

Hung Out To Die



FAMILY COMES FIRST...
WITH A HANGMAN'S NOOSE



G.M.HAGUE

A Lukas Boston Mystery

Hung Out To Die

By

G.M.Hague

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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.

To my brother Stephen, who I'm sure will be watching.

Hung Out To Die.

ONE

As far as derelict warehouses go, this one was typical—apart from the corpse hanging from the rafters. The body cast a grim, long shadow from the beams of cold sunlight streaming from a line of skylights in the roof.

The place was big, built on an old harbour dock with wooden piers beneath and a weathered timber floor. A labyrinth of forgotten packing crates was piled high along with sea containers and stacks of loading pallets covered by musty sacking. The abandoned goods created a maze of narrow passages and alleys that stank of rat's droppings and rotting hessian. Outside, seagulls could be heard wheeling hopefully above the wharves and ships, the water of Port Phillip Bay below them glinting under the weak winter sun with patches of spilled oil and scum-lined waste. The next stop south was Tasmania, then Antarctica. The sunlight had so little warmth that these might have been a stone's throw away, not thousands of miles.

The dead man was suspended above a clear area among the clutter and near the middle of the building. In the gloom, the circle of surrounding boxes and rubbish was like the edge of miniature, dusty city.

Lukas Boston stared up at the corpse and said, 'Yep, I know him. Edward Rewold. The last time I saw him, he looked a lot healthier. Not so... blue around the face, if you know what I mean.'

'Was he a miserable bastard?' Detective Peter Goodall asked. 'Miserable enough to do this to himself?'

'Not at all. He needed a good private investigator and I came highly recommended—*highly* recommended. You don't hear that too often, do you?'

'Certainly not where you're concerned,' Goodall said. 'What was the problem?'

'I can't tell you. Client confidentiality and all that. I'm sure you understand, Pete.'

'I understand that your client is *dead* and hanging from the roof. He won't be putting in any complaints.'

The two men stood side by side. Lukas was tall and lean, with a shock of black curly hair and brooding, green eyes. Goodall looked more like the policeman he was—spending too much time at his desk and gaining pounds on his already thickset body with every donut he ate. His hair was thinning and grey. Both of them hunched into heavy coats. The air was chilly and a wind coming off the water made it sharper. Inside, the shadows seeped a dank, unpleasant cold.

Lukas said, ‘Your powers of detective observation are almost Sherlock Holmes-like at time, Pete. I’m impressed.’

Goodall just looked at Lukas, waiting.

‘And I’ve got my professional reputation to consider. A very good one, apparently.’

‘Give me a break, Lukas. We haven’t got all bloody day.’

Lukas looked hurt. ‘All right, keep your shirt on. I’m investigating a bit of in-house robbery in Rewold’s home. Probably done by one of his own family, so he doesn’t want to call you blokes in. Rewold’s really pissed off, but prefers to keep it private.’

‘How much are we talking about?’

‘Money? I don’t know.’ Lukas shrugged. ‘But I’m guessing that it was little more than petty cash for this guy. Hardly worth stretching your neck for.’

‘Seriously? You don’t know how much?’

Lukas protested his innocence with a gesture. It was true, Rewold hadn’t told him.

Goodall said, ‘He’s on the wrong side of eighty. Maybe a terminal illness and he didn’t want kick the bucket too slow?’

‘Fit as a fiddle when I saw him.’

One of the forensic team walked past. Although she was dressed in a baggy, white overall she had a shapely figure underneath it, so the two men still watched appreciatively.

‘Hi Denise, how’s it been going?’ Lukas asked lightly.

Without turning around or saying anything, Denise flipped him a middle finger and kept going.

Goodall said, ‘Have you been disappointing my female officers again?’

‘Okay, let me ask *you*,’ Lukas said. ‘How many times can you expect to sleep with a woman before she should start thinking that the relationship is... you know, exclusive? That you shouldn’t be having sex with anyone else?’

‘I dunno,’ Goodall thought it over. ‘Three times maybe. Four tops, I guess?’

Lukas was annoyed. ‘Well, there you go. You and Denise apparently have a few things in common, strangely enough. Personally, I would have said five or six times, right?’

‘Did you count the early dates? Going out to dinner and stuff without taking her home afterwards? The nights without sex?’

‘Without sex?’

Goodall sighed. ‘Hard to imagine, I know, Lukas.’

‘All right, assume that happens, do they count?’

‘Of course, they count.’

Lukas pulled a face and muttered something.

Goodall said, ‘How’d she find out about the other woman?’

‘First hand, unfortunately. I really must figure out a better place to hide my spare front door key.’

Goodall blew out his cheeks in sympathy, but hid a pleased smile. He nodded at the hanging man. ‘Notice anything strange?’

Lukas obliged, studying the corpse again. ‘Rewold’s wearing a really nice suit and he’s got bare feet. A Paul McCartney fan?’

Goodall squinted at him. ‘What?’

‘You know, that picture of the Beatles crossing the street in front of Abbey Road studios and Paul McCartney’s got no shoes on...’ Lukas’ voice trailed off as he saw Goodall wasn’t interested. ‘You don’t like the Beatles?’

‘I’m a Johnny Cash guy myself,’ Goodall said flatly. ‘Real country and western, not that bubblegum country shit they play now.’ He pointed at the body. ‘Why don’t you take a closer look?’

Careful not to disturb any of the forensic people, Lukas stood right next to Rewold and examined him, waiting for something to leap out. He started saying, ‘Maybe he didn’t want to piss on his best shoes? Sometimes they think about stuff like that—’ Lukas stopped, surprised as one of the forensic team took a cue from Goodall and lifted the corpse’s legs, one by one, so Lukas could see the soles of Rewold’s feet.

On the bottom of one foot in green marker pen was written “Lukas” and on the other was “Boston”.

‘That’s odd,’ Lukas said.

‘You think so? That’s why you’re here,’ Goodall told him. ‘Mind you, there’s *always* odd shit happening whenever you’re involved. What the hell is it about you?’

‘Why does it always have to be my fault?’

‘Because it usually *is* your fault. Are you still saying this has nothing to do with your missing petty cash?’

‘Let’s not rush into anything.’

‘No one’s paying you by the hour here, Lukas.’

Lukas ignored that, thoughtfully regarding the body. ‘Have the rest of the Rewolds been informed he’s dead?’

‘Yes, but nobody’s been interviewed. We just broke the news and no one exactly burst into tears. You’d think we’d told them their pet parrot had fallen off the perch. A little suspicious, if you ask me.’

‘Then why not let me talk to the family first? I might get more out of them.’

‘If you think it’s worth a try.’

Lukas stared up at the corpse’s face and thought, *And I can try talking to someone else, too. Like maybe this guy.*

TWO

Two hours later Lukas was sitting in the lounge room of Rewold Manor, a stately home in Toorak, one of Melbourne's oldest and more prestigious suburbs. The house around him was huge and ornate, over a hundred years old with paneled walls and open fire places like the one with a crackling pile of blazing logs next to Lukas now. Wide staircases with polished handrails wound to the upper floors. Lukas would have guessed the chair he sat in was antique and worth more money than he earned in a year. That would explain why it was killing his back and made his arse completely numb.

In an identical chair facing him sat the late Edward Rewold. Edward's wizened expression was giving nothing away.

'Come on, Eddy. You're making this a whole lot harder than it needs to be. Just tell me what the hell's going on and we can clear the whole thing up. I'll still find your stolen cash and... I dunno, give it to your solicitor or something. No one else needs to know.'

Edward stared back at him and a slow, knowing smile spread across his face.

Lukas said, 'See? I *knew* you were playing games, you crafty old sod.'

Edward disappeared.

Lukas sighed. That was the trouble dealing with damned ghosts. When it came to holding out on giving critical information or just being difficult, the bastards always vanished when the going got tough. Lukas swore quietly and sat back—then jerked forward painfully as something in the stupid, antique bloody chair tried to bore a hole in his spine. Lukas had spent plenty of time tied to a variety of chairs for unpleasant reasons, but these things took discomfort to a new level without resorting to ropes and sharp knives.

'You're not helping, you know that don't you?' he asked the empty air.

Someone knocked softly on the door.

'It's okay, you can come in,' Lukas called.

Theresa Rewold peered cautiously around the door. She asked timidly, 'Has it helped at all? Did you connect with the room? Get some kind of *vibe*?'

Lukas hadn't told anyone what he was really trying to do—have a chat to Edward Rewold's spirit. Instead, he'd explained it was all about tuning into the crime scene where the safe had been robbed. Getting a feel for the room. It sounded all a bit Zen and rubbish, but the Rewold family swallowed it.

'It's been very interesting.' Lukas gestured for her to come in.

She slipped inside and, before closing the door, turned and leaned out to check the hall behind her, bending over rather more than necessary. Lukas wasn't about to complain. She had a full figure with a slim waist in a classic hour-glass shape. Long, auburn hair framed a pretty face and brown eyes. Her low-cut, short black dress was a spectacular success, as far as Lukas was concerned. He'd already discovered that Theresa was a flirt and a tease, and he hadn't been surprised to learn Theresa had been married twice. It *was* a little strange how she'd been tragically widowed both times, but with a figure like that Lukas was willing to be understanding.

'We're alone,' she announced breathlessly, coming in and standing with her back to the door, her breasts heaving hypnotically.

Lukas was all too aware of that. 'Oh, good... I guess.'

'What did you find out?'

'It's hard to say, I'll need to do it again. Tell me, are you *sure* everyone wants me to continue investigating this? Your father's just died in a terrible way and you must all be grief-stricken. It's not a good time to have a private investigator poking around the family home and looking for lost petty cash.'

Theresa hurried over and sat in the chair opposite, leaning forward in a way that had Lukas further focused on her exposed cleavage for as long as he dared.

'It was a lot of money, Lukas,' she said secretively. 'A veritable fortune and someone took it. Father would want you to continue.'

'All right, if you insist.' Really, Lukas had no intention of quitting since Edward had added the mystery of doodling Lukas' name on the soles of his feet. 'Why would anybody take the money?' Lukas waved at the house around them. 'There's a squillion bucks in inheritance all around you. Why would anybody in the family bother with stealing anything?'

Theresa lowered her voice. 'Because no one knows how much share of the old boy's money we'll get when he dies—I mean, now he's dead,' she said

hastily and threw in a look of remorse. ‘Some of us could get nothing. If you ask me, I think that stealing the safe’s contents might have been a crime of opportunity, grabbing a kind of insurance. A nest egg, if we’re cut adrift.’

‘That’s quite a theory, although it still seems a little drastic,’ Lukas said to her bosom, then managed to drag his eyes upwards to Theresa’s liquid, come-to-bed eyes. ‘We really should bring the police in, you know. They have much better resources than me—fingerprints and DNA... all that stuff.’

‘No, this is a family matter and that’s how father wanted it. No one broke in, nobody escaped the house. The contents of the safe are still here somewhere. Somebody within these walls is the culprit.’

Yep, that narrows it down, Lukas figured. The house was enormous.

He looked thoughtful to impress her. It usually worked. ‘Tell me, I hope you’re not offended but... you’ve lost two husbands, right? So I guess you’re quite comfortable in a financial kind of way?’

‘Are you trying to establish an alibi for me, Mr Boston? How sweet.’ Theresa fluttered her eyes.

‘Ah... call me Lukas, please. I’m only getting background information on everybody here. It’s a part of the process.’

‘Probing people for the truth? That’s all right, you can *probe* me as much as you want. I’ve got nothing I want to hide.’

Lukas cleared his throat. ‘So, what can you tell me about your past marriages?’

‘Oh, they were just bad investments.’

‘You mean, your *wives* had bad investments, right?’

Theresa sat up and sort of jiggled impressively.

She said stiffly, ‘They were both stockbrokers who couldn’t tell the difference between a good stock bond and a free hamburger voucher. Poor Cecil took his own life, hanging himself when the pressure became too much. Albert, on the other hand, died of food poisoning. An unfortunate luncheon sandwich.’

Lukas tried to look sympathetic, something he wasn’t very good at. ‘How awful for you. Still, I suppose you must have sued somebody for damages after that? A law suit of some kind?’

‘He made his own lunches, Lukas.’

Seconds ticked by as Lukas searched for an answer.

'Dreadful luck. It just goes to prove that good hygiene in the kitchen is so important these days,' he managed. 'What about your father? Why on earth would he kill himself?'

'Perhaps, because he took a good look at himself in the mirror and didn't like what he saw? My father suffered from an over-abundance of greed, spite and a sick sense of humour. Maybe his conscience finally got the better of him? On the other hand, he was quite old and this could be his way of making things difficult for the rest of us one last time?'

'He seemed quite a nice guy to me,' Lukas said, eyeing the shadows.

'Like hell, he couldn't even just die like a normal person, damn it. All I can say is that some things, Lukas, are wide open for interpretation at the right time and others are not.'

It didn't make much sense until Theresa did a leg-crossing move that had Lukas mesmerised. She arched an eyebrow at him to make sure the message got through.

'Exactly,' he said, clearing his throat again. 'Okay, back to the... ah, theft. You think someone cleaned the safe out in case there's no money for them in the will?'

'It makes sense to me. I didn't do it, of course. I'm just *saying*, that would be my guess.'

'Does everyone know how much money was supposed to be inside it?'

Theresa did the leg-crossing act again. Lukas unconsciously followed it, his head nodding. She said, 'Yes, because father used to taunt us about it. He said the safe was filled with treasure and cash just sitting there with nothing to do.'

'How does that work? What, you're all broke?'

With a wan smile Theresa said carefully, 'Let's say the financial arrangements around here don't put a lot of disposable income in our wallets. We don't get much money to spend on ourselves.'

That might explain the lack of underwear, Lukas guessed.

She added, 'Your fee is still guaranteed, of course. I'll personally make sure of that. If it comes to the worst, we can always *come* to an arrangement.'

'It's not a concern right now,' Lukas said, hoping they were both still discussing cash. Romping around naked with the lovely Theresa in any of the

many rooms upstairs was appealing, but didn't constitute legal currency or even rate a discount. The invoicing would be difficult, too.

Not that Lukas needed it. A healthy investment portfolio provided by his parents, who had retired to a sun-soaked beach in Queensland, catered for everything Lukas could want and plenty more. However, he knew clients tended to be more forthcoming during his investigations, if they were paying a decent fee and expecting their money's worth.

'Mind you,' Theresa said with a false smile, 'While we've been assured you're the best man for the job, I should warn you that our family isn't accustomed to failure.'

Lukas suspected he was being threatened with a bad sandwich. He wondered if that justified pulling his Glock and shooting Theresa in self-defense. The plunging neckline swayed his mind.

'We've got a long way to go before anyone starts talking about failure,' he said, making a mental note, *Take-away food at all times during this case.*

The door burst open and a younger, even more attractive version of Theresa stormed in. Corrine Rewold was Theresa's twenty-five year old niece.

'Aunty Theresa, have you seen where—oh, for God's sake.' She gave her aunt a disgusted look. 'Are you trying to prove your innocence by pushing your tits in his face? I'm sure Mr Boston isn't going to fall for that kind of trick.'

'Corrine, hello darling.' Theresa stood up, smoothing her clothing. 'This was a private conversation. You should have knocked.'

'It looks like Mr Boston is the one who was about to get knocked. Flat on his back and mauled like a—'

'That will *do*, thank you. You're being silly.'

Lukas held up his hands. 'Please, you can *both* call me Lukas. And I can assure you that I always maintain a strictly professional relationship with my clients.' Both the women stared at Lukas in disbelief. He added to be safe, 'Well... okay, not *strictly*, so to speak. I mean, there have been some rare exceptions.'

Bloody Facebook, Lukas thought. *You can never be too sure what they know about you.*

Corrine came over and stood close, gazing up at his face. 'Lukas, surely you weren't eliminating Theresa from your list of suspects simply because she was

flirting with you? Because if that's all it takes, wouldn't you rather interview someone a lot younger? Somebody not quite so... *stretched?*'

A hissing noise came from Theresa.

Lukas was always willing to see both sides of any criminal investigation and Corrine's shapely, youthful figure had abruptly achieved much towards getting her aunt, who moments earlier was innocent as new fallen snow, convicted, jailed and the key thrown away.

'Like I said, I'm an expert at being impartial. Please, let's keep things polite.'

'Would you like to know what I'm expert at?' Corrine asked him, fingering his shirt. 'You can ask me anything you like. I never refuse any reasonable request.'

Lukas was getting curious to know whether the family's financial constraints had a similar effect on Corrine's underwear collection. From this close, it seemed so.

Theresa said, 'Ask her for a cheap rate. Everyone else does.'

'At least they *ask* me, Theresa. I don't need to stalk my lovers.'

They glared at each other.

Lukas said in the void, 'I think we need a family meeting. Let's get everyone together and set some ground rules, right?'

'All right, if you insist,' Corrine said with a pout that promised this wouldn't be the last time she got to play with his clothing. 'We'll go to the front room. The bar's in there and grandfather can't stop us drinking his liquor now, can he?'

You might be surprised, Lukas thought, although he expected that, as it often proved, he was the only person who would ever see Edward Rewold's ghost.

Three more members of the Rewold clan joined them in the front room.

Agatha Rewold was the oldest daughter and Corrine's mother. Seriously overweight and perpetually scowling, her marriage to Ted Rooker had become a life-support system for both of them, a stubborn arrangement that neither was prepared to give up. The fact that Agatha hadn't taken Ted's name—even Corrine called herself a Rewold, not a Rooker—told Lukas that Ted didn't have

a lot of say in matters. Looking almost gaunt beside Agatha, Ted affected the *persona* of a fit, well-dressed businessman with many things on his mind. He spoke vaguely, as if his head was filled with important decisions to be made. Lukas had been told that Ted held some kind of nominal position in Edward Rewold's organisation, a role that involved frequent, long lunches and board meetings that never seemed to achieve anything. The real powerhouse of the empire was Agatha, who carried out her father's every whim with an iron fist and, no doubt, was now relishing being let off Edward's leash with his death.

Lukas looked at them both and tried to figure how the gorgeous Corrine had resulted from such a union. It didn't seem possible. Then, watching Corrine perch herself on a barstool, the skirt riding high, his mind strayed back to the question of underwear again.

Job Rewold was in his mid-thirties, only slightly younger than Theresa. With a beer in one hand he lay sprawled across a couch and seemed bored with the whole thing, toying with a smartphone. Job was slim with a pronounced paunch. It was obvious where much of his supposedly meagre, disposable income was spent. His hair was too long and lank, with a high forehead. Job wouldn't be bothering hairdressers for much longer.

Self-conscious in front of them, Lukas announced, 'I thought it best to speak with you all together to explain how we can go forward and make sure you still want my involvement in this investigation. Your father hired me to look into this situation, but since he's now deceased I need an assurance you're in agreement that I should continue and I'll be getting your full co-operation.'

Agatha blinked at him, then rolled her eyes at Ted to instruct her husband that speaking wasn't necessary and would only annoy her. Corrine slurped on a large whiskey and shifted slightly on the stool to make her dress lift another half inch. Theresa saw this and wiped at something invisible on her chest, prompting some more jiggling that Lukas pretended not to notice.

Job sighed and said, still playing with his phone, 'Will it take long?'

'That's hard to say,' Lukas said, already deciding this was somehow going to be the fastest investigation he'd ever done and the main priority was getting out of this madhouse.

'Will you need to interview the house staff?' Agatha said. She had a wheezing, squeaking voice like she was about to choke any moment.

‘You have house staff?’ Lukas inwardly groaned. More people meant more complications.

‘An incompetent cleaner, a maid who is never here to answer my calls, and a house manager who couldn’t manage a dog kennel,’ Agatha said, grating out every word. ‘I would fire them all, except I don’t have the authority until father’s will is read.’

Job said laconically, ‘What makes you think that’s how everything will work out? It might be me.’

Agatha snorted, ‘Father had a sense of humour, but he wasn’t a complete fool.’

‘Are these staff here now?’ Lukas said.

Theresa answered, ‘Not today. They don’t live in the house and we’ve told them to stay away until further notice.’

‘And, I might say, have you noticed any damned difference?’ Agatha asked everyone.

‘My bed needs making,’ Corrine said, annoyed. ‘And we’ve run out of ice.’ She frowned at her whiskey.

‘I really don’t know how you’ll cope,’ Theresa murmured. ‘Mind you, I wasn’t aware you ever slept in your own bed.’

Ted told them, ‘My appointments schedule has all gone to hell. I’m missing a lot of very important meetings.’

Theresa said, ‘Business should improve then?’

He gave her a droll look. ‘Isn’t it time for your hourly snack, dear? You’re wasting away to a mere mountain in front of our eyes.’

This prompted everyone to begin sniping furiously at each other, ignoring Lukas, their voices getting louder and louder.

Lukas considered pulling out his pistol and firing a few rounds into the ceiling. ‘Is there anyone upstairs?’ he asked mildly. No one heard him and the noise dragged on.

It was something Lukas had *always* wanted to do.

‘I have another question, Mr Boston,’ Job suddenly announced over everyone, putting up his hand. It made them all stop to listen.

Disappointed, Lukas said, ‘Ask away.’

‘Will any of this investigation be adding to our official police records?’

This was a surprise. 'Which of you has a criminal record?'

For the first time the Rewolds displayed some kind of family unity, exchanging wry smiles.

Job said, 'Who hasn't? Didn't you know?'

THREE

Lukas was back at the warehouse where Edward Rewold hung himself. He let himself in through an access door that no one seemed bothered to lock. Already the police tape had gone with only tatters still stuck to the beams and walls. The rope had been taken down. A breeze blew mournfully through gaps in the corrugated iron sheeting, bringing with it the cries of seagulls and the sound of the water lapping against the pylons below. Lukas was hoping to answer what he thought was a telling question.

Why did Rewold kill himself here?

As a wealthy man with all kinds of options available to him—and apart from the fact Rewold must have had plenty of ways to avoid suicide in the first place—this place didn't strike Lukas as being high on Rewold's list of unhappy memories. Somewhere he might have reason to test his knot-tying skills with a rope around his neck.

'Why here?' Lukas asked the creaking building around him.

Something rattled nearby and Lukas spun around, instinctively reaching for his Glock. Outside it was overcast with not much light coming into the warehouse, making it even more gloomy and forbidding. Lukas waited patiently, watching. Nothing was there. As he looked down between a pile of crates to an end wall, a piece of the tin wall lifted back with the wind, letting in a slice of daylight, before springing back with a bang.

Satisfied, he turned back to be confronted once again with Edward Rewold's corpse hanging from the rafter. This time the body was twisting slowly on the rope.

Recovering from the small fright, Lukas asked, 'What's the view like from up there?'

It took a long moment for the dead man's face to be looking down at Lukas. It was still terribly blue and his swollen tongue poked out. His eyes were open and glaring angrily at Lukas. Rewold spoke with a choking, guttural voice.

'Where are my socks?'

'I'd say cold feet is the least of your problems now, mate,' Lukas said. 'Tell me, why the hell did you do this to yourself? Couldn't you have driven your

Ferrari into a brick wall or drowned yourself in a bath of Moet or something? I mean, it's not like you needed to kill yourself on a budget, right?

The ghost didn't answer, twisting away again. Lukas tried to follow it. 'Can you keep still?' he said, walking in a circle, looking up. Lukas' foot slithered and he glanced down. In that instant the hanging corpse vanished—as Lukas expected would happen once he took his eyes off it.

He was alone in the warehouse again, if you ever considered a ghostly, hanging man as company.

'Okay, socks... where are his shoes and socks?' Lukas asked himself. The likely solution was they had been bagged as evidence and taken away with the corpse. It was something Lukas needed to confirm with Pete Goodall.

He went outside and took in the scenery, hoping for inspiration. The area beside the warehouse was wide enough for trucks. Normally Lukas would have expected to find people fishing from a wharf like this. He guessed the polluted waters didn't have much to offer or maybe it was just the wrong time of day for fooling fish into swallowing suspiciously convenient worms.

Further down the dirty, uninviting beach was another jetty with a similar line of warehouses. This one wasn't abandoned, instead the buildings converted into a large markets with permanent stalls, small shops and cafes. It looked more than a little forlorn with its faded bunting fluttering in the breeze, the signs and paintwork peeling. Lukas conceded that the grey day wasn't helping, but it was still a far cry from Disneyland. His stomach growled and that made up his mind.

'As good a place as any to start,' he said.

Lukas had to walk back to the shore, across a car park and out onto the other wharf. A large door had been made in the end of the warehouse with a banner above saying, "Welcome to Wharftown Markets". A cartoon seagull with a big toothy grin held a packet of chips and a can of drink. Just below the banner was a small plaque declaring that the building was owned and controlled by Windhall Holdings Pty Ltd. Lukas scratched at his memory and was almost sure this was a company owned, at least in part, by Edward Rewold.

He'd need to check, but in the meantime a piece of the puzzle, albeit a small one, potentially clicked into place.

Stalls were erected on both walls of the warehouse and back-to-back in the centre too, creating two aisles either side. Tourists wandered half-heartedly between them. Mostly it was women trailed by dutiful, bored husbands waiting until it was a reasonable time to suggest going to a bar somewhere for a drink. Lukas tossed a mental coin and went left.

Many of the shops were offering the same bric-a-brac, souvenirs and trinkets to lure the tourist dollar. Some of the owners wore hopeful, half-desperate expressions watching shoppers pass by, trying to use sheer will-power to make them stop and browse. Others seemed resigned to their fate and read newspapers or fiddled with laptops and tablets, almost resenting that anyone should disturb them and, God forbid, ask if they might buy something.

A stall dedicated to paintings and poster prints caught Lukas' eye and he went in. As he took a closer look Lukas realised that what he'd first thought was a Salvador Dali-like theme was simply an appalling lack of talent. Whoever did these pictures didn't have a trace of artistic ability at all. Worse, every painting was of a cat. Distorted, furry faces followed Lukas around as he did a quick lap of the stall. He shuddered involuntarily, since Lukas had recently had a bad experience involving cats. More to the point, the *owner* of a missing cat.

'Are all these from a local artist?' he said to the stall owner, a small bespectacled man sitting nervously in the corner behind a desk. Lukas only asked, because he accidentally made eye-contact.

'It's all my own work,' the man said, in a piping voice. 'Only my *best* work, of course. I have more in my studio at home, if you're after something different.'

'Different? You mean, without any cats in it?'

The man blinked. 'No, why would I do that?'

'Well, for someone who likes dogs, perhaps?' Lukas started backing out of the stall.

'I'm afraid that I only prefer cats.'

'Right—okay, I'm more of a dog lover, so...' Lukas raised his hand in an apology and edged further away. The man craned his neck, watching him leave.

Next Lukas saw a cramped secondhand book shop and stepped over the threshold. The shopkeeper was an older, gruff-looking man deeply absorbed

in a paperback. He glanced at Lukas and said without greeting, 'Erotica is on the left there, on the bottom three shelves. Two bucks each or three for a fiver. You can't browse for long. Pornography might be free on the damned internet, but not here.'

Lukas looked around making sure the man was talking to him. 'I'm not interested in erotica,' Lukas said. 'Or pornography,' he felt compelled to add.

'Nope, nobody is. That's why it's the biggest industry in the whole world. Magazines are in the racks next to you. The R-rated stuff is in the cardboard box on the floor. Ten bucks each, definitely no browsing.'

'You're joking, ten dollars for a secondhand porn magazine? I've never—' Luka stopped himself.

The owner carefully turned a page of his book. 'These are collectors' items, guaranteed no stains or torn pages.'

'Maybe I'll just have a look around,' Lukas said, again sliding towards the aisle and escape. The markets were plainly operated by lunatics.

'Suit yourself.'

Charming prick, Lukas thought. And he'd *never* pay ten dollars for a used porn mag. That was crazy.

To escape the book store quickly, Lukas crossed to a stall on the opposite side. Too late, he realised it was crowded with hanging mystical orbs, posters on witchcraft and the occult, and shelves filled magical ointments, talismans and charms. It was exactly the kind of place that Lukas' grandmother would have despised. She had been the genuine thing, a woman with old, gypsy blood in her veins. She'd alerted Lukas to his gift of being able to chat with the likes of Edward Rewold—people *after* they'd moved on from the living. Since his first experiences with the Afterlife, Lukas couldn't help feeling disdain for this kind of bogus, commercial spiritualism.

'What a load of shit,' he told a bottle of bath salts guaranteed to bring you love and happiness, if you used it once a week.

Nobody was behind the counter and Lukas decided to get away unnoticed, but he bumped into a girl hurrying back.

'Sorry, I was just in the bathroom,' she said cheerfully. 'Is there anything I can help you with?'

She was pretty and petite, one of those women who would have the body of a teenager for her entire life. She had a bob-style haircut, a cute face and a wide, gorgeous smile. Although it was cold outside, she was only wearing a tight tee-shirt and jeans.

‘Hello, I love this kind of stuff,’ Lukas told her. ‘Can’t get enough of it.’

‘Really? You don’t look like a spiritual kind of guy.’ She gave him a friendly, sideways look.

‘Trust me, I’m a believer.’ *Come for a walk and I’ll show you a very spiritual Eddy hanging from a rope. You’ll love it.*

‘Then you’re in the right place. Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?’

Your phone number and I want to personally congratulate whoever sold you that tee-shirt. ‘Not really, just browsing for anything I don’t already have.’

‘My, a *true* believer.’ She leaned close and whispered, ‘To be honest, a lot of this stuff is just junk for the tourists.’

Lukas whispered back, ‘I know, but if you don’t tell anyone, then I won’t.’

‘That’s a deal.’ She shook his hand, holding on a fraction longer than necessary. ‘My name is Carrie.’

‘Lukas.’ He sensed the phone number had just gotten closer. ‘Hey, can I ask you something else?’

‘As long as I don’t have to answer, if I don’t want to.’

‘Do you have much to do with Windhall Holdings? The people who own this place?’

Carrie regarded him a moment. ‘So you’re really interested in the occult, but suddenly you’re asking me that?’

‘Really, I am. I’m working with Windhall on another thing and I noticed they’re the property owners here. Pure coincidence, but I’m curious what they’re like to deal with, that’s all.’ Lukas put on The Smile.

‘My, haven’t we practised *that* in the mirror for hours?’ Carrie said. ‘For what it’s worth, I’ll tell you that I pay them rent and they do next to nothing in return.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning maintenance, fixing stuff... there’s busted crap around here like plumbing and power outlets that are downright dangerous, but Windhall do nothing about it.’

‘That’s very good to know Carrie, thank you.’ Lukas gave her a small bow. ‘Hey, I don’t suppose you’d be interested in having a drink sometime... maybe dinner?’ Lukas tried his lop-sided grin instead.

‘And go back to your place afterwards? So I can see your collection of spirit world artifacts?’

This was a problem. The only spiritual thing Lukas had in his apartment was a bottle of twenty-year old whiskey. Still, these bridges were best crossed when you came to them. ‘Well, only if you’d like to,’ he shrugged as if he didn’t care.

Carrie sighed at the attempt. ‘I suppose that depends on how much you spend in my shop. I have a special rewards program for big spenders who are *honestly* interested in the spiritual world.’

Was that a wink, or something in her eye?

‘Of course, that makes sense,’ Lukas said, trapped and looking around. ‘But you said yourself, most of this stuff is rubbish.’

With a funny smile Carrie said, ‘Maybe I’ve got something out the back which will interest you?’

‘Like what?’

‘Wait here a moment.’

‘Oh... okay.’

She disappeared through a curtain. A moment later he heard a soft scream and Carrie saying, ‘Oh my God!’

Lukas thought, *Jesus, the ol’ damsel in distress move. That’s okay with me.* He said loudly, ‘What’s wrong? Hang on, I’m coming.’

It wasn’t worth pulling the Glock. Carrying a gun might completely spoil his already tenuous reputation for being in touch with his inner self. Empty-handed, Lukas rushed through the curtain as threateningly as he could.

The back area was narrow and crowded with empty cartons, overflowing shelves and a tiny kitchen space with a refrigerator and kettle. Carrie stood frozen, her hands to her face in shock. On the wall in front of her an untidy, bloody mess had been pinned to the wall with a kitchen knife.

It was a small, headless chicken. Blood ran down the paintwork.

‘What the hell is that?’ Lukas said, moving closer to look.

‘It’s a curse,’ Carrie said quietly, her voice shaking.

‘It certainly was for the chicken. Is this what you were going to show me?’

‘Of *course* not. I was getting my phone to give you my number. I know you don’t give a damn about anything spiritual.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong, but I’ll explain later,’ Lukas said, moving Carrie aside. ‘You’d better call the police.’

‘No, I won’t do that. Why bother?’

‘The *police*, Carrie. They use fingerprinting and things for catching criminals who stick dead chickens to walls, right?’

‘What kind of half-witted criminal leaves behind fingerprints these days?’

She had a point.

Lukas said, ‘Then tell me how someone could have done this. How did they sneak past you? They couldn’t have hidden in here, there’s hardly enough room to swing a cat around—’ *Bad dead animal metaphor*, he realised. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘I—I go to the toilet a few times and I don’t come out the back all that often. I have to watch the shop. When I need the bathroom, Roger keeps an eye on things.’

‘Roger?’

‘In the bookshop opposite.’

Mr Happy with his nose permanently buried in a book. Genghis Khan on a horse could have gotten past him.

‘What about the guy with all the cat paintings? I’ve met him. He’s got some serious issues, don’t you think? Would he do something like this?’

She shook her head. ‘Stuart has a crush on me and goes to pieces, if I pay him any attention at all. He can hardly speak when I say good morning. He wouldn’t do anything like this. Especially to me.’

‘Do you have a cat, by the way?’

‘No, is that important?’

‘Kind of—all right, what about a plastic bag? Let’s get rid of this thing.’

Recovering, Carrie found a shopping bag and gave it to Lukas. He pulled the knife from the wall letting the chicken carcass drop into the bag, tossed the blade in after it and tied the top.

He said, 'Are you *sure* you've got no idea who would do this or why?'

'Not a clue,' she shook her head. 'Maybe it's someone's bizarre idea of a joke?'

'Maybe, or maybe it's about something else.' Lukas was thinking of corpses hanging from rafters not too far away. 'Look, if you're not going to call the police, then I'm your next best thing.' He gave Carrie a business card.

'A private investigator,' she read aloud, slightly dismayed.

'A *very* private investigator. Your secrets are safe with me. I'm going to get rid of this thing,' he lifted the shopping bag. 'I'll have a discreet walk around the rest of the markets, too. Will you be okay?'

'Sure, I'll stay out the front where anyone can see me.'

'I'll be back in a while.'

'Do you still want my phone number?'

'Name, rank, serial number *and* phone number,' he said, giving her The Smile again.

'Please don't do that,' she said, searching around for her mobile.

A few minutes later Lukas chose his moment to shove the dead chicken in a trash bin when no one was looking, slamming down the lid. Then he began strolling around the markets, watching the customers and vendors carefully.

The woman running the Sweet Heaven chocolate stall looked well capable of killing a tray of caramel creams in the blink of an eye, but not a chicken.

The guy selling stuffed toys didn't have anything remotely resembling a chicken, real or otherwise, but still Lukas assumed he'd have to be an animal lover.

The husband and wife behind the counter of Sam And Ella's Fish and Chip store also sold deep fried chicken—that was something. It could mean they had access to fresh produce with the feathers still attached. The smells of cooking oil, salt and vinegar had Lukas' stomach churning again.

'Do many customers get the joke?' he asked the surly-looking proprietor.

'What joke?'

'The name...' Lukas gestured at the chalkboard menu.

Scowling, the chef tapped his embroidered apron. ‘My name is Sam, my missus’ name is Ella, and this is a fish and chip shop. What’s funny about that?’

Lukas tried to decide if he was kidding and took the easy way out. ‘Never mind, I’ll have a fish cake and a small serve of chips. Can I smoke here?’ It seemed likely with the air already choked by plumes of fat-laden vapour from the cooking vats.

‘Nope, outside only,’ Sam grunted. ‘It’s a health risk.’ He dumped Lukas’ fish cake into a morass of boiling, yellow oil.

Lukas used the cooking time to investigate the markets down the other side of the centre stalls. Again, he was greeted by faces of all types—hopeful, cheerful and indifferent, but no one seemed particularly guilty-looking and, more important, nobody appeared upset in a someone’s-pinned-a-dead-chicken-to-my-wall kind of way.

He took his wrapped fish cake and chips to the outside seating area. He was the only one braving the chill wind and Lukas didn’t like the look of the tables and chairs covered in grime and seagull shit. Besides, a nearby service area for the fish and chip shop was crowded with gas tanks, rubbish bins and a roaring extractor fan. Instead, he stood near the edge of the wharf in the comparative quiet and stared back across at the warehouse where Rewold’s body had been found.

Rewold’s death and the chicken impaled on Carrie’s wall couldn’t have been further apart in method and motive, yet Lukas had a gut feeling that something connected the two. The close proximity of the two wharves was one thing and the fact that Wharftown Markets had a Rewold company as a landlord was another, yet nothing else really added up and Lukas was listening to his instincts more than anything else. He munched on the fishcake and discovered the concept of “fish” in fishcake was up for interpretation, tossing it aside for a crowd of shrieking seagulls to fight over. The chips were only slightly better. More seagulls hovered overhead, waiting their chance.

‘Piss off, it’s mine,’ Lukas told them amiably, pulling out a cigarette with his fingertips so the grease on them wouldn’t ruin the smoke. ‘Maybe you’ll get lucky, if you hang around.’

Something heavy cannoned into Lukas' back sending him stumbling forward. The low railing was never going to save him and with a yell of fear and outrage he flipped over the top rung and plummeted into the cold water below.

It wasn't a long fall, but enough to punch the breath out of Lukas as he struggled, lost in a maelstrom of bubbles and murky grey. The shock of the freezing water hit hard, too. Spluttering, he managed to find the surface and broke through.

'*What the fuck are you doing?*' he howled at the wharf above him. 'Help! Someone help me!' Filthy sea water slopped into his mouth and Lukas spat it out, almost retching.

He was a strong swimmer, but Lukas knew the weight of his clothes could drag him down fast. On the other hand, keeping them on would protect his body from the million, razor-sharp barnacles on the pylons that could be his salvation. He looked up again, expecting to see a face peering down, either concerned or curious if he was drowning—and saw a large rubbish bin toppling off the wharf towards him.

'*Shit!*' Lukas tried to dodge. The bin caught the wooden edge and careened outwards, missing him. 'You bastard! I'll find you and *kill* you, you prick!'

Because the pylons were directly beneath the wharf, they could protect Lukas from any further missiles. With his strength ebbing fast he floundered across to the nearest and gingerly wrapped himself around it using his arms and legs, keeping his hands clear. The barnacles worked, grabbing at his clothes, and Lukas had a chance to get his breath. A shiver racked him as he saw the shore nearly a hundred metres away. There were no ladders or platforms he could see on the wharf any closer. Working his way back to the beach, pylon by pylon, was his only chance of surviving. It wouldn't be easy.

Then he heard the putt-putting of a two stroke motor coming closer. Twisting to see, Lukas saw a small dinghy heading his way. It was piloted by an elderly, Indian man and the boat was filled with crab nets.

The man called in a strong accent, 'If you want to kill yourself, you should jump from something a lot higher than that. They do dives like that in the Olympics, you know. It's not going to hurt anyone.'

‘I’m not trying to kill myself,’ Lukas shouted, copping another mouthful of water from the dinghy’s wake. ‘Someone pushed me.’

‘Ah, I see. That makes more sense then.’ The man nodded, satisfied and losing interest.

‘Hey! Are you going to help me or not?’

The boatman scratched at his chin, looking at his crab nets. ‘I’ve got no room, but hang on—I’ve got an idea.’

‘*Hang on?* What the *hell* do you think I’m going to do?’

‘There’s no need to be like that, I’m only trying to help,’ the man said, fiddling with a rope that he eventually tossed to Lukas. ‘Hold that and I’ll tow you to the shore.’

The dinghy’s small motor strained with pulling Lukas towards the beach while he fought to stay on his back and endure the ignominy of being dragged to safety. People up on the wharf had begun to notice, pointing downwards and calling excitedly, taking photographs.

Lukas tried to wave in a way that assured them everything was under control. Nothing to worry about. This kind of thing happened to him every day. Lukas often got pushed off wharves in the hope he’d die in the chill, wintery Port Phillip Bay.

In his line of work, if it wasn’t the greasy fish and chips that killed you or the cigarettes, there was always an impromptu plunge into the freezing harbour to finish you off.

End Sample

Back Page Stuff.

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Serious Stuff...

Hung Out To Die

by G.M.HAGUE

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