

**G.M.HAGUE**  
A PARANORMAL TALE

**Sample**

**DEATH  
WISH**

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A PARANORMAL TALE

by

**G.M.Hague**

**IMPORTANT NOTE: This book was previously published under the title  
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**These Paranormal Tales are all standalone books with complete horror stories for the reader — real horror. Some releases will be long, but most will be shorter stories written in the traditional style of horror stories of the 20th century with ghosts, ghouls, evil spirits and people returning from the grave. Having said that, no setting or subject will be out-of-bounds. You might be taken way back in time or sent well into the future, perhaps under water or high in outer space. But more likely you'll find yourself in a dark room with all the doors and windows locked... and something standing in the shadows, waiting for you to turn your back.**

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## Author's Introduction: Death Wish.

When someone or something comes back from the dead, usually it's because of some evil intent by a malicious demon or ghost — or the devil himself has been disturbed. You didn't ask for it. Then again, sometimes people make stupid mistakes by dabbling with things best left alone like Ouija boards and séances.

For this story it came to me one day — what if you just *innocently*, desperately wished for something impossible and it came true? With the confusion of your grief and loneliness over the loss of a loved one, you didn't really understand what you were saying. Worse, you didn't know that something dreadful was listening, waiting for a chance.

Then things could get really bad, because it's nothing like Patrick Swayze helping out with Demi Moore's pottery fetish while a ghostly Whoopi Goldberg cracks jokes in the background.

Let's face it, when the Dead come back it's never going to be good, no matter who it is.

# Death Wish

## ONE

Linda McPharlin felt like she hadn't moved for three days—and didn't care. She had done nothing except sit on the couch and stare across the room, chain-smoking and drinking whatever came to hand. Her husband Brian was dead and it had shocked her. Completely and utterly surprised her. Even though they'd known he was dying.

*I just want him back*, she thought once again, well aware it was a foolish path to let her mind go down. It wouldn't help wishing for the impossible. *I'd give anything to get it all back. I want to turn back time and make everything right again. For God's sake, what harm would it do to the universe?*

The empty house ticked and creaked around her. A wind breathed in the eaves like a long sigh of despair. It was an unfamiliar place. Linda didn't particularly like it, but Brian had loved it on sight.

The cancer was diagnosed a year ago and no miracles were ever going to happen. Their lives had been a countdown to his inevitable, final breath from that very first moment they'd known he was gravely ill. His sister had it too, except it was cancer of the spine for her. Eileen was still alive, sustained by bitterness and spite, dismissive she'd survived longer than her brother. *So what*, she said. *What difference does it make?* Their grandmother died of lung cancer. History was simply repeating itself.

The disease was in their blood—in the genes. So no, they hadn't wasted precious time trying to beat it. No trips to mystical mountains or fountains of youth. No crazy diets. No sudden religious awakenings. Once the doctors showed Brian the damage to his body and, not long after that, how quickly the disease was spreading, it was a matter of enjoying the months he had left. They'd moved to the country, a dream of Brian's for years, their only concession to the fact he was running out of time.

He only asked one other thing of her. That they never say aloud that he was going to die, and that Linda would be left a widow so young. It would never be spoken of. They couldn't cheat Death, but maybe they could ignore his dark, gloating presence.

They didn't even say goodbye.

Suddenly now Brian *was* dead—and Linda wasn't ready for it. Worse, she didn't know what to do. In hindsight it was crazy—stupid on both their parts. For a start, she

and Brian never discussed what he wanted for a funeral. A burial or a cremation? A celebration of his life or a torturous grieving of his death? She didn't even have a song to play when—

*Hell, they always played a song, didn't they? When the fuck did they play songs at a funeral?* Linda pinched the bridge of her nose hard, trying to think. Anger flared for a moment. Brian didn't have to face the aftermath. *Alone, like this.*

Her sister-in-law was no comfort. Unattractive and shunned by men all her life, Eileen was contemptuous of women like Linda who never knew loneliness. Eileen's cancer became like an affirmation of her cursed existence. Linda needed to keep her distance from Eileen and was glad that, so far, it was how things had worked out.

Friends were far away, back in the city, remote and almost forgotten. Neighbours who were little better than strangers had visited, sat uncomfortably with Linda until they couldn't stand it anymore, and left again with empty promises to drop back in later. Brian's boss at his old job had phoned, but the last months of absence from his office had distanced Brian from his colleagues. There was no longer any intimacy. No connection. The man couldn't wait to get off the line and escape back to his normality. Linda could imagine some kind of lottery being held at the office to choose who would attend the funeral. Someone drawing a short straw.

*God, what funeral? What the hell do I do?*

Someone had called that morning. Telling Linda that Brian's body was no longer required at the morgue and she "needed to make arrangements". Had she, "made any arrangements?"

*Arrangements.* No, she hadn't made any arrangements. Just like she hadn't made the bed or a decent meal, or any effort to leave this damned couch for three days. *She hadn't made any fucking arrangements.*

'Oh, for Christ's sake!' she snapped and stood up, the room spinning momentarily. Her voice sounded like a stranger's.

Linda walked towards the kitchen, her mouth dry. She passed a full-length mirror in the hall and stopped, catching a glimpse of herself.

A dreadful, treacherous thought came to her. *Would anyone else have her? A widow at thirty? Dressed in black and mourning?*

Of course they would.

Linda wasn't blind to her own beauty. She was still pretty and petite.

In fact, she already had a lover.

That hurt. The guilt. And the thought that Brian knew about Jackson now. Her dead husband was looking down from some Heaven for cancer victims and discovering his adoring wife had been unfaithful.

One night, Linda had lost it. Failed herself and her dying husband. She'd craved real sex and to be close to a man whose breath didn't rattle in his throat. It really *was* supposed to be just for *one night*, but it hadn't turned out that way. Jackson worked at the desk next to her and continued to whisper all the right things she'd needed to hear, at the right times. Weak, she'd succumbed again—and again.

She thought wretchedly, *I was pathetic and evil*. She refused to add *desperate, lonely and terrified*.

'Brian can't see anything. He's not in Heaven,' she told the mirror image. 'You haven't got him out of the bloody morgue yet, you useless bitch.'

Linda's eye fell on a local newspaper strewn across the kitchen table. She couldn't recall where it came from. A neighbor left it behind perhaps, or it was days old. She was reminded of her parents, both dead now, who used to pick through the death notices and ghoulishly look for names they knew.

There had been advertisements, too. Linda began flipping through the newspaper to the right page.

The few columns of death notices were bordered by advertisements for florists, grief counseling and legal advisers. A large spread by a city-based funeral directors struck Linda as too slick—too commercial. Instead, a smaller advert in the corner of the page for a company called Evermore Funerals seemed more appropriate. She imagined kindly, stooped old men with gentle smiles who would say the perfect thing no matter what.

She dialed the number.

'I—I need to arrange a funeral,' she explained after a quiet voice answered.

'Are you the next-of-kin?' the man asked.

'Yes, I'm his wife... I'm the—the widow.'

'Then I offer my condolences. Please, take your time. Do you have friends and family to support you?'

'No, not really,' Linda admitted reluctantly and with this out in the open, the sad truth catching in her throat, she added in a rush, 'And I don't know what to *do*. I've never had to do anything like this before.' Linda had been overseas when her parents died in a car wreck. It was all over by the time she returned.

‘You don’t have to do anything,’ the voice told her easily. ‘That’s what *we* do. Perhaps it would be best if we called around for a visit? Discuss things in person?’

‘Yes, all right,’ Linda found herself nodding at the phone. ‘That would be very kind.’

‘Not at all.’

She gave them her name and address, and hung up. A moment afterwards Linda felt puzzled at how easy the call had been. *Surely there was more to it than that?*

‘No, like he said, that’s what they *do*,’ she decided. It still didn’t feel quite right—but then nothing felt right.

Old habits kicked in and Linda fretted that the house wasn’t fit for visitors. She discovered herself sitting on the couch again and with a sigh forced herself to get back up. There wasn’t much to clean—she sure as hell wasn’t going to break out the vacuum cleaner. The few dishes were quickly stacked in the washer, she wiped down the benches and straightened some papers into a pile. Some of them went in the bin outside and she remembered that it was collection day the following morning.

Dragging the bin to the front curb, the brief walk in the sunshine was like emerging from a tomb of her own. The warmth felt comforting—except Linda didn’t *want* to feel comfortable. She didn’t deserve it, *because she was a stupid, cheating whore*. She hurried back inside.

*What else?*

She made the bed, hating every moment of it—a bad memory. Brian liked to make it with military precision, the cover perfectly tucked and tight, the pillows arranged exactly right. Linda used to laugh at him.

It was the first time she’d made the bed since he’d died.

*It’s going to be like this for everything*, she thought, straining to lift the mattress to tuck the sheets under. Everything was going to be the first time, or the last time, or the only time—since Brian died. *It will measure things for the rest of my life*.

The doorbell ringing made Linda frown. It was too soon for the funeral directors, so who was it?

She was wrong. Two men dressed in formal black and wearing practiced smiles of sympathy were waiting on the porch.

‘Mrs McPharlin? I’m James Blacken and this is my assistant, Adam Finde. From Evermore Funerals,’ he went on carefully, seeing confusion on Linda’s face.

Blacken was the epitome of a mortician. Tall, lean and hollow-cheeked. Adam Finde was a surprisingly fresh-faced young man who offered an almost inappropriate, cheerful smile.

‘That was... quick,’ Linda said.

‘We left immediately and the traffic was kind,’ Blacken explained.

‘Not a single red light,’ Finde said, his smile widening. ‘Our lucky day.’

She was taken aback. She didn’t want to hear about anyone being *lucky*. It was hardly a *lucky* time for her, was it? Linda expected Blacken to apologise, but both men stayed silent and looked at her until she realised they were waiting to be invited inside.

‘Oh—please, come on in,’ she said, turning to walk down the hall and gesturing for them to follow.

‘Thank you.’

‘I’m afraid the place is in a bit of a mess.’ It was automatic.

‘It’s a very nice home you have here. It speaks of welcome to me. You must be proud.’ Their footsteps plodded in unison making a glass cabinet rattle.

‘It needs a lot of work, but we haven’t been doing anything for a while, of course,’ she said.

‘Of course,’ Blacken said, and was echoed by his assistant.

Linda frowned for a second, before facing them again inside the kitchen. *Of course? How the hell would they know? Brian could have been killed in a car that morning.*

Maybe the house reeked of death. Of Brian’s slow and painful decline.

*Maybe they just know what to say.*

She offered them a cup of tea, which they declined, so she made herself one to occupy her hands as she explained what happened. The two men murmured kindly as her story progressed, then she sat with them at the table and discussed the funeral arrangements. Linda agreed with everything they suggested. They understood she wanted nothing elaborate. Just the basics would do. Brian wouldn’t want her wasting money.

‘Do you have a site chosen?’ Blacken asked. Linda had to think what he meant.

‘A gravesite, you mean?’ Tears threatened. ‘You know, I’m afraid we never discussed it.’ She didn’t add that they hadn’t discussed *anything*. ‘I supposed I’d better—’

Bracken interrupted, 'Our company has access to several remaining plots in a very old site. It's beautiful with large, shady trees and very quiet. I'd be pleased to offer your husband a resting place there at a very reasonable price.' His eyes crinkled encouragingly.

*I can do without the damned sell job*, Linda thought, but the idea appealed to her. She had things left to say to Brian, even if he wouldn't answer. It sounded like just the right place. 'Thank you, I think I'd like that. You're very kind.'

'There are some documents, of course.'

'Of course,' Linda said, the mimicry not lost on her. Bracken didn't seem to notice it.

He pulled some papers from an aged, leather satchel and took a fountain pen from his pocket. He began to write in a florid, old-fashioned style and Linda was moved enough to comment, 'You have beautiful writing.'

'It comes from many long years of practice,' Bracken replied quietly, concentrating. It discouraged her to say more, so Linda turned to Finde.

'How long have *you* been doing this?' she asked. It sounded inane, but it was better than the silence with only Bracken's scratching nib.

'It feels like forever,' Finde said, smiling again.

'I must say it's an unusual choice to make—for your career, I mean. Are you part of the family?'

'No, nothing like that,' Finde shook his head slowly. 'There's never any lack of trade. And the pay is good. You soon get used to—well, you know what. I don't think it's so strange.'

'No, of course not. I didn't mean to—'

He held up a hand, the smile unwavering, stopping her.

A small shiver went down Linda's back and she decided that Finde wasn't quite so normal after all. She excused herself and went to get a suit for them to dress Brian with. She put shoes, socks and a tie in a bag and took them all back to the kitchen, handing them to Finde. He accepted the bundle without comment and they sat in silence until Bracken twisted the papers around for Linda to sign.

'We need your signature on these. I'll show you where,' he said, placing a finger delicately on the first page. Then Bracken hesitated. 'I'm obliged to remind you this is a binding contract. Do you wish to read it through, before you accept it?'

Linda shook her head and signed everything without a second glance at what the forms meant. She didn't care or believe for a moment there could be anything out of the ordinary. *That's what funeral directors were all about, wasn't it?* They gave you not only comfort and support, but trust, too. You had to *trust* them.

Bracken stood and placed the papers back in his bag. 'That's all we need. Under the circumstances I think we should go to collect your husband straight away.'

'They did call,' Linda said, standing as well.

'Exactly.' He produced a business card and gave it to her. 'Please call at any time, if you need to know anything at all.'

'Yes, I will.' Awkwardly, she held out her hand.

He surprised Linda by taking it and tracing a pattern in her palm with his finger. Watching, she saw it was the same as the first letter of their company, an "E" with the elongated middle lateral. Bracken let go and said with a reassuring smile. 'An old family tradition, that's all. A sign.'

'A sign?' She was confused and suddenly uncomfortable. Even slightly frightened, she realized. 'I don't understand. What does it mean?'

'In days long gone you would make this mark on your door, if you needed our services.'

'Okay,' she said lamely. *So... was it a handshake or what?* Linda felt—*creeped out*. The childish term was the only thing that came to mind.

The two men turned away leaving Linda to silently follow them back to the front door. They didn't say anything more, no polite goodbyes or further condolences. That disturbed Linda further. Unexpectedly, Linda realized she felt *tricked* even though that made no sense at all.

Then she figured it was *all in her head*. It had to be. Grief and exhaustion were playing with her mind.

Despite this reasoning, abruptly she couldn't wait for them to leave. 'Thank you again,' she said, closing the door as soon as they were outside. She heard an indistinct reply masked by the latch clicking into place.

With a deep breath Linda waited for the sound of a car starting up and pulling away. Nothing happened and she began to dread they'd forgotten something and would come back, knocking again. A long minute passed. Perhaps they were writing notes or making a phone call, before they drove? She hurried into the lounge room and peered through a crack between the drawn curtains.

The driveway was empty. So was the street at her curb.

*What the hell?*

Linda's reluctance to see Bracken again was defeated by curiosity and she went outside to stand on the front lawn, staring up and down the street. There was no sign of the two men or any car. She stared around for a long time. Finally an unconvincing answer came to her.

They had an undertaker's car built especially to be quiet and discreet. Maybe it had some super muffler or something? That's why she hadn't heard it.

She went back inside and sat on the couch again. The same despairing thoughts of loneliness, loss and guilt started crowding back and she let them, since there was nothing else to think about. They were joined by a new concern—a nagging doubt. That she had acted hastily in calling Evermore Funerals. She should have shopped around and seen what others had to offer.

*Don't be stupid. This is your husband's funeral. You're not buying a bloody washing machine.*

Still, Linda had found Blacken and his assistant more than just slightly unnerving in the end. There was something wrong about them. Something odd in a frightening way.

It was too late now. She'd signed the contracts.

## TWO

The next morning Linda discovered that she had to speak with Bracken again already. He had asked her if there was anything special she might like to place in the casket with Brian. At the time it seemed a macabre concept to her, then Linda figured on putting her husband's much-loved and tattered copy of *Lord of the Rings* in with his body. Brian had read it many times over. Linda had meant to give the funeral directors the book as she handed over the suit, but had forgotten.

Bracken would need it soon.

She looked for Bracken's business card in a bowl on the room divider, but the card wasn't there, puzzling her. Linda was certain that's where she'd put it.

She looked for the novel as well and couldn't find it either. Frustration brushed over her frayed nerves as she started re-opening the same drawers and checking the same places. Finally she had the idea to use the newspaper advertisement again to at least call Bracken. The book could wait. The paper was on the kitchen table exactly where she'd left it.

Impatiently, Linda turned to the Births and Deaths columns.

The advertisement wasn't there.

'Now you know you're going crazy,' Linda told herself shakily, checking the newspaper once more. It definitely wasn't there, although Linda found the large advertisement she'd thought tasteless. It was the right *page*.

*Okay, hang on. Is this the right paper?*

It had to be. It came out weekly.

Linda leaned with both hands on the table, partly to stop their sudden trembling, hung her head and took deep, calming breaths. *This was insane—no, it was ridiculous.* That was a better word. It just didn't make sense. There had to be a logical explanation. The same one that would explain too how Bracken had arrived at her door so quickly and made strange signs in her palm like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

She savagely pushed those thoughts away. Paranoia *would* drive her insane.

It must be the wrong newspaper after all—somehow. Had she found the advert in something else instead and didn't remember it? She *had* been feeling exhausted and emotional. Anything was possible, really. Her memory couldn't be trusted.

This made her think about the strong sedatives she kept in the bedroom and how attractive it would be to take one now. A doctor prescribed them to help cope with the stress of Brian's illness—she hadn't mentioned to him the added pressure of having a lover in one bed, while her husband was dying in her own.

'You don't need one,' she told herself and went into the bedroom anyway. Linda sat on the window sill and tried to deny herself the pill. Convince herself she should reserve the drugs for real emergencies. Her eyes fixed on a dirty washing hamper and a memory came back. She had been wearing one of Brian's old khaki work shirts the day before.

She pulled it out of the basket and found Bracken's business card in the pocket. Linda felt a weak relief, not the least because it took away any need to answer the riddle of the missing advertisement. She could stop looking for *that*.

*God, what if no one answered her call?* What if Evermore Funerals had vanished just like the advertisement, taking her dead husband with them.

'For Christ's sake Linda! Cut it out!'

Hurriedly, in case any more foolish, frightening thoughts plagued her, Linda used the extension next to the bed to dial the number. She heard it ringing at the other end, then Bracken's whispery voice answered.

'Hello, Mr Bracken? It's Linda McPharlin.'

'Ah, Mrs Pharlin. I hope everything is all right?'

*No, actually. You're starting to really freak me out and I'm beginning to wish I'd never called you.* 'Everything's fine, Mr Bracken. I'm calling about—'

'Your husband is here with us now,' Bracken cut her off gently. 'We're looking after him as best we can, I assure you.'

*Which meant what?* Linda didn't know and pushed back awful images of Bracken doing things to Brian's corpse that she couldn't even imagine.

'I'm sure you are. I'm calling to remind you about the book? I was going to give it to you to... to give to Brian. To keep with him.'

'That's right, we haven't forgotten. I have it right here,' Bracken said.

'You do? But I thought that—' Linda stopped, too confused to argue. She couldn't remember handing the book over at all. 'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. A rather well-read copy, I would say.'

‘Yes—yes, that’s the one.’ There was a long silence and Linda felt compelled to say, ‘I was just trying to check.’ Which was a lie, since Linda was *still* convinced she’d never given them the book in the first place.

‘It will be safely within his reach.’

‘All right, thank you.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘You will be able to find the cemetery all right?’

‘I’m sure I won’t have any problems. Your directions were very clear.’

‘We will see you there, then. All the arrangements are in place and you needn’t worry about anything. Good day, Mrs McPharlin.’

The phone went dead. Linda stared at it in her hand.

Suddenly, out of nowhere she had an idea. Linda slammed the receiver on the cradle and rushed outside. If Evermore Funeral’s advertisement was in another newspaper, it must be in the rubbish with the other things she’d hastily thrown in as she’d cleaned up for Bracken’s arrival.

The bin was empty, the lid open from the collection truck dropping it back to the ground.

‘Damn! Damn it to hell!’ Linda swore, leaning on the bin.

*It wasn’t such a big deal, was it? Was it?*

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Jackson called her that evening. She could tell by his voice that he was at home, in his office, and didn’t want to be overheard by his wife Abigail.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

Linda let herself rage for a moment. *Why does everyone want to know if I’m all right, when the last bloody thing I should be is “all right”.*

‘I’m fine,’ she said wearily.

‘Do you want me to come over?’

‘No, absolutely not!’ *For God’s sake, didn’t he get it?* It was all a mistake. He shouldn’t even be calling, let alone expect he might ever sleep with her again.

‘Calm down, I didn’t mean anything like that,’ he read her mind. ‘I thought you might need some company, that’s all.’

*Company*. That meant sitting and talking. Maybe he would hold her hand. Then stroke her hair. Jackson wouldn't be able to stop himself and an evil, wretched voice in Linda's head doubted *she* would stop *him* either.

'Okay, but you still can't come over.'

'I understand. Of course not, I shouldn't have asked.'

'No.'

A silence stretched out until he said, 'I've made some decisions.'

'Have you? Good for you.'

'Don't you want to hear them?'

'Not particularly, but I guess you're going to tell me anyway.'

'Linda, why are you talking to me like this? It's not *my* fault what's happened. To Brian, I mean.'

Linda relented. 'No, I suppose not. So what are these decisions?' One handed, she scrabbled a cigarette from a packet and lit it.

He hesitated. 'I'm leaving Abigail. I don't want to be here anymore. I can't be with her much longer.'

Her lit match froze in mid-air. This wasn't the first time that Jackson had announced this, but the circumstances were different and Linda felt a rush of alarm. She said carefully, 'I hope you're not including me in any of these plans?'

Jackson sounded hurt, but he knew what to say. 'No, it's nothing to do with you—with us. Brian's death has reminded me that life's too short.'

'Brian's certainly was,' Linda told him bitterly, while she thought, *Damn you, there is no "us"*.

Jackson let that pass. 'When is the funeral, do you know yet?'

'Day after tomorrow.'

'That's quick.'

'I think I got lucky.' Linda said wryly.

'Perhaps it's good to get it over with.'

'Perhaps.'

'Will you send me the details? I'd like to come.'

Jackson had only met Brian once and even that had been accidental, an awkward moment that had Linda twisting inside with anxiety in case something was let slip. Was it right that Jackson attend the funeral? Who would care? Who would know?

*Who the hell else was going to come?*

‘Sure. I’ll email them to you.’

‘Okay.’ He waited, but she didn’t say more. ‘Are you sure you don’t want me to come over?’

‘Of course, I’m sure. Christ, Jackson! I can’t believe you’re asking me—twice.’

He retreated, ending the call. Linda hung up the phone and stared at the empty chair opposite. Brian used to sit there a lot. She imagined Jackson in it. He was tall—his legs would splay across the carpet. Jackson had broad shoulders that would fill the cushioning. He used to do a lot of sports, which had given him a rugged, weathered face. That had attracted Linda strongly, perhaps because Brian had started to look so pale and fragile. The strange thing was that Jackson looked strong and capable, determined and reliable, yet inside he was the opposite. He was insecure and naive. Easily manipulated.

She’d only wanted sex. It didn’t even have to be good sex, just discreet. And Jackson *was* discreet, Linda had to give him that. With a wife expecting him home, he’d made sure of that.

That night the sedatives called to Linda again. She ignored them and drank a bottle of red wine instead. The room spun as she stumbled to bed.

Laying in the dark she listened to a strong wind push a tree against the house. It scratched wooden fingers across the tin roof and tapped at the window, as if searching for an opening, demanding her attention. Wanting to be let in.

She awoke in the small hours, startled and frightened. The sound of someone breathing in the room faded and she couldn’t tell if it had been a bad dream or the wind again. It hadn’t been like just anyone breathing.

It’d had the laboured, painful rasp of Brian fighting for his life.

Out of sheer habit she ran her hand across the other side of the bed to see if he was there, because sometimes Brian would get up and leave her in peace to sleep.

The sheet was warm and she jerked her hand away.

*I was sleeping there. I’ve rolled over,* Linda thought against a rising panic. *Jesus, you really need to get a grip on yourself. You’ll be hearing monsters under the fucking bed next.*

She turned on the bedside light and the glow chased away all the fears instantly. She sank back into the pillows and waited for the anxiety to ebb out of her skin.

*What are you going to do now? Sleep with the light on like a child?*

*Why not? Who will care?*

*What are you scared of?*

She couldn't answer that either.

# THREE

The day of the funeral a storm sat over the city. Single, fat drops of rain fell like a promise of things to come, but that was all, as if the storm couldn't summon the energy yet. Linda was glad of it. The heat was taken out of the day, even if she paid for it with a sticky humidity that made her clothes cling to her back.

She found the cemetery at the end of an untidy cul-de-sac. The entire street struck her as old and worn out. Walking along the uneven footpath, making sure not to twist an ankle, Linda told herself this was a surreal, impossible moment in her life. She was going to her husband's funeral alone like she was walking to the corner store for a packet of cigarettes. The lack of ceremony and sense of occasion was disturbing. Eileen was going to hate every second of this.

Linda was surprised to see about twenty mourners gathered around an open grave. She spotted Jackson staying well back and out of sight. As she moved among them and heard the murmured condolences she tried hard to figure out just who most of these people *were*. People she had never met before. People she would never see again. Vague voices from the past drawn to this place by some odd feeling of obligation.

Eileen was standing at the head of the grave. She wore a black dress, stockings and a belt that cut unflatteringly into her thick waist. A wide hat and veil hid her face. Seeing her, Linda was startled that it appeared that Eileen was the widow, not her. Linda wore a navy suit and dark blue blouse—the closest thing to black she owned that was suitable. Linda hadn't had the inclination to go out and buy anything more.

Disappointment poured from Eileen's body. Linda could see that nothing about this day met with her sister-in-law's approval. Still, Eileen managed to touch Linda's elbow sympathetically.

'I was beginning to worry about you,' she said softly. It was a lie, Linda knew. Eileen probably wouldn't have given a damn if Linda hadn't turned up at all. It would have let her take over things and do them *properly*.

Linda could have explained that she didn't want to arrive at the cemetery any earlier. Why endure this place a second longer than necessary?

'I got some traffic,' she said instead. 'I don't know what—an accident or road works...'

'Goodness.'

‘I know,’ Linda murmured.

*You know, Linda? What do you know?* What an inane thing to say. It didn’t matter. Eileen was silenced, which was good.

There were several minutes when everyone stood around, uncertain what to do. It wasn’t clear exactly what was going to happen next. Then Eileen began handing out printed leaflets, a guide to how the ceremony was going to proceed. Something she had planned herself. Linda had gladly let her.

Linda was looking around the graveyard and deciding it was a long time since any other burial had taken place here. Perhaps she should have been more grateful that Bracken offered her a plot for Brian? It didn’t appear to be something he did often.

They heard the sound of a horse’s hooves on tarmac. At the entrance of the cemetery appeared a beautiful horse-drawn hearse with a pair of magnificent black animals in the traps. The leather of their harnesses shone with dubbing and the brass buckles and bits gleamed. Perched in the driver’s seat was Bracken with Finde beside him. They were dressed immaculately in top hats, coats and tails. The hearse was a perfection of polished, dark timber and shining chrome. The horses seemed unsettled, their eyes rolling, but picked their way into the cemetery with practiced ease.

‘My God,’ Eileen breathed beside her. It appeared, finally, something had met with her approval.

‘My God, indeed,’ Linda said. It was a shock to her, too—a pleasant one. Bracken had never mentioned it.

The hearse stopped a few metres away from the grave site and Finde dropped down on the other side to appear at the horse’s heads, holding them. Bracken slid effortlessly to the ground beside the grave. He moved smoothly and with confidence, belying his age. He opened the rear door and, with the faintest smile of encouragement to say there was nothing to be afraid of, he beckoned for people to come forward to be pall-bearers.

At first, no one moved. Then the men among the mourner’s group moved forward slowly and with Bracken’s whispered guidance helped lift the coffin out and place it over the hole. Some of them stumbled under the weight and caused tiny cascades of soil. All of them stepped hastily away from the task.

Bracken had come to Linda’s side. ‘You should start now,’ he said quietly.

Eileen began the service with a reading from the Bible. None of her family was religious as far as Linda was aware, and she had no idea how Eileen had found

something appropriate, but it worked. Next, a colleague of Brian's spoke briefly of how well her husband was regarded and how much he'd be missed.

Too soon, it was Linda's turn.

She fought down tears and a strong urge to flee. A carefully-rehearsed speech, short and to the point, evaporated from her mind leaving her stricken and dumb.

'We—we didn't want this,' she said finally. 'Nobody wants this. It was never supposed to happen. Brian and I were going to live together until we were a hundred years old and die peacefully in our bed on the same night. He was my entire life and I wish with all my strength this had never happened. I will miss him so much...' Linda stopped, feeling stupid and inadequate. 'I want him back—I wish to God I could have him back. Is that so wrong?' She could sense a mood of embarrassment in the crowd for her. A silence stretched out. Eileen was seething.

Uninvited, abruptly Bracken began to speak. In a sonorous, rolling voice he talked of loss and grief, of loved ones left behind, and the inevitability of life going on regardless. It was beautiful and poetic. It had nothing to do with Brian McPharlin and at the same time had everything to do with him. It was perfect, and ended at exactly the right moment.

He said to Linda kindly, 'My god would grant your wish, Mrs McPharlin.'

'Amen,' Eileen said, slightly puzzled.

Bracken had to again gently urge some of the men to take up the ropes for lowering the casket. Finde pulled away the supports and the coffin dropped inexpertly into the ground. Some of the mourners tossed handfuls of dirt into the grave. It was like an excuse to call their duty done, because they left immediately. It wasn't long before Linda and Eileen were alone with Bracken.

'Thank you, Mr Bracken,' Linda told him hoarsely. 'You've made a—a difficult day exactly right. I couldn't have coped without you.' She was about to add an apology for doubting him, but remembered in time that Bracken had no knowledge of that.

'It's my life's work, and you are most welcome,' Bracken told her.

Eileen said, 'The horses are beautiful. We didn't know.'

Bracken peered at her through the veil. He didn't reply for a long time and Eileen was beginning to frown with discomfort, then he said, 'You should prepare.'

'I'm sorry?'

He bowed slightly and stepped back. ‘We have to leave. The storm may break and I should get the horses stabled.’

He turned and walked away. Linda could see that Eileen was pale and trembling suddenly.

‘We should go, too,’ Linda said.

‘What did he mean?’

‘I think he meant the storm, Eileen,’ Linda lied. She had her own opinion she didn’t want to say. ‘We should be ready in case it rains.’

Eileen came out of a daze. ‘Yes, of course. All right, we’d better get going, remember? People will be waiting.’

‘Oh—yes. I nearly forgot.’

Eileen had arranged a wake in small hall. A dozen mourners made the effort and Linda sat awkwardly among them, sipping wine and fielding questions about the future as best she could. Jackson hadn’t come. She counted the minutes to when it would be acceptable for her to leave. Finally she thanked everybody one more time and slipped away. No one knew, or perhaps they chose *not* to know, that she was driving alone.

At home she sat disconsolately on the lounge suite and wondered at how quick and unremarkable the day had been. It seemed an indecently small amount of time had been spent burying her husband.

Linda consoled herself with the thought that it wasn’t about ceremonies and funerals. It wasn’t about *rituals*. Brian’s passing should be marked with deeply personal memories that she alone owned. Privately, she should immerse herself in the past and be damned to the future.

So she did, and Linda wasn’t ashamed at tears that ran down her cheeks. It was the right thing to do.

Memories can play strange tricks on the mind. As she cried Linda could smell Brian’s after-shave in the air.

**END OF SAMPLE**

## **Serious Stuff...**

### **Death Wish by G.M.HAGUE**

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