

Paid in Fool

IT'S A GAMBLING PROBLEM
WHEN YOU'RE BETTING WITH YOUR LIFE



♦ G.M.HAGUE

A Lukas Boston Mystery

Paid in Fool

By

G.M.Hague

This is a sample only. You can purchase the entire 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.

I love music - I play it myself. And I listen to music all day, every day. This book is dedicated to all the musicians who've made my days so full of cool stuff, loud guitars and awesome riffs.

Paid in Fool

ONE

A bullet smacked into the limestone above where Lukas crouched for cover. It sent tiny chips of rock slashing through the air, stinging his face and the back of Lukas' neck.

'Missed, you useless prick,' Lukas called over the top of the wall, fumbling out new clip for his Glock.

Heath Latima yelled back with a raucous laugh, 'Nah, I'm not really trying yet, Boston. This is too much fun. Stick your damned head up properly, if you're impatient for me to kill you.'

'Oh, I'm in no hurry,' Lukas muttered. 'I'm having a hoot of a time.'

Things weren't looking too good. Lukas was hiding beside the stone walls of a new beach house. Next to these was another, waist-high wall that was more of a decorative feature than having any real purpose. If asked, Lukas couldn't figure out what the hell it was supposed to be—except at this moment it was the most brilliant piece of architecture ever created since it was preventing Latima from peppering Lukas full of 7.62mm holes.

Taken by surprise as he'd arrived, Lukas dived for cover behind the wall when Latima emerged from a van and started shooting without even saying hello. Now Lukas was providing a kind of whack-a-mole game for Latima, taking quick peeks over the top of the wall at different places, scuttling on his haunches backwards and forwards hoping to fool the gunman about where he'd appear next.

To remind Latima that he wasn't entirely at his mercy, Lukas blindly fired a few rounds from his Glock over the wall. He didn't expect to hit anything—just give Latima something to think about. No one was going to help Lukas anytime soon. The house was on the edge of a new estate of mostly empty blocks and For Sale signs. The laundering of drug money can have that effect on housing developments. As Lukas had suspected and come here to confirm, the place was a sham. What was *supposed* to be on the verge of becoming a

cosy, beachside escape for Melbourne A-Listers was nothing more than a financial black hole for the proceeds of many and various crimes.

Not a soul was in sight. Even the closest seagull was a dot in the distance, wheeling against the breeze in a perfect blue sky.

‘Hey, aren’t you over-reacting, Latima?’ Lukas said, blowing sand off his pistol. ‘I’m only here to check out one of the properties. I’m a potential client, for God’s sake.’

‘You’re a potential pain in the arse, Boston. My boss doesn’t like anyone with potential.’

‘Yes, I’m surprised that you two get on at all.’

‘Funny bastard.’

Two more rounds hammered into the stonework. One ricocheted away with a noise that would have done any Hollywood movie proud. Lukas was uncomfortably reminded that any wayward bullets could come *his* way.

With a flopping movement he risked another glance over the wall and saw Latima standing solidly on the road, watching carefully. The rifle instantly came up and barked, too late and the shot smashed into the brickwork like the others. Still, he’d been quick.

‘Why don’t you call a friend?’ Latima said, laughing again.

‘I already have,’ Lukas lied. ‘Plenty of them. You need to get moving.’

‘I’ll be long gone by the time anyone gets here and you’ll be long dead.’

‘Are you sure this is what your boss wants you to do?’

‘I’m using my initiative, Boston. He’ll be pleased.’

‘Bloody hell, potential and initiative? That’s two long words you’ve used. You’ll give yourself a headache.’

Lukas needed to keep Latima occupied. At the same time, he hoped his talking wasn’t giving away that he was crawling towards the far end of the wall. Lukas figured that since shooting over the top appeared to be a recipe for instant ill-health, maybe Latima wouldn’t be ready for someone poking a gun around the side.

‘Laugh it up, Boston. Have yourself a real good chuckle, because it’s going to be your last. Hey, guess what? I’m going to make myself a great big sandcastle on your grave when I bury you on the beach. You’ll be the easiest corpse I ever put in the ground.’

By now Lukas was at the end of the wall and lying flat on his stomach. He didn't want to make any noise now in case it gave his position away. It wouldn't be long before Latima found his silence suspicious.

'Got nothing to say, Boston?' Latima said. 'No last words I can tell your mother?'

All Lukas had to do was haul himself forward an arm's length and shoot quicker than Latima could react. He took a deep breath.

'Are you trying something sneaky, Boston? Don't do anything silly.' Doubt had crept into Latima's voice.

Grunting at the effort Lukas thrust himself past the end of the wall, twisted onto his side and took aim. Latima was staring at him in a mix of surprise and annoyance. His rifle was pointing in the other direction.

Lukas let off three quick shots. The range and Lukas' awkward pose stacked the odds against hitting anything. He was hoping to put Latima on the defensive, force him to duck and forget about shooting back. Give Lukas a chance to find his feet and move closer.

Luck was on Lukas' side and one of his rounds clipped Latima's shoulder sending the big man crashing to the ground, the rifle thrown aside with the impact. With a curse of satisfaction Lukas scrambled up and ran across, keeping his Glock trained.

'You bastard,' Latima grated, squinting up at him, clutching at his shoulder. 'You *prick*.'

Lukas gave him an innocent look and tapped his own chest. 'Oh right, now *I'm* the bad guy, because I got to shoot you first? That's not very fair, is it?'

Latima writhed on the ground. 'Call an ambulance, for God's sake. I'm dying here.'

'It's just a flesh wound, don't be a big girl. I want you to tell me some information first. Then I'll call all the ambulances you want, okay?'

'I'm *telling* you, Boston. I'm bloody dying—you've... you've hit an artery or something. I can feel it.' Latima let out a realistic groan.

'Hitting an artery doesn't hurt any more than a normal bullet wound,' Lukas said mildly. 'You're going to have to do better than that. Come on, let me see some real pain. Make an effort.'

Latima obliged him, his face contorting into a grimace of agony as he curled into a foetal position. Lukas was half-convinced and wondered if one of his other shots had hit the mark, too. He leaned forward. 'You poor thing, show me where it hurts. Is it in your tummy, Heath? Do you need to go to the toilet?'

Latima went rigid, his body snapping straight. Suddenly he held a snub-nosed revolver in his hand. It had all been a ruse so he could reach his spare gun.

'Oh shit,' Lukas said, stepping back. As the revolver swung towards him Lukas fired twice, shooting Latima in the chest. It snuffed the life out of him, his body quivering for a moment before everything went limp, his wide staring eyes already seeing nothing by the time the gunshots stopped echoing off the nearby dunes.

Shaken by the close call, Lukas breathed, 'Jesus, the ol' backup gun in the ankle holster trick. Who would have thought it?' He poked Latima with his toe to make sure.

A shadow flitted over the body making Lukas flinch. It was only a seagull, maybe the same one, come to have a look. Others were closing in. Perhaps dead criminals were known to leave unfinished fish and chips lying around?

'Don't shit on him,' Lukas told it. 'Otherwise I'll have to shoot *you* as well and take your feathered remains in for forensic evidence.' The seagull swore at him in bird language and fixed Lukas with a contemptuous, beady look.

Lukas took out his phone and called Detective Senior Sergeant Peter Goodall.

'I've got some good news and some bad news, Pete,' Lukas said through a cloud of smoke, lighting a cigarette.

'That's unusual you've got something good to tell me,' Goodall said warily. 'I'll try that first.'

'You'll be glad to know I'm fine. Not a scratch on me.'

'Oh great, I'm so pleased. What's the bad news?'

'I've just shot Heath Latima.'

To his credit Goodall only allowed himself a brief, shocked silence. 'Jesus Christ, Lukas. Where?'

'Once in the shoulder, then two in the chest. It was—'

‘No, you bloody idiot. Where *are* you?’

‘Oh, right...’ Lukas looked around, even though he knew. ‘I’m out at that new beachside estate I told you about. I hadn’t even got my bucket and spade out of the car when Latima comes running out of his truck and trying to shoot me. It was self-defense, Pete. Pure and simple.’

‘Are you sure he’s dead?’

‘Pretty sure, do you want me to make certain?’ Lukas made a clicking noise like cocking a pistol. It was an old joke and Goodall ignored it.

‘Are you on your own?’

Lukas eyed the growing crowd of seagulls and decided they didn’t count. ‘No one in sight. It’s very peaceful out here, you should think of moving. It’d be good for the kids and the missus.’

‘I hate the ocean, it’s full of sharks and all kinds of things that can kill you. Have you called anyone else? Emergency or the local lads?’

‘Nope, I thought I’d call you first. I always do.’

‘And I wish you wouldn’t,’ Goodall sighed. ‘All right, secure the scene—you remember how to do *that*, right? Let me take care of the rest. I’ll send Elizabeth out with a team. Wait until she gets there.’

‘Elizabeth? Fantastic, it’ll be good to catch up.’

Goodall said pointedly, ‘Don’t ask her out to dinner again, Lukas. Just don’t, all right? You know how much that upsets her. We’re the ones that have to put up with her foul moods for the next week.’

‘I wasn’t going to,’ Lukas said, sounding hurt.

‘I’m telling you, don’t do it, hear me?’

‘Okay, okay, I won’t.’

‘Or out to lunch.’

Lukas hung up to express his disappointment.

Detective Constable Elizabeth Reynolds surveyed the scene. Police tape was flapping in the sea breeze and refusing to stick to the limestone. A cursing constable had to keep scrambling for the loose end and re-securing it. A forensic team was digging bullets out of the walls and collecting spent casings from the ground. Sand was getting into everyone’s equipment and causing a

lot of swearing. The trolley from the Coroner's van had bogged down under Latima's weight. Many of the crew attending the crime often looked wistfully towards the white beach and its inviting, blue ocean.

'I don't believe how you get away with this shit,' Elizabeth told Lukas standing next to her. 'Anyone else shoots someone, even if it was Hitler himself, they'd get dragged away for questioning and spend the next week in a cell. You? It's just "Take his statement and tell Lukas, don't forget he owes me a beer". You're a law unto yourself, Lukas Boston. It's bloody annoying.'

'It was self-defense, Beth,' Lukas said. 'He was a very bad man. I've done you a favour.'

Elizabeth didn't answer, seething that Lukas was right. No one in the police force was going to be unhappy that Heath Latima was out of the picture. Even better, with Lukas being a private detective and no longer in the force, it saved a lot of paperwork and internal enquiries.

She said, 'What have you ever done to piss off Heath Latima?'

'Who knows? We've all arrested him or shaken Latima down at some time or another. I'm not the only one, so why pick on me?'

'What about the rest of his family?'

'Basket cases, the lot of them. Mind you, his idiot brother is more of a danger to himself than the rest of society.'

'No sign of him here?'

Lukas shook his head. They watched the forensics team for a while, then he said, 'Hey, who says I owe them a beer?'

'Who *don't* you owe a beer? The list grows every day.'

'People take advantage of me. It's not right,' Lukas grumbled.

She said sweetly, 'Why don't you throw a great, big party at the casino or somewhere and pay off all your debts in one go? You can afford it.'

'Would you come?'

'Nope. I'm sure that won't leave you short of female admirers to keep you company.'

'Without you there, it wouldn't be the same.'

'Lukas, please be quiet, if all you're going to do is talk rubbish.'

Lukas considered Elizabeth to be the most stunningly beautiful police woman on the force, if not in the entire world. This was despite the effort

Elizabeth made towards looking plain. She was utterly immune to his charms and as far as Lukas could tell it wasn't any pretence. Elizabeth didn't secretly find him attractive, denying herself the pleasure of Lukas' company. She genuinely wasn't impressed by anything he said or did.

This didn't stop him from trying.

'I don't know why you've got me so wrong, Beth. We should talk it over.'

'I can't imagine why either. That's because I'm not interested in thinking about it. And no, we shouldn't *talk it over*.'

They fell silent again as a forensic officer walked by giving Lukas a shy smile as she passed. The sunshine was pleasant and the breeze cooling, but the young woman was sweating in the plastic overalls.

Lukas called after her, 'You should go for a swim afterwards, Linda. Did you bring your bikinis?' She tinkled laughter back at him over her shoulder.

Elizabeth said, 'She's only been out of the academy a week and you know her?'

'We met at that... ah, break-in last Tuesday. She introduced herself to me, if you must know.'

'Of course, she did. Did you ask her out?'

'No, we just chatted for a bit. I was trying to make her feel welcome.'

'I'm sure that's not all you were hoping to feel.'

Lukas sighed his hurt feelings and gave her a hang-dog look. Elizabeth was tapping information into her phone and didn't notice.

After a while he said, 'Pete said we should have lunch together sometime soon, you and I. When are you free?'

She gave him a scathing look.

'Maybe I misunderstood him,' Lukas said quickly.

TWO

Senator Gregory Ramsford was an important man. If you had any doubts about that, you only needed to ask him and Ramsford would tell you. To be fair, he'd already been important even before an electoral anomaly voted him into parliament as a senator at the last election. Ramsford was a millionaire in his own right, controlling an empire of tinned food manufacturing ranging from baked beans to an alarming meat concoction that was just one small regulation away from being dog food—it was all in the labeling.

Ramsford had stood as an independent candidate for election because he figured the government needed a good business person inside the parliament. Most of the politicians were fools and incompetents, running the country inevitably towards bankruptcy like the Titanic heading for its fated iceberg—only Ramsford declared the economy would sink a damned sight faster. Ramsford's logic was flawed, his policies non-existent and his understanding of politics was vague at best, but he made all the right noises at the right time with an avalanche of expensive advertising and appealed to the voters, sneaking under the guard of the larger political parties and winning himself a seat.

All of this could have been okay, if Ramsford was even half the businessman he claimed to be. The unfortunate truth was that he'd inherited his fortune and the corporation making it. So far, the wheels of commerce had managed to efficiently grind on without Ramsford's occasional interference causing too many problems. Quietly, most of his high-level management hoped that Ramsford's new political obligations would keep him well and truly out of their way before he ruined everything.

The bureaucracy gave Senator Ramsford a small office and a rudimentary staff, and in turn hoped he would soon get bored with the whole thing and align himself with a major party, meaning he'd vote as he was told. However, that would be the sensible thing to do and Ramsford wasn't big on common sense.

At this morning's meeting no one expected any different.

'What's on the agenda today, Stephanie? Make it quick, I've got a luncheon appointment,' Ramsford said, shuffling behind his desk and sitting down

heavily. An ex-footballer from his youth, he was a barrel-chested man in his fifties. Half the reason he got elected was his imposing presence on a television screen.

His personal assistant, Stephanie, looked nervously across at another man sitting in the room. Paul Crowe was Ramsford's secretary, an amorphous title that covered a wide range of responsibilities. "Trouble-shooter" or even "baby-sitter" would have been more appropriate. Slouched sideways in an office chair, Crowe answered with a tiny shrug that Ramsford didn't see.

Stephanie said timidly, 'You've only just got here, Greg. You really need to come into the office earlier and you can't just rush out again. There's a lot to do.' She crossed and re-crossed her long legs, because that always stopped any man getting upset with her.

'Are those new glasses, Steph?' Ramsford said, peering at her.

Stephanie pushed the large-framed spectacles back onto her nose self-consciously. 'Yes, I needed a new prescription.'

'They make you look even more damned attractive than before, if that's possible. Did we pay for them?'

By *we*, Ramsford meant the government.

'No, I had to pay for them myself.'

'Aren't they covered by that... health thing everyone's talking about?'

'That health *thing* hasn't been passed yet, Greg. You're supposed to vote on it soon, by the way. Have you made up your mind?'

'Damned if I know. Have I made up my mind, Paul?'

Crowe waved languidly. 'Not yet, Greg. Let's see which way the wind blows, shall we?'

'Talking of which,' Ramsford lifted one cheek from his seat and let out a tremendous fart. 'Sorry Steph, but my gut is killing me.'

His staff suffered this in patient silence. Stephanie tapped at her tablet.

'You've got a meeting with the assistant director of the agency for Women's Affairs.'

'We have an agency for women?' Ramsford frowned at her. 'Why, what's the point?'

‘I think you just demonstrated that,’ Stephanie said smoothly. ‘Among several issues, there have been complaints that your internal communications haven’t been gender-neutral.’

‘Haven’t been what?’

Crowe broke in, ‘Stop sending everyone your smutty email jokes, especially the ones with pictures.’

‘I only send the funny ones.’

‘That’s not the problem. It’s the pictures, Greg.’

‘Did you see that one with the girl who—’

‘And you have a meeting with the secretary for Home Safety and Security,’ Stephanie cut him off.

‘Cancel it, I hate that bastard.’

‘You’ve never met him, Greg.’

‘Of course I haven’t, because I don’t like him.’

Crowe got up and closed the door. The meaning wasn’t lost on Ramsford, who pulled a face and looked resigned. Coming back to his seat, Crowe’s expression was sombre.

‘Greg, we’ve got some serious shit to deal with. We need to talk about it. I know you’d rather ignore everything, but we can’t do that forever.’

Ramsford seemed about to argue, then he grunted and sat back in his seat. ‘All right, but don’t waste too much time.’ He rubbed his stomach.

‘First, you’ve got to stop using your government credit card for private purchases. They take a very dim view of that sort of thing.’

‘Have I?’ Ramsford was puzzled.

‘Miss Martha’s Massage? Twice last week?’

‘Twice the week before, too,’ Stephanie added unhappily.

‘It’s a massage for Christ’s sake. To get rid of all the aches and pains I get from sitting in this bloody office half my life. You don’t only go once, you need regular visits. It’s a legitimate expense.’

Crowe and Stephanie exchanged a look. Crowe said gently, ‘Greg, every politician who’s ever been elected has been a guest of Miss Martha and we all know exactly what goes on. Don’t pay with the company credit card, that’s all. It comes up on the system.’

‘Damned stupid, if you ask me. I went there in my government car, booked the appointment on my government phone... no one’s complained about that.’

‘Not yet,’ Stephanie said, making a note.

‘There’s worse—much worse,’ Crowe said.

‘Yes, well deal with it,’ Ramsford waved a hand. ‘Bloody hell, all this official shit has got me starving. Are we going to be much longer?’

‘Your union friends are getting impatient about seeing some return for their investment.’

That stopped Ramsford dead and he went slightly pale. ‘Ah, those guys,’ he said after a moment. ‘Things haven’t turned out as easy as I thought. This place is full of corrupt bastards and cutting deals can take forever. Tell them I need more time.’

‘That’s what I told them *last* time.’

‘Then tell them again,’ Ramsford said unconvincingly.

Crowe made a noise and entered something into his phone. ‘There’s also the matter of your recreational behaviour. That has to be dealt with fast, before the press gets to hear of it.’

‘That’ll be easy, I’m working on it.’

‘I said fast, Greg. Seriously, make it go away.’

‘All right, all right, we’ll figure out something later today.’

‘Thank you, senator,’ Crowe made another note on his phone. ‘I’ll schedule a reminder for after lunch.’

‘You can schedule whatever you want, if it’s going to be *after* lunch. Anything else?’ Ramsford looked at Stephanie and Crowe in turn. She gave him a helpless shrug.

Crowe said, ‘You know, at least you don’t have to worry about Heath Latima anymore.’

Ramsford’s face lost a little more colour. ‘Really? I can’t believe *that*. Don’t trust the bastard, what the hell is he saying now?’

‘No, really. You don’t have to worry about him anymore at all. He’s dead.’

Puffing out his cheeks in relief, Ramsford collapsed back into his chair. ‘Thank God for that. What’d he die of?’

‘He was shot dead two days ago. Some kind of shoot-out out near that new housing estate down on the south-west beaches. The one that the corruption commission refuses to look at.’

‘By who, the police?’

‘No, some private detective guy. We don’t know what his connection with Latima is or what he was doing out there, but there was some kind of gunfight and Latima was killed in self-defense. End of story.’

‘Jesus, just like that?’ Ramsford raised his eyebrows.

‘No police, so no red tape, it seems. Not much, anyway.’

Stephanie had done some research into Lukas and she said, ‘It’s kind of complicated. He’s got contacts and influence. Let’s be grateful for small mercies.’

Ramsford spread his hands. ‘Hang on, damned Latima has been the bane of my life for months and you’ve done nothing about it. Then this guy comes along, pops him one and it’s all over? Problem solved, just like that? What’s his name?’

Stephanie sensed what was coming and said reluctantly, ‘Lukas Boston, he’s a private investigator, but an ex-policeman, too. A good one, clean as a whistle. That means he’s not your type.’

‘Are you kidding? He knows all the right people and all the right tricks, and he doesn’t have to play by the rules? Sounds bloody perfect, if you ask me.’

‘Something like that, I suppose.’ Stephanie looked to Crowe for help again. Like before, he gave her the smallest shrug back. This happened a lot between them.

The closed-door confidential discussion hadn’t turned out so bad after all and Ramsford celebrated with another outstanding fart. ‘Gotta make room for lunch,’ he explained. ‘This Lukas Boston sounds like the sort of guy we need on our team to fix some of my... ah, other issues. Get him in here, let’s talk. Can we put him on the payroll?’

‘Not the government one,’ Crowe said. ‘You’ll have to pay for him yourself.’

‘Damn, can’t we call him a consultant? Everyone else does it.’

‘You’d better not.’

‘Well—okay, we’ll worry about the details later. Time to go.’ Ramsford stood up. ‘Good meeting, people. Excellent work. Is there anything else I have to do?’

Stephanie tried to be casual. ‘You should probably attend at least one sitting of parliament this week. This afternoon might be good. It’s about the... health thing.’

‘What the hell, all right.’ Ramsford headed for the door. ‘Cancel my three o’clock appointment then, would you?’

She checked her tablet. ‘What? Three o’clock? I don’t have anything here.’

‘It’s on my personal desk calendar,’ he said, hurrying out.

Crowe drawled, ‘Miss Martha will be annoyed. She hates last-minute cancellations.’

THREE

Lukas was on the ground floor of his apartments, staring out at the neat gardens while he waited for the elevator to arrive. A building converted into luxury flats, the place only had four levels in total and he couldn't understand why the lift was taking so long. He took a step back and contemplated using the stairs. His flat was on the second floor, akin to climbing the Eiffel Tower. Lukas lit a cigarette instead and rattled the elevator call button again.

'Come on, I haven't got all day.' This wasn't true. On the suggestion of Goodall, which meant he had no choice, Lukas was keeping a low profile until the Latima shooting had been pushed aside. 'For God's sake, what's taking so long?'

The lift finally pinged and the doors opened to reveal a woman struggling to wheel a trolley out. She had a trim figure in a tight top and short skirt, and an angelic face framed by long, black hair falling past her shoulders. She reminded Lukas of a catwalk model, except one that had eaten something recently.

'Good morning,' he said, flicking his cigarette into the rose bushes before she could see it.

'Hello,' she said with a bright smile. 'I'm sorry, have you been waiting for the elevator? I had the doors jammed open, so I could load my stuff out. Very selfish of me, I know.'

'I'm in no hurry, no hurry at all,' Lukas said, standing aside to make room. 'What stuff? Are you moving in?'

'As a matter of fact, I am. Do you live here?'

'Lukas Boston at your service, Flat 7 on the second floor.' He bowed and offered his hand.

'Rowena,' she shook. Lukas was tempted to kiss the back of her hand. She said, 'Flat 12, so we'll be neighbours.'

'Goodness, then I hope you're not the sort of person who likes to have *fun* and hold rowdy parties and do things like that,' Lukas put on The Smile.

'Absolutely not, I wouldn't dream of it.'

'I'm delighted to hear it.'

Lukas hated moving house. The very thought of shifting furniture, packing boxes, carrying heavy cartons to and from a truck... it horrified him.

‘Do you need any help?’ he asked, trying to be sincere.

‘No, you’ve timed it perfectly, so you’re safe. I’ve got everything inside. Next, it’s all about unpacking and I don’t think you’d want to help with that.’

‘Perhaps a coffee, before you start?’

‘No, if I stop now I’ll never get anything done. I really appreciate the offer, even though you didn’t mean it. If I change my mind, I know where to come knocking, right?’

‘Number seven,’ Lukas mimed rapping on a door. ‘Everyone’s lucky number, if you believe in getting lucky.’ He gave the smallest wink and wasn’t prepared to let this gorgeous creature escape so quickly. ‘Before you go, can I give you a friendly word of advice? As my new neighbour?’

‘Sure, if you want.’

Lukas lowered his voice. ‘The woman in Flat 3 is Irene. She’s the Chairwoman of the Owner’s Standards Committee, which is a secret neo-nazi organisation dedicated to enforcing that you don’t forget to flush your toilet or polish your cutlery. The woman is a monster and I recommend avoiding her as much as you can. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s a witch and while I don’t want to alarm you, it’s possible she may have cooked and eaten the previous owner of your flat.’ He dropped to a whisper. ‘Don’t ever answer your door after midnight.’ Lukas tapped the side of his nose. ‘You’ve been warned. Don’t say I didn’t tell you.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Rowena said, her smile wide. ‘She’s my mother.’

Lukas only missed a heartbeat. ‘Good, then you’ll know all about her. Of course, she has a lot of marvelous traits as well. Very kind and generous, your mother. I’m quite fond of her.’

‘She’ll tell me all about you, then?’ Rowena said, drifting off towards the car park, pushing the trolley.

‘I’d rather you formed your own opinions.’

‘Oh, I always do that. Number seven, if I change my mind, right? And I can bring my mother?’ She mimicked his door-knocking.

‘Now you’re just messing with me,’ Lukas said, but she was too far away, waving goodbye. ‘I hope.’

He got out of the elevator on his own floor and crept past Irene's door. He could almost feel her accusing glare through the wood, daring him to go anywhere near her daughter. Inside his flat, Lukas dumped his stuff on the table and took stock. If he was smart, Rowena should be considered out-of-bounds. Irene already looked at him as some kind of large species of vermin that refused to be exterminated. Getting friendly with Rowena would only make the relationship worse.

Then again, he could hardly be expected to ignore legs like that, right?

A dreadful thought came to Lukas. What kind of freakish, genetic accident had created such a stunning girl from the likes of Irene? Surely it wasn't possible that Irene had been at some point in history... God forbid, good looking? Even *slim*?

Lukas shook his head, refusing to accept this. It suited him better to think of Irene as having always been the ogre she was now.

There was a knock on the door and he froze. *Christ, she even knows what I'm thinking.* Then another possibility occurred to him, bringing a slow smile. *Rowena had decided she wanted that cup of coffee after all. The temptation to check him out more proved too much.*

Lukas opened the door, a suave welcome on his lips. He was pushed aside by three large shopping bags.

'Couldn't get my key out, so I knocked. Get out of the bloody way, will you? This stuff is heavy.' The shopping bags hurried noisily past him.

'Hello Karen, what are you doing here in the... ah, middle of the day?' Lukas closed the door and hastily re-organised his thinking well away from any Rowena-based fantasies.

'Aren't you glad to see me?'

'Of course I am, don't ask silly questions.'

'You sound disappointed.'

'I'm not disappointed.'

Karen Roland, a defense lawyer and Lukas' "friend with benefits"—as she liked to be called now—rarely left the central, criminal courts building while the sun was shining. Usually she burst into Lukas' apartment late in the evening and demanded wine, food and sex in no particular order, then left in the very early hours of the morning. The loud exhaust on her sports car was

another sore point between Lukas and Irene, shattering the dawn calm as Karen rocketed away down the street.

For almost a month Lukas and Karen had shared his flat while hers was being redecorated, an experiment in a nearly monogamous, nearly committed and nearly too-much-of-each-other relationship that proved they were better off living miles apart.

‘What time is it?’ she said.

‘Almost lunch.’

‘Damn, too early for drinking. Never mind, I was after some sex anyway.’

‘Karen, what are you *doing* here at this time of day?’

‘What? Oh right, another bloody bomb scare. The judge has spat the dummy and adjourned until tomorrow. He didn’t want to wait for the search teams to finish. So here I am.’ She flapped her arms. ‘Aren’t you glad to see me?’

‘You’ve already asked that. Sure, I’m glad to see you. You’re lucky I was home, but it’s—’

‘Just a minute, who are you thinking of, Lukas?’ Her tone was suddenly ominous.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Who are you thinking of? You’ve got that look in your eye that you’re thinking of someone else.’

‘No, absolutely not.’

‘You look guilty.’

‘I am not guilty of anything.’

Please don’t knock on the door, Rowena. Please, not now. Even with your evil mother.

Karen stepped close and began tugging at his clothing. ‘I’m not going to find any evidence that somebody has just left this place, am I?’

‘Nope, I’m clean.’

‘Someone female?’

‘No, I said.’

‘No smells, no *stains*?’

‘Do you mind?’

‘Is the bed okay?’

‘It’s not made, but it’s perfectly... okay.’

‘It’ll have to do. Come on, you’ve wasted enough time.’ Karen reached inside his jeans, took a firm hold and towed Lukas into the bedroom.

In a matter of seconds Lukas was naked and lying flat on his back on the bed. Karen jumped on top.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ she demanded after a moment.

‘We’re not all instantly made horny by bomb scares. Give it a chance.’

She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘You honestly haven’t got anything else on your mind? *Anybody* else?’

Just the possibility of my very hot, new neighbour knocking on the door.

‘No, honestly. You need to bring me up to speed, that’s all.’

‘Are you joking? You need *bringing up to speed* when you’ve got *this* sitting on your dick?’ She gestured at her body.

I reckon Rowena’s breasts aren’t quite that big, but they’ve got a much nicer—NO, NO, NO, stop thinking like that! Do you want to die?

‘As a matter of fact, I was thinking of you all night, last night.’

‘You lying asshole, I don’t believe you.’

‘Really? You’re a defense lawyer. You’ll believe any damned thing.’

Karen grabbed both his nipples and yanked hard, making Lukas howl in pain.

‘You deserved that,’ she said. ‘Don’t be such a soft cock—literally.’

Lukas fiercely shut his mind to any further thoughts of Rowena knocking on his door and dragged The Smile out. ‘I’ve got evidence to the contrary, if you’ll only stop complaining and do something useful while you’re sitting there.’

Karen studied him a moment longer, then gave him the benefit of the doubt. ‘That’s more like it—and *that’s* more like it, too,’ she said approvingly, moving her hips.

Lukas silently thanked the gods that while his head might be filled with terror and anxiety, things below his waist still had an unimaginative mind of their own and stuck to the basics.

Afterwards they made some lunch, then took a bottle of red wine back to the bedroom. They drank most of it while the rest ended up on the sheets, in Lukas’ hair and between Karen’s breasts during a series of inventive

suggestions by Lukas. Eventually, this made Karen sleepy and she lay with her head on Lukas' chest.

'You're quite the celebrity at work,' she yawned.

'Oh? Why?'

'You're the guy who knocked off Heath Latima. I reckon you won't have to buy a drink for weeks, if you play your cards right.'

'I'll remember that.'

'Was it really self-defense?'

'Hell, don't you think I'd tell *you*, if it wasn't? He jumped out of his van and just started shooting like a madman.'

'Why'd he want to kill you?'

'Because he caught me snooping out at the housing development...' Lukas fell silent as he considered this.

'A bit over the top, isn't it?'

'Now that you mention it, maybe.'

'There must have been something awfully important out there he didn't want you to find.'

Lukas didn't think so. Lots of sand and vacant building lots. 'Maybe.'

'Either that, or someone wants you killed anyway. Latima saw it as a chance to claim first prize.'

'You're full of good ideas aren't you?'

'I'm just saying,' Karen murmured sleepily into his chest. 'You might want to find out why Latima tried to kill you, even if you got him first anyway. Shooting an ex-cop, private detective is a big deal. There's gotta be more to it than getting angry that you drove over his... his... new lawn or whatever.'

Lukas thought about it some more. 'There wasn't any lawn—' He saw she was dozing.

So someone wanted him dead?

Nothing new in that. Slightly worrying, but nothing new.

End Sample

Back Page Stuff.

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Serious Stuff...

**Paid in Fool
by G.M.HAGUE**

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