

Dead Wrong

CRIME DOES PAY...

EVEN WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

Sample

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a black handgun. The hand is positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers gripping the handle. The hand is partially covered by a dark, textured fabric, possibly a skirt or dress, which has a subtle floral or paisley pattern. The background is dark and out of focus.

G.M.HAGUE

A Lukas Boston Mystery

Dead Wrong

By

G.M.Hague

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book in PDF form from my website at:

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Lukas Boston books are not episodes of a larger story and it isn't necessary to read them in correct order, although the backgrounds to some of the characters and events will be made clearer if you do. If you'd like to be told when other Lukas Boston stories are available, I've created a newsletter at www.graemehague.com.au you can sign up—I promise not to send you anything except info on Lukas Boston, myself, my books and my music.

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DEDICATION.

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful, furry friends that have graced our lives, past and present. People who know me will understand where some of my novel's character's names have come from.

And, of course, to my beautiful wife Lisa who allows me to pursue this crazy idea of being a writer.

Dead Wrong.

ONE

It occurred to Lukas that it would help matters right now if he was wearing some pants—or anything really—rather than be stark, bollock naked. Most problems, including ghosts, are more easily dealt with when you’ve got pants on.

Was it really a ghost? Someone from the Other Side come back to haunt him? A poltergeist intent on sucking him into the television? Could they still do that with flat-screen TV’s?

What the hell does it matter? Lukas thought. It was more important to figure out what to *do*.

Okay, this was definitely a ghost. Standing motionless against the bedroom wall and watching him. Lukas could see the faded wallpaper through the man’s body. Still, the smoky figure was solid enough to have a recognisable face and that had Lukas slowly groping under the bed for his gun. It didn’t make much sense to try and shoot a ghost, and the chairwoman of the apartment’s Owners Standards Committee would give him hell for putting a big hole in the plaster, but it was the only idea coming to Lukas for the moment.

Lukas had sensed the strange presence in the bedroom, waking him—or maybe he slept with one eye open and didn’t even know it? Lukas had long ago learned to sleep lightly, wary that someone seeking revenge might slip into his room. Plenty of people held a nasty grudge against him. Jail time can do that.

‘Oh shit,’ Lukas groaned, remembering something else. He gave up on finding the gun, pushed himself into a sitting position and risked taking his eyes off the ghost for a moment, glancing at the other side of the bed. The empty, rumpled sheets were stained, smeared with lipstick and make-up. The girl who made the mess was gone.

Where the hell was she?

He held a hand up towards the apparition, ‘Hey, can... can you just hold on for a minute?’

The ghost didn't move.

Lukas worried she was in the bathroom or maybe the kitchen getting a drink. Any second now she'd walk back in, see his ghostly visitor and start screaming the place down, which wouldn't improve things. The chairwoman had already complained about some of his noisier overnight visitors. Lukas needed to keep his missing guest out of the bedroom somehow. Give him time to deal with Caspar the Unfriendly Ex-Criminal Ghost, before she caught sight of anything.

Except, thanks to an appalling hangover, Lukas couldn't remember her name.

Damn it, Caroline? Charmaine? Damn, damn, damn... I'm a detective, for Christ's sake! I'm supposed to be good at shit like remembering names.

Lukas called towards the closed bathroom door, 'Hey—ah... are you in there?' No one answered. 'Babe? Are you in the kitchen?'

Silence.

He said, 'Because there's this *really* big spider on the ceiling in here and if you don't like spiders, you'd better stay exactly where you are until I kill the damned thing. I mean, it's a monster. Maybe one of those bird-eating things you see on the telly.'

Still nobody replied.

It was unthinkable to Lukas that the girl had left altogether. Quite impossible. Surely no woman would climb out of his bed without at least telling him how great a time they'd had. Saying goodbye and making him promise to keep in touch. Swapping phone numbers—the usual stuff after a night of unbelievable sex.

All right... so *maybe* last night he hadn't been at his absolute best. Ralph the barman's generosity with the bourbon bottle had impacted on Lukas' usually smooth, cool *persona*. And those stairs next to the bar? Hell, anyone could have fallen down those. Lukas nearly broke his bloody neck. Anyway, it hadn't stopped... *Cloe? Clara?* ... from coming home with him, right? Practically ripping his clothes off. He could *clearly* remember some of the amazing things they did—well, some of the things.

The ghost spoke, startling Lukas and reminding him that he had a more pressing issue.

'I want you to do something about it.' The voice was whispering, calm.

Lukas' answer was a hoarse croak. 'Do something about what?'

The spirit vanished.

'Great, why doesn't *that* surprise me?' Lukas sighed.

Shaken and out of breath, Lukas searched under the bed again, this time for his tracksuit pants which were on permanent standby. His fingers touched the Glock, but Lukas left it there.

Pulling on the track pants restored Lukas' dignity and self-confidence. A cigarette from the bedside table calmed him further. He went to the window, raising it fully open, and poked his head out, leaning on the sill and staring down two stories at the quiet street below. Lukas gratefully speared smoke into the clean morning air. The kerb was lined with expensive cars. This was a rich inner-city Melbourne suburb with trendy apartments squeezed onto prime real estate. It was populated by lawyers, accountants, CEOs and a certain ex-police detective now turned private investigator, Lukas Boston.

'What the hell was that all about?' Lukas asked a ginger cat curled on the bonnet of a distant BMW. The cat lifted its head and glared disdainfully back at him.

Lukas heard a snapping noise along with the *smack* of something slamming into the wall behind him. It took a too-long moment of disbelief for him to realise what had happened.

Only bullets passing that close make such a distinctive sound.

Lukas scrambled backwards, hitting his head painfully on the window frame. He flattened himself against the wall and tried to figure it out. It didn't need much thinking.

This was bad. For three good reasons.

First, Lukas hadn't heard a shot. This meant the shooter had a rifle—it had to be a rifle—equipped with a silencer. Every second farmer in Australia had a dozen high-powered rifles stuffed under the mattress, but silencers were bloody hard to get—let alone a weapon that could mount one. So the killer knew all kinds of the right people.

A professional.

Second, now there *was* a large hole in the plasterboard opposite. If that meddling woman from the Owners Standards Committee found out about it the "please explain" paperwork would be endless. It wasn't enough that Lukas *owned* the place. The committee took its self-appointed role of maintaining a high standard of tenant seriously and would take a very dim view of anybody who irresponsibly allowed high-velocity sniper rounds through an open window to ruin the decor. The chairwoman, an imposing, large woman called Irene, would go nuts.

And third, someone was trying to kill him.

Lukas dropped to his hands and knees, crawled under the window to the other side, then snatched at the hanging cord to bring the blinds crashing down with a cloud of dust and dead insects. A twist closed the louvres although the morning sun still got between the gaps. Lukas waited for another bullet to punch through, the shooter trying his luck, and he wasn't surprised it didn't come. If the man was a pro he wouldn't waste his time or the ammunition on a blind shot. More likely, he was already far away, well aware that Lukas wouldn't give him another opportunity. Not today.

But to be absolutely safe, Lukas took care to avoid the direct field of fire through the window. Still unconvinced his guest had completely abandoned the sexual experience of her lifetime Lukas went looking for her. In the living room he found a note had been pushed under the front door.

'That's more like it,' he said, unfolding the paper and reading it.

Next time I won't miss. Do as you're told. Leave the past in the past.

'Clever bastard,' Lukas said, balling the page and tossing it into a corner. It must have been delivered earlier. So was the shot a deliberate miss or not? The message could be just insurance against bad marksmanship. The paper, he knew, would be forensically clean and useless.

The coffee machine needed time to boil. Waiting, Lukas stared unseeing into his empty cup, lost in thought.

This was a hell of a morning. Bloody upsetting, when you think about it.

Surely he hadn't been *that* bad at sex last night? So disappointing that she didn't even say goodbye or leave a note? Was he losing his touch in bed?

Lukas sighed. Worried.

TWO

Lukas wasn't so surprised that he'd seen a ghost. When he was ten years old his grandmother told him, 'Boy, you have the Gift.'

'No, I don't think so,' he said solemnly, but it was encouraging. Lukas was hoping for a new bicycle.

The old woman bent closer enveloping Lukas in a waft of whiskey-laden breath and stale clothes. 'Yes, you do. It will take time to discover it, that's all.'

This was still okay. There weren't many places you could hide a whole bike. Lukas nodded, his face serious. 'All right, grandma. If you say so, but can you give me a clue?'

Her voice shook and she raised her eyes to the ceiling. Unseen, Lukas made a face. This was where talking to his grandmother often got confusing. She said, 'There are more souls surrounding you than those you can simply see. One day, you will know how to open your eyes.'

Lukas repeated this in his head several times trying to decipher the riddle. He frowned, asking, 'It's in the shoe cupboard, grandma? Really?' *Heck of a small bicycle. She did this a lot—failing to notice just how much he'd grown.*

'Shoes, boy? What are you talking about?'

Hardly a fair question. 'It's okay, grandma. I understand.' It was the family's agreed get-out-of-jail response to the old girl's ravings.

'Make sure you do, boy. It's not something to dismiss as a trifle.' She pointed a crooked finger at him.

Now it was about puddings, which was enough to send Lukas in search of his parents for clarification. They were in the lounge watching television.

'Grandma's bought me a new bicycle and she won't tell me where it is,' he told them.

'Mother's done what?' his mother asked, warily.

'She said I have a gift and I've been *asking* for a new bicycle for ages, so I guess...' Lukas left the rest of his obvious logic unspoken. These were adults after all.

‘Oh shit,’ his mother said with a sigh. ‘The crazy old bat.’ She added sweetly, ‘Lukas, can you go get me some chocolate from the kitchen?’

His father supped on a can of beer, still watching the screen. When Lukas was gone he said absently, ‘She’s as mad as a witch. Now what do we do?’

‘What do you damned-well think?’

‘How the hell should I know? She’s *your* weird mother.’

‘Tomorrow you go and find Lukas his new bicycle.’

‘But we haven’t bought him—’ A sharp jab in the ribs explained things best. ‘All right, but she can pay for the bloody thing.’

‘Oh George! You can afford to buy him a hundred bicycles—a thousand of the damned things. Just get him a new bike.’

‘Okay, okay, whatever you say.’ Which for George Boston meant he’d send any one of his dozen assistants, who were highly qualified in business management, accounting and financing, down to a mall to buy a bicycle.

‘Do it *yourself*, George.’

‘Yes dear,’ George lied.

‘Or would you prefer to explain everything about my mother to Lukas instead?’

Since George didn’t understand much at all about his nutty mother-in-law and her gypsy-like ravings, and he preferred it stayed that way, he stuck with the easy way out.

‘No,’ he muttered. ‘You’re right, he really needs a new bike.’

It was years until Lukas finally realised what his grandmother meant. On occasions he felt just the slightest whim of how his supposed Gift could work. His friends and colleagues learned not to play cards against Lukas for money, because he had an uncanny ability to know what hands they held. Later as a detective his sixth sense, the one that all good policemen possessed, worked better than most. It was a warning system for unseen danger and a nose for the evidence that wasn’t so clear.

As for seeing ghosts now, that *was* something new and totally unexpected—and shocking, if he cared to admit it. But still not exactly surprising.

What gave Lukas most cause for concern was the identity of his ghostly intruder.

The late Gavin Hucknall had alternated between being a petty thief, an all-round nuisance and a hired goon who everyone knew shouldn't be given too much responsibility. Put simply, Gavin wasn't that bright. Yet he'd managed to get involved in a complex drug operation that went sour when a very large shipment of cocaine went AWOL. People got angry and Hucknall disappeared—from a workplace environment where "disappeared" could be a fatal condition. Prior to this Lukas had been riding Hucknall pretty hard, picking him up regularly for impromptu questioning, putting the pressure on, making Hucknall's life miserable. Nothing worked and Hucknall never cracked. When Hucknall vanished it didn't exactly create a manhunt for his whereabouts—he was just another piece of the puzzle, albeit a missing piece now, not worth pursuing. Lukas remained a part of the task force that attempted to get to the bottom of things. The criminal underworld was certainly rumbling with discontent and heads were rolling. One particular drug dealer from St Kilda was discovered in far too many pieces for his health. His head was put in a milk crate to *stop* it rolling away.

The code of silence prevailed and the task force failed to unearth much in the way of solid information. Gavin Hucknall wasn't seen again alive or dead. The worst was assumed, but you never knew. Perhaps Hucknall had seen the writing on the wall and fled in time? To live in terror somewhere, hidden and very far away.

At least Lukas had the answer to *that* now. The man was dead. But why, after all these years, was his ghost suddenly annoying him?

THREE

Lukas knew how to dial through the switchboard system and connect directly to Detective Senior Sergeant Peter Goodall's desk.

'Pete, how's it going?'

There was a short silence. 'Hello, Lukas.' Goodall managed to instill dread, resignation and weariness all in two words.

'Don't be like that.'

'I could pretend to be happy hearing from you, but I'm sure I'll be feeling like crap by the end of this phone call, so what's the point?'

'Sounds like you need a holiday, Pete. Long service leave can't be far away, right?'

'What do you *want*, Lukas?'

'Just some files from ages ago. Old shit, no one will mind.'

'I'm not allowed to give you *any* files. Old shit, new shit or even shit straight out of my own arse that I could copyright myself. You know that.'

Lukas understood that Goodall had to make all the right noises. In the end he'd agree knowing that Lukas was useful to have around and might even do some of the police work for him. Lukas said, 'You know I'll be very careful and not make copies. Destroy everything when I'm finished. For the usual fee, of course.'

'Nope, no good,' Goodall surprised him. 'I've still got four full bottles hidden in the shed and the wife's read me the riot act about my drinking. I have to slow down—or at least not let her see me on the booze.'

'So just start drinking in the shed, Pete. That's a no-brainer.'

'You're a funny bastard and obviously not married. Tell me what you want and I'll figure out what it's worth.'

Lukas didn't like the sound of that. 'All right... I'm after anything you can give me on Gavin Hucknall and all that shit he got caught up in. It was a few years back.'

There was another pause while Goodall dredged through his memory. Lukas used the opportunity to light a cigarette and noticed a butt rimmed with lipstick in the ashtray.

Maybe she had to go to work really early? What did she do? Christ, what the hell was her name? Would his memory return as the hangover diminished? Should he try *more* alcohol as a kind of crime re-enactment thing?

Goodall was saying, 'That *shit* you're talking about was a big deal. It was over five years ago by now. What the hell do you want with that?'

Trying to make light of it, Lukas said easily, 'I've got a lead that Hucknall is well and truly dead after all. I'd like to sort out a few loose ends in my head that's all.'

Lukas could hear Goodall's suspicion over the phone. 'Of course, he's dead. He would have popped up somewhere by now, if he wasn't. Is that why they gave you a promotion just before you got fired? Coming up with brilliant detective work like that? What sort of lead?'

'Sorry, can't tell you. Client privilege and all that. You know I would, if I could.'

'You've got *clients*?'

Taking a drag on his smoke and sighing it out, Lukas said, 'Come on, Pete. Can you help me out or not?'

Goodall let him wait a moment longer. 'I can't email files like that to you. The IT nerds have put filters and crap on the computers and you need to be an approved recipient or some shit. If you come in, I'll dump it onto a disk for you.'

'You're a good man, Pete. I owe you.'

'Actually, I've just thought of something you can do for me in return. A small favour. No big deal, really. A piece of cake.'

It was Lukas' turn to be suspicious. 'Really? What is it?'

'A bit of private investigating. Right up your alley. I'll give you the address and you can drop by on your way here. Let me know what you think.'

'Sure... ah, what's it about?'

'Don't worry, like I said, it'll be a piece of cake for a man of your talents.'
Goodall started laughing. Not a good sign.

Lukas knocked on the door of small, red brick house surrounded by an immaculate garden. This was an area that had survived the expanding Melbourne CBD, a nook of quiet streets and large, shady trees almost in the shadows of the corporate skyscrapers. The turn-of-the-century homes had become very expensive real estate.

A shrill voice answered. The door rattled, opened and revealed a woman. She was forty-odd, stout and dressed in a skirt that would have pleaded for leniency if it had a voice. Her ample and very visible bosom was heaving with the effort of hurrying to the door. It paused momentarily with surprise, then the twin mounds of exposed flesh resumed pumping up and down with what Lukas could only interpret as enthusiasm. A slow and wide smile spread across her face, making him think of a crocodile that can't believe its luck when a fat antelope strays within reach.

'Mrs Shields?' he asked, holding up a library card briefly. 'I'm Lukas Boston. Detective Goodall should have called and you're expecting me?'

'Well, I wasn't expecting *you*,' she said with barely-suppressed excitement, moving aside. Mrs Shields didn't seem the type to suppress much at all unless you counted the straining dress. 'I've been trying to get interviewed by a real policeman for days, but I'm more than happy to speak with one of their consultants. Do come in.'

Consultant? Is that what Pete told her? Which sounded like the police paid him and he couldn't charge a fee. Bastard.

She hadn't stepped back quite enough, forcing Lukas to brush against her as he went inside. He stammered an apology.

'It's Barbara, by the way,' she breathed in his ear as he passed. 'Barbara Shields. Please call me Barbara. Do you need to see some kind of identification of mine?'

Lukas decided that if she offered to show him a distinguishing tattoo in a discreet place he was out of there. Goodall could shove his files *back* up his arse.

'No, that won't be necessary at all,' he said quickly.

'All right. First door on the left then,' she said, pointing down the short hallway.

Making sure it was a lounge or kitchen and not a bedroom, Lukas hesitated in the entrance and checked. He was safe—for the moment.

It was a crowded parlour room of polished, dark timber tables and casements lined with knick-knacks. An open fireplace wasn't used, instead holding a basket of stuffed dolls. The mantelpiece was likewise filled with ornamental china plates and photographs. Lukas was relieved to see a pair of stuffed two-seater lounges. Just in case, he lingered as Barbara gestured for him to sit, watching which way she moved, then he perched on the edge of the lounge opposite her.

She suddenly cried, 'Oh God! What am I thinking?' and bounced back to her feet so abruptly Lukas almost drew his gun. 'Would you like a tea or coffee?'

'No—no, I'm fine.' He waved a hand.

'Are you sure? I've got a special machine that makes excellent coffee.'

'That's very kind of you, but...' Lukas patted his stomach, then wondered what that was supposed to mean.

Barbara looked stricken. 'And I've just made a fresh cake. I do a lot of baking. I'm a *very* good cook among my other talents.' This was said with a slow wink and Lukas figured it might be a good idea to get her out of the room.

'Okay, if you insist. But please, not too much,' he said, patting his stomach again. *Why do I keep doing that?*

'Don't move, I won't be a minute.'

The room felt much bigger after she was gone. Lukas looked around. A television in the corner was on, the sound muted. It was showing one of those talk-shows where the participants admitted to bizarre family problems and the audience voted on the best solution.

'I'll swap places with you,' Lukas told the TV. 'Scotty, beam me up for God's sake.'

For the first time he noticed a faint acrid smell in the room.

An idea came to him and Lukas took out his mobile phone. He wasn't adept at texting and he laboriously typed to Goodall the message, *You are a prick and you owe me big-time, you bastard*. He pressed send with only a small sense of satisfaction.

Barbara returned with a tray laden with mugs, sugar and milk, and two huge slabs of cake on plates. She pulled a coffee table between them and fussed with

arranging everything. Lukas tried to smile gratefully. The cake looked like it might kill him within minutes.

Lukas took a deep breath and put on his serious, business face.

‘So Barbara, you’ve lost your cat?’

Barbara looked annoyed. ‘No, Lukas—can I call you that?’ Lukas nodded reluctantly. ‘I haven’t *lost* my cat, she has been stolen. Possibly kidnapped, which is more likely.’

‘Why do you believe that?’

‘Because she always comes home, of course.’

‘I see, and how long since you’ve last seen your cat?’

‘Esther.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Esther. It’s the name of my baby. She was the most famous of Persian queens and my cat is a Persian. Didn’t you see the photograph?’

‘Ah, which one?’

Barbara stood up and swept a framed picture from a bookshelf. Before he could do anything about it she sat back down next to Lukas. Their thighs rubbed. So did their shoulders when Barbara held the photograph in front of his face. The picture was of a very furry, untidy white cat staring angrily into the lens.

‘Isn’t she gorgeous, Lukas?’

‘I’m afraid I’m not much of a cat person, Barbara. I’ll have to take your word for it.’ Lukas tried to put some space between them. The sagging lounge didn’t let him.

Something else made sense now. The fine coating of white over everything. Cat’s hair. Worse, it was as if Lukas was wearing some kind of cat’s fur magnet sucking every hair towards him, sticking to his clothes. And that *smell*. Cat’s piss everywhere. Esther must have had a bladder that could put out forest fires.

His phone vibrated with a message. Lukas apologised and took it out, struggling to hide the screen from Barbara’s curious eyes. It was from Goodall.

Just keep screwing her until she forgets about the cat. Problem solved.

‘Important?’ Barbara asked with wide eyes.

‘Something’s come up,’ Lukas said gravely.

‘Oh, how exciting!’ She pulled a funny face and glanced at his crotch.

Don’t move a muscle, Lukas. Pretend it never happened. He said quickly, ‘Sorry, now I can’t stay long at all. So tell me, who do you think will have kidnapped your cat?’ Lukas was thinking it was the Number 3 bus and Esther was little more than a stain on the street somewhere.

‘My ex-husband, of course.’

Of course. There’s always an ex-husband to bloody complicate things. Lukas almost groaned.

‘Why would he resort to such tactics? It seems... excessive.’

Barbara’s bosom was heaving again, this time with outrage.

‘Because he knows how much Esther means to me and what she is worth.’

‘Worth? What do you mean?’

‘Lukas, my dear Esther is a very valuable breed and a champion example of her kind. It’s wrong to put a monetary figure on my baby, but I suppose you could say she’s worth... perhaps seven thousand dollars?’

‘Fucking *how* much?’

‘I *beg* your pardon?’

‘I’m sorry—I mean, it’s... just a cat, right?’

‘No, she’s not *just* a cat. Esther is my pride and joy, the most precious thing in the world.’

Lukas hid his face behind the coffee cup for a moment.

He said, ‘So your husband will have kidnapped Esther to demand something in return? Like what? Money?’

Barbara’s face went grim. ‘Freedom. A quick divorce so he can marry the slut he’s living with now.’

Right, make that really complicated.

Lukas sighed. ‘Give me some details so I can go and check this out. That’s first on the list.’

He stood up, preparing to leave. Barbara was disappointed, but didn’t argue. She scribbled something onto a notepad, tore the page off and gave it to him, tucking it into his top pocket. Standing very close.

‘You’ll find him and that scheming bitch here. I’ll bet it’s all her idea. Have you got a card?’

‘A card?’

‘A *business* card, so I can call you, if something happens.’

‘Oh, sure...’ There was no escaping it. Lukas took one from his wallet and gave it to her. ‘Please Barbara, only call me if something important happens, okay? Leave everything else to me.’

‘What about dinner then?’

‘What?’

‘What about coming around for dinner one evening? I told you, I’m a very good cook.’

He gave her a sad smile. ‘I’m afraid that I’m one of those people who have to be extremely careful about what I eat. I have to cook for myself. It’s a carefully balanced diet. I make a point of never asking anyone to put themselves to so much trouble.’

Barbara’s face lit up. ‘You have to cook for yourself? You live *alone*? At home?’
Shit, shit, shit...

‘I can’t go into details about my personal life, Barbara. For security purposes.’

She beamed at his business card as if it held the secret to eternal youth. ‘I’ve done courses in special diets. You just tell me what’s needed and I’ll cook you up the best meal you’ve ever had.’

‘We really need to focus on finding Esther,’ Lukas tried.

‘See? You’re already turning into a cat lover, too. That’ll be from seeing her photo. It has that effect on everyone. I can see that you and I are going to get on very well, Lukas. The *best* of friends.’

Lukas’ fingers were flexing, imagining plucking the card back out of her grasp. Instead he turned, hurried down the hallway and fled out the door.

Lukas’ car was a battered Ford, an ex-police car he’d picked up the auctions. He could easily afford something better, but too often Lukas had to park in parts of

the city where passers-by dragged coins down the paintwork of expensive cars simply to improve their hand-eye co-ordination. The Ford attracted far less attention.

He sat behind the wheel and took a deep breath to clear his head, getting more than a whiff of cat's piss. 'Filthy moggy bastard,' he growled and wound down the window to let in the crisp autumn air. It didn't really help, so he lit a cigarette, tipped his head back and closed his eyes gratefully, feeling the smoke ransack his lungs.

A voice came from behind him.

'Here we go again.'

Lukas cried out in surprise, jerking around to look in the back seat. It was empty. 'What the...'

Something in the rear view mirror caught his eye.

Gavin Hucknall was sitting behind him.

Lukas fought the urge to throw himself out of the car. He clenched his fists to keep himself calm.

'What the *fuck* do you want, Hucknall? Why are you bothering me?'

'You nearly got me killed, Mr Boston. That wasn't very nice. You owe me. I want you to do something about it.'

'I *nearly* got you killed? Have you seen yourself lately? You're not looking well.' Lukas twisted again towards the back seat and still couldn't see anybody. Snarling in frustration he turned back to mirror.

Hucknall was gone.

'Jesus,' Lukas collapsed into his seat and rubbed furiously at his face with both hands. He forgot about the cigarette in his fingers, jabbing it into the roof of the car and bring a shower of hot ash onto his head. Lukas swore loudly over and over, scrabbling at his hair.

He had no idea what Hucknall wanted, but Lukas could guess the debt he supposedly owed was about the amount of grief he'd caused Hucknall during the investigation. *Like hell he had to pay Hucknall anything back for that.* But the criminal mind worked in mysterious ways. The stupid ones, at least. *He had to do something about what?* The drug task force was long shut down, the files closed,

Hucknall was dead even if he didn't know it himself, so ordinarily Lukas couldn't have cared less.

Except it wasn't so simple. He needed to find out more, if he wanted to stop Hucknall's ghost from dropping into his life like this whenever it wanted. It could ruin Lukas' sex life—and any extremely important lost cat investigations, too.

Plus someone *was* shooting at Lukas and while it wasn't definite the two situations were connected, the coincidental timing was hard to ignore.

FOUR

Constable Elizabeth Reynolds was on the reception desk of the Detectives Division. This improved Lukas' day. Elizabeth was an extremely attractive girl who utterly failed to disguise her looks despite the amount of effort she devoted to the task. Her dark hair was drawn back into a severe bun, make-up was scarce aside from the hint of lip gloss and she invariably wore a dead-pan expression that could turn men to stone if they missed—or worse, ignored—the message she was putting out.

'Hello, Beth,' Lukas said. 'Now everything looks a whole lot brighter.' He leaned on the countertop and gave her The Smile.

'Don't do that, Lukas,' she said, without looking up from some paperwork.

'Don't do what?'

'Smile at me like that. It's never going to work and I'm getting annoyed you keep trying it.'

'I'm only smiling, for God's sake.'

'No, you're not. You're trying to convince me to like you, then like you a bit *more* until I agree to some kind of gratuitous date which should eventually result in my sleeping with you.' She gestured dismissively, not raising her eyes from the documents. 'For the record, if this can possibly put an end to the matter, you *are* a very good-looking man with a fine, athletic physique. That slight brogue you put on whenever you're talking to women has its moments, even if it is a bit silly. I suspect that you dye your hair, because it's impossibly black and shiny, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt—' Still without looking up she raised a finger to stop him interrupting. 'However, none of these are remotely enough to persuade me to become your latest, bedroom conquest. For goodness sake, give it up will you?' Now she stared at Lukas, picked up the papers and shuffled them into shape, before snapping a stapler close to Lukas' fingers. He snatched his hand back.

Lukas said, 'I suppose sex in a hot-tub is out of the question, too?'

‘Can I bring a knife?’ she said acidly. ‘You know people bleed out faster in warm water?’

‘I think we should forget this conversation ever took place and start again another day. You’ve had a bad morning.’

‘I’ve had a bad morning *now*.’

‘It’s good that I know you’re not being serious, Beth. Otherwise I’d be deeply hurt. Anyway, I’ve come to see Pete Goodall. Can you buzz me through?’

Beth’s hand moved to a button behind the desk. ‘I can’t wait for the day when I can treat you like every other criminal we get in here.’

‘Oh, I’ll be playing this game for a few years yet,’ he said, winking at her as he moved to the door.

‘Damn it, did you just *wink* at me?’ She hefted the stapler again.

Lukas hurried through the security door into the large, open plan office where the branch’s detectives worked.

The truth was that Lukas wasn’t really fired from the Victorian Police Force. He’d resigned before they kicked him out. In the process he racked up a ton of brownie points with many of his colleagues, because an unpleasant scandal had been about to break out and a lot of people were in the firing line. At the time Lukas was in a funk about his career and on an impulse he chose to take the brunt of the blame, saving everyone a heap of trouble. The sacrifice was quietly acknowledged, deals were cut and Lukas escaped with little more than a slightly soiled reputation. The union even got all his wages and entitlements paid, which he didn’t really need thanks to his father’s investment portfolios—given to Lukas when his parents fled the city in search of sunshine, cold beer and retirement. The scandal was soon forgotten, replaced by the next one.

This was why Lukas could walk into the Detectives Division with impunity any time he liked, ask for favours that irritated people, and essentially still act and behave like a fully paid-up member of the police department.

‘You’re an arsehole,’ he told Pete Goodall, dropping into a chair on the other side of the detective’s desk. ‘That Shields woman is a man-eating monster. I almost had to come here to file rape charges.’

‘Did you do her?’ Goodall asked, leaning back. His chair creaked under the weight. Goodall spent too much time at his desk. Most of his hair was gone and the remainder was a dirty grey. He avoided fitness reports at all costs.

‘No, I bloody didn’t! And I never will unless I’ve got a death wish. Have you *seen* her?’

Goodall was smug. ‘Got a look at her when she came into the front desk the first day, so I made sure no one put her file in my tray. Then some clever bastard transferred her phone calls though to *me* and it’s been like phone-a-bloody-friend every day demanding I go looking for her cat. In fact, she called again just a few minutes ago. Mrs Shields is very pleased with the new arrangement. She certainly likes *you*.’ He grinned. ‘Barbara assures me she already has all your contact details, but I made sure all the same.’

Lukas blanched. ‘You didn’t give her my home address?’

‘No, not yet. But you know, since you’re working on Mrs Shields’ case file, perhaps I should give it to her anyway?’

‘I guess you’re just amusing yourself, right?’ Lukas said uneasily. ‘Having a laugh.’

Goodall shook his head slowly. ‘Lukas, I know the whole wavy hair, green eyes thing gives you a free shot at all the beautiful women around, but as a public service and for the sake of charity you should be spreading a little of your stud-like love with the Barbara Shields of the world, too.’ Goodall thumped himself in the chest. ‘So I’ve taken it upon myself to ensure that happens.’

‘I’ve got a better idea, why don’t *you* sleep with her?’ Lukas said flatly. ‘It looks like you need the exercise.’

‘Nope, I can’t,’ Goodall said mildly, reaching for his coffee. ‘I’m a happily married man.’

‘I’ll bet that if Barbara Shields looked like Cameron Diaz your happy marriage would be conveniently forgotten.’

‘Let’s not get morals confused with shit like that,’ Goodall frowned at him. ‘My Jackie would leave me for George Clooney in the blink of an eye, too. It’s all relative, when it comes to your relatives, right?’ Goodall didn’t wait for an answer, taking a computer disk out of a drawer and dropping it in front of Lukas, gestur-

ing that Lukas should hide the disk quickly. 'That's everything I can give you. I suppose this is a result of last week?'

'Last week?' Lukas slid the disk inside his jacket, jamming it into a pocket.

'With Monroe falling off the perch. Have you heard something?'

'Damn, I didn't even think about that,' Lukas said, truthfully.

It was even odd, considering the morning he'd had.

Charles "Chuckles" Monroe had been the leader of the same criminal organisation involved in the failed drug deal five years before. Gavin Hucknall had even worked for Monroe. Two weeks earlier Monroe had died of a heart attack. In the obituaries the press painted Monroe as a "prominent business figure" since it still made sense not to upset the family and friends of someone who collected his overdue debts with a cricket bat. Monroe had ruled with an iron fist over a widespread and nasty collection of thugs, pimps and dealers. The mobster had been at the heart of Lukas' investigations and most likely responsible for much of the death and violence linked to the purge following the missing drug shipment.

Lukas wondered, *Could Monroe's death be somehow causing Hucknall's sudden appearance?*

'So, what have you heard?' Goodall broke into his thoughts.

'What?'

'What have you heard? About Monroe and all that shit,' Goodall pointed at the disk in Lukas' jacket. 'You must have heard something.'

'No, not really,' Lukas said, standing up. 'I'm only thinking it's a bit easier to poke at a few old bears now that Chuckles is in the ground.'

'Why? You're not a policeman anymore and it's not your problem.' Goodall peered at him, smelling a rat.

'Well, okay—there *is* a third party interested in doing some digging around again, now that he's gone.' Lukas didn't want to admit it was him.

'Hoping to find the drugs? After all this time?'

Lukas shrugged. 'It's the buried treasure of the Underworld, Pete. The fabled, lost drug shipment of Chuckles Monroe. People will always be searching for it until somebody finds the damned thing. No surprise, someone is willing to pay me to have another look, so why not?'

‘Who?’

‘Sorry, can’t say.’

‘*Won’t* say.’

‘No, I *can’t* say.’

‘What a load of shit. You’ll keep me in the loop all the same?’

‘You’re my best friend forever, you know that.’

‘Now I know you’re lying. Piss off, then.’

Lukas left, feeling he’d come out on top until Goodall called after him, ‘Don’t forget to give Babs my best—and give her *your* best while you’re at it.’

‘I’m going to find the bloody cat,’ Lukas said unhappily over his shoulder. ‘Easy fixed.’

Goodall burst out laughing.

Back at the reception desk Lukas leaned close to Beth when she wasn’t looking. ‘How about dinner tomorrow night?’ he asked, making her jump.

‘Good idea,’ she said, recovering. ‘Come around at seven. Wear a dark shirt, so you won’t see the holes after the Taser prongs are pulled out. Are you an organ donor?’

‘Absolutely. I’ve given my heart to you, Elizabeth Reynolds.’

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Just hold that thought,’ Lukas said, walking away.

‘I’m holding down my bile instead. Don’t wink again—no, *don’t*... you bastard, Lukas!’

At his car, before getting in Lukas couldn’t help checking the back seat for signs of Hucknall. He realised looking through the windows wouldn’t work, so Lukas began peering into the wing mirrors, walking in a crouch around the car and trying to find the best angle.

‘Are you thinking of buying it, Lukas?’ A constable asked as she passed. ‘It looks like pile of shit.’

‘As a matter of fact, I already own it,’ Lukas said.

‘Then the car-crusher’s in the next yard,’ she said without stopping.

‘Very funny,’ Lukas called, but not too loudly, because she looked damned good from behind.

‘*It stinks in here,*’ came Hucknall’s voice from inside.

Although he couldn’t see anyone, Lukas jerked the back door open. ‘Back again? You always bitched about the smell in my car, so get out. Find your own way bloody home or wherever it is you hang out, when you’re not haunting me.’

There was no reply. More self-consciously Lukas again attempted to see the interior using the mirrors. Giving up, he got into the driver’s seat and used the rear-view. The back seat was empty.

Lukas said softly, ‘You *always* bitched about that. So are you really talking to me or just echoing the past?’ He thought, *I can’t remember Hucknall ever mentioning any damned debt or that I owe him anything.* Then again, Lukas hadn’t listened too closely, because Hucknall never really said anything he’d wanted to hear. It had been like interrogating a brick wall.

END SAMPLE

Back Page Stuff.

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Serious Stuff...

**Dead Wrong
by G.M.HAGUE**

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