**HEMINGWAY’S TRUNK ©**

 A Mystery Novel

 by

 Gerald Arthur Winter

 **Spade and Marlowe, Shaken Not Stirred**

 Trailer

 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tt4icxd-gKc&feature=youtube_gdata>

 This is a work of fiction. All names and characters

 are invented and used fictitiously. Accounts of Ernest

 Hemingway’s loss of his early writings are hearsay.

 All proposed accounts of what the great American

 author’s actual opinions may have been are imagined,

 fictitious, and in no way meant to portray his actual

 feelings or to declare anything he may have or may

 not have said about the alleged loss or anyone who

 may have taken part in their loss. The hypothesis

 that these manuscripts existed and could be found so

 long after they were written is meant to establish the

 intrinsic value they might have today.

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 Episode Five

**CHAPTER 10 – SOME GRIEF**

 I drove my rent-a-wreck to Upper Nyack early to get a peek at Junior on his

arrival at his father’s home for dinner. To my surprise, I wasn’t early enough. I’d

intended to pass the house and park in the lot at the park down the road then walk up

to the house. When I saw a patrol car and an ambulance in the driveway, I turned

around and parked on the street in front of the house. A teenage boy and his mother

were talking to a police officer where they stood beside the flashing ambulance.

I walked up to the cop and flashed my array of cop brotherhood ID cards and

said, “I was here earlier today and was invited back this evening to meet with Mr.

Baskins and son. What happened?”

 “Mr. Baskins had a fatal stroke,” the officer said. “The kid mows his lawn

and went to collect his pay when he found the old man dead in his wheelchair.”

 “Has his son been notified?” I asked.

 “The boy’s mother spoke to him on the phone.” He nodded to the woman with

the boy.

 “Will he be coming here soon?” I asked.

 “Not sure. On the son’s request, the funeral director already picked up the body,”

the officer said.

 “Do you mind if I have a look inside, officer?”

 The officer frowned. “What was your business here?”

 “Mr. Baskins wanted to see an old manuscript I have,” I admitted, seeing no

harm in telling the truth. “It came from an era when the deceased worked for the same

publisher where the son works now, so it was just a matter of interest and a courtesy to

the father. I have the trunk containing the manuscripts in my car if you want to see it.”

 The officer nodded. “Not necessary. But make it quick. The son asked the

neighbor to lock up the house.”

 I went through the porch where I’d been earlier and entered the musty home.

I saw the empty wheelchair beside a pole lamp. When I got closer I noticed a muddy

footprint behind the wheelchair on the carpet. I assumed the footprint was probably

from one of the EMT team crossing the front lawn before coming into the house to

try to revive old Baskins. I noticed another footprint . . . then another one, both muddy

and coming from the kitchen at the rear of the home facing the river. Maybe the EMT

couldn’t come through the front door and found easier access through the backdoor.

 I followed the trail to the backdoor and saw the same tracks on the five wooden

steps to the porch, so I walked across the back lawn to a field of taller grass between

the lawn and the Hudson River. I found a path made by one, possibly two, people

coming from the river through the tall weeds to the rear entrance.

I followed the path to the riverbank with jagged rocks along its shore. There

was no dock for a boat, but the tide had receded recently. At a higher tide, a landing

 with a small boat would’ve been possible. Then I saw a scrape mark on one of the

large rocks protruding from the river. The rock could have been used as a stepping

stone onto the shore. The scrape mark was fresh with white paint flecks from a fiber-

glass watercraft.

 I wondered why someone would bother to make such a landing, then a stench

from the nearby weeds made me gag. I covered my nose with a handkerchief and

moved the tall grass aside and saw the body—*Zelda*, covered with green-headed

flies. The old dog’s bloated carcass had been baking in the sun all afternoon.

 Despite the dog’s mistreatment and its age, it had attempted to stop an intruder

and paid the price. I saw that the dog’s face was free of any flies, so I took my hand-

kerchief and swabbed Zelda’s nose. The flies buzzed and swarmed around my face

like confetti at a ticker-tape parade. I waved the handkerchief in front of my nose and

pulled my head back from the acrid smell of chloroform.

 At least the intruder had the decency to euthanize Zelda, so I figured Tony

Imperato didn’t kill the dog. His MO would’ve been to make Zelda suffer just for his

amusement. Someone knew about the dog and the access to the home by boat from the

Hudson River. I figured Junior wasn’t directly involved, but may have sent someone to

retrieve something of value. Whether the old man died of natural causes wasn’t so much

an issue to me, as was the motive to speed up the process. I doubted a murder was part

of the plan, too messy with a trail of DNA, but perhaps the old man still had some fight

in him from his Korean War days. Putting up a fight might’ve given old Baskin’s a final

flare of manhood that would’ve made Papa Hemingway proud.

At the Hudson River’s shoreline, I used my penknife to scrape some of paint flecks

off the rocks into my palm. I took a pinch of the white slivers and wrapped them in my

handkerchief. I figured if I gave my findings to the police, the house would be cordoned

off as a crime scene and prevent my easy access later, so I kept quiet.

As I turned to head back to the house, I saw something imbedded in the dirt by a

footprint. I noted the size and form of the footprint. It differed from those left inside the

house and was small enough to be Tony’s, about a size 8 compared to my size 11 alongside

it. I dug the object out of the dirt with my index finger and blew the dirt off it. It was a

cigarette butt, but not a match to the only smoker I’d encountered with her distinctive

brand. I still put the butt in my pocket, but outside the crumpled handkerchief containing

the paint chips I’d collected. I headed back to the front of the house.

 “What happened to Zelda?” the boy asked when I came back to the cops in

front of the house. ‘I couldn’t find her I the house.”

 “Who’s Zelda?” the cop asked. “Is there a wife?”

 “His dog,” I said. “Must’ve gotten out after the old fella croaked. Out in the

hot sun all day with no way to get back in, the dog died, too. Fifteen is old for a

shepherd. With its master gone, the dog’s better off.”

 “I think it was his son’s dog,” the boy’s mother said. “He left the dog here

just to keep his father company.”

 That might have eliminated Junior as a suspect, but I had to meet him before

making any judgment. I wondered if Junior would be back that night to meet me as

planned, or would he send someone else with a *stronger* message this time.

 \* \* \*

 Waiting in the park down the road, I wondered if Baskins, Jr. had spoken to his

father by phone after I’d left the first time, and if he’d told him my name and business.

If the old man said nothing before he died, Junior would have no reason to expect my

visit or to send someone else as his second to deal with me.

From the park, I watched the river for any repeat approach by boat. I waited until

after 8:00 PM as the sun was going down before I worked my way toward the house,

hopefully undetected.

 Concealed in the shadows along hedges of neighboring homes, I found a basement

window I could force open. The old cellar was musty and dank with critters scampering

along the walls and making a rattling wave among boxes in my path toward the creaky

open stairs that led to the first-floor kitchen. I’d seen no one approaching the house from

the river or from the street, so I was confident that no one had seen me enter the house.

 I listened from the dark kitchen, but heard only an occasional car in the

distance. I pushed through the swinging kitchen door to the parlor where Baskins

Senior’s wheelchair remained beside the pole lamp as before. I sat in his wheelchair,

which gave comforting relief to my ribs, still aching from yesterday’s beating.

I thought about the old man and his past with Hemingway and wondered if

anything could be gained by a trip to Paris to track down any leads on the rumors he’d

mentioned about a ransom. Without even a page of the manuscript to determine if it

was a scam, I had to rely on reasonably credible sources to determine the truth.

 I sat so long in the wheelchair with my Vicodin kicking in that I dozed off

with my head hung and my chin resting on my chest. Soon a swirl of images engulfed

me until I saw myself as a young Hemingway a hundred years ago. Though I saw

through Hemingway’s eyes, I heard my own voice in my head narrating the prose:

 Winter’s chill cut through his tattered overcoat, and the

 vapor from his wine-scented breath crystallized in his dark,

bushy mustache—something the over-stuffed lesbian advised

him would provide more prowess as a man than anything he

could ever put to paper. He half-believed her critiques of his

writing, though she was an obese, butch Jew, which—in his

mind—obscured any sensitivity she may have possessed to

assess his burgeoning talent. His belief that *a woman* . . . *is*

*a woman* . . .  *is a woman* helped him dismiss her negative

opinions as obvious penis envy.

 At twenty-one, he believed his writing was true to

himself and to the world. His crisp prose, simple and concise,

 would hit his readers like a punch in the face, which—he told

 the fat hag—would knock his critics on their asses. His self-

 assured posture did not impress her, so they parted with mutual

 contempt for each other.

Weeks later, at the Paris train station, he ground his

 teeth and chewed on his pipe—another prop for his machismo

image. He wanted to show her his latest work, a short story

taken from his own experience as a teen when his mafia-

connected uncle took him to the racetrack for the first time.

He felt it was the truest prose he had ever written, because

his own heart was in it. In the story, a mobster, angered by

trying to collect an overdue gambling debt, shot and killed

his uncle.

He didn’t care if she would hate the subject matter.

*Little boys with peach fuzz in their groins haplessly trying*

*to find their way in the real world*—he’d heard her say*.* Her

criticism of his relentless *machismo* infuriated him then, and

would haunt him long after *her* death, right to the final thought

in his head four decades later with a flick of the 12-gauge

by his big toe in the Idaho boonies. Hail and farewell!

His anger distracted him until the train whistle blew

 as it came into the station. He walked down the platform

away from his meager possessions—two sets of clothes, a

a Webster’s dictionary, a typewriter, and his writings, all

inside his steamer trunk, too heavy for the draft from an

incoming train to whisk off the platform.

 He flinched, seeing, not Gertie, but her scrawny

companion, Alice, with a floppy hat. He nodded, hearing

her flimsy explanation.

She glanced at his worn shoes, an army issue

from his ambulance driving days, but his best. She

took full inventory of his presence and *tich-tiched* at

his pipe and mustache*,* then informed him—with the

warmth an ice sickle, “Gertrude had better things to

 do today than to read your erratic scribblings. Good

day.”

 Dismissed, he watched her disappear into the

crowd on the platform. When he turned with disgust,

only the satchel remained on the platform. The steamer

trunk containing his life’s work at age twenty—the only

copies of a thousand manuscript pages he’d written over

the past two years. Gone in an instant along with his

typewriter . . . every painful word . . . gone forever.

But nothing is forever. . . .

When I woke, it hurt just to blink my eyes. It was the buzz of my iPhone

on silent mode skating along the hard wood floor that woke me. I flinched with

pain when I leaned forward in the wheelchair to reach for my phone on the floor.

The pain in my ribs seemed like nothing compared to the contusion pulsing at

the base of my skull.

Bound with tape around my ribs, it was hard to reach the swelling

where my head perched fragilely on my neck. No doubt a concussion from a

heavy blow, the metallic taste of blood dripped from my sinuses to my throat

and made me vomit.

Another job for Mrs. Han in the morning, I thought—if I’d live to see

another morning. A crackling sound came to my ears as I tried to breath. It felt

like sand in my nose, but more likely, it was minute bone fragments from the

blow to the back of my head, this time meant to kill.

I wondered what had motivated someone enough to kill me. Did they

have something of value in their hands, something they didn’t have before that

made me worthless to them now? All I had was an empty steamer trunk worth

six figures to the right buyer, and nothing worth killing anyone to possess.

 I shook myself from my daze as best I could and answered the phone:

“Larkin here.”

Sophia’s voice sounded agitated. “Tom? Is that you?”

I mumbled a reply with minimal coherence.

“Are you OK, Tom? Have you been drinking?”

 “I wish,” I hissed. “I think *Colonel Mustard* hit me with a lead pipe in the

parlor.”

 “I don’t understand what you mean,” she huffed. “Did you get an opinion

about the value of the manuscripts from your source?”

 “Afraid not . . . but I probably have a concussion,” I said, struggling to stand.

I reached into my trousers for my car keys, but the pocket was empty. “Sophia—the

steamer trunk was empty—right?”

 “I don’t know,” she said. “I assumed it was. It was emptied after the robbery.

Why? You do have the trunk, don’t you?”

 “I’ll call you back and let you know,” I said, hanging up. I picked up my

fedora from the floor and staggered toward the front door to leave. As I did, some-

one was coming in through the screen door.

 “Whose there?” a voice called to me from the porch.

 “Tom Larkin,” I said, seeing a man’s silhouette backlit by the headlights from

a car with its engine still running in the driveway. “Are you his son?”

 The figure didn’t answer at first, which gave me a moment to adjust my eyes

and shade the headlights’ glare with my fedora. I didn’t need to focus to notice his

stature, at least six-feet-eight, just like Tony Imperato’s silent partner—*Mr. Sandman*

from the Jersey shore.

 “What are you doing here?” he asked with a Yaley lilt to his tone. “How’d you

get in?”

 “You’re Junior, right?” I asked. The man’s reticence made me wonder if Tony

was waiting in the car. If he was, I had no chance to fight back in my weakened con-

dition. With nothing else for defense, I figured I might as well go out with a flurry

of stinging rhetoric. “Your father was supposed to introduce me to you tonight.”

 “My father?” he said with surprise. “Where is he?”

 I felt like I was in an Abbott and Costello Who’s-On-First routine with Mr.

Sandman, whoever he was.

 “You’d better come in and sit down,” I said, motioning with my fedora for

him to come inside. “I have some bad news.”

 He followed me inside and I turned on the pole lamp. We both sat in soft easy

chairs facing each other.

“I had the understanding that you were told earlier today,” I said.

“Told what?” he asked, continuing to receive information from me and

returning none with his stoic gaze of distracted curiosity.

 “Your father died this afternoon,” I told him, hoping for at least a blink

from this creature with the eyes of a crocodile deciding if I was the weakest

wildebeest in the herd crossing the river.

 “There was nothing on the news,” he said with a slight crease of

expression cutting between his eyebrows as if to let me know there was a

thought process going on inside his head.

 Confused by his response, I said, “I’m sure his life will be memorialized

with appreciation in tomorrow’s obits.”

 He looked at me as if I were some curiosity in an antique shop that he

felt confident he could pay for, but wasn’t sure he wanted. Then he took a deep

breath and, on his exhale, grinned widely with jagged teeth. Nothing about the

man, no older than forty, resembled his father. I wondered if Junior was adopted,

or if his mom had an affair and passed the kid off as dad’s offspring. Otherwise, if

his son looked more like his mother, Baskins Junior had been conceived when his

father was fifty.

 “Now I understand,” Junior said, making me glad that one of us did. I surely

didn’t.

Then pay dirt came when he asked, “You came with the sample to show me

tonight. Right? Where is it?”

 His eyes darted around the room and his tone seemed excited, but I wasn’t

sure if I could interpret his emotions after observing his robotic personality before

his sidekick, Tony, had dumped me into the bay. By contrast to that night, he

appeared at least mildly interested, so I played along.

 I baited him with: “I have the steamer trunk in my car down the road. Since

you’re not into conserving energy anyway,” I said, nodding toward the running car

engine, “how about a lift? I’ve run into a few unforeseen health problems lately and

would appreciate forgoing a walk in the dark.”

 Junior continued to grin then said, “Sure. Let’s go.”

 I walked unsteadily to Junior’s car and was relieved to find it empty.

 “Did your neighbor tell you about your dog?” I asked as he backed out of

the driveway.

 “What dog?” Junior asked.

 I wondered if my concussion and pain killers were making me hallucinate.

Nothing like a lie to bring out the truth, and just when I’d been on such good behavior.

 “The woman across the street—name’s Zelda. She found your dog down by

the riverbank behind the house. The dog was out in the sun all-day after your father

had a fatal stroke . . . your dog’s dead, too.”

 Junior seemed oblivious, especially since the neighbor had said Zelda was *his*

pet. Nothing seemed to jive, but I couldn’t trust my thinking. If Junior didn’t know

about his father’s death, who had called the funeral parlor to make the arrangements?

 When we reached my rental car, I played dumb and pulled on the driver’s

side door handle. Since my keys were gone from my pocket, I was surprised the

door opened. Better yet, the keys were in the ignition. To my relief, the steamer

trunk was still sitting across the backseat.

“Supposedly this old trunk was Ernest Hemingway’s back about 1920,” I

continued my banter but noticed the trunk was open a crack. “Hemingway’s initials

are inside, but the real proof that it was his, would be its contents—a novel and a

volume of short stories never seen before.”

 I got no response from Junior, not even a grunt.

 “I thought Scribner’s would be interested in purchasing them for publication. . . .”

 That at least opened his mouth some, like a crocodile taking in the sun through

extended jaws to store heat for the cool evening.

“How much do you want?” he asked.

 “I’m told the trunk’s worth two hundred fifty grand to a collector,” I said.

 “Not the trunk, joker,” he said in a threatening tone that finally reflected the

reptilian exterior that made me wary. “I want only what’s *in* the trunk.”

 I flipped open the old trunk and shrugged. “As you can see, it’s empty.”

 “We’re done,” he said without expression and turned to leave.

 Before I could speak, someone grabbed me from behind.

 “Can I kill ’m this time?” the voice hissed near my ear as I struggled.

“You got the manuscripts?” Junior asked.

 “In the car,” the garlic-tainted voice said.

As a cloth with chloroform covered my face, the last thing I heard was Junior’s

fading voice: “Not worth my trouble. He’s clueless. Just give him some grief. . . .”

 \* \* \*

My grief was a nasty headache from the chloroform and hours at the Upper

Nyack pokey for illegal parking and a suspected DUI. Though the chloroform made

me tipsy, only the stench of the booze poured on me and the empty bottle of Maker’s

Mark in the backseat of my rental car tested 90 proof positive for an arrest. Breaking

and entering got tacked on, too, until a call from my high-level friends at NYPD gave

me the benefit of the doubt with a warning to keep out of that town. I figured one less

vagrant was just a drop in the bucket, but I still was making little progress establishing

if the manuscripts were legit.

I’d have to wake Mona to come get me—potentially more dangerous to my well-

being than having my ass kicked repeatedly by strangers. In my weakened condition, I

wasn’t looking forward to Mona’s tongue lashing, like a storm surge against a rotted

bulkhead.

**CHAPTER 11 – CHECKMATE**

 Mona picked me up at the police station that morning, because the cops had

impounded my rental car. We were able to retrieve the empty steamer trunk from the

backseat. Mona’s expression showed sympathy for my ordeal, but her body language

 expressed disgust. She drove across the Tappan Zee Bridge back to Manhattan with

the empty steamer trunk upright like a third passenger in the fold-down rumble seat in

the back of her Porsche convertible.

 “Were you drinking?” she asked—always the first question. I gave her a look

that made her ashamed she’d asked. “OK, then what were you thinking? For bloody

sake! Tom, these people want to kill you.”

 I enjoyed when Mona’s Jamaican soul rose to the occasion with the British

expressions she’d learned from her grandma. My telltale grin, despite my physical

pain, made her laugh.

 “I know I’ve been lucky so far,” I admitted. “My mind is still cloudy, but I

think I got skunked last night. I thought the trunk was empty, but I have this vague

recollection that the manuscripts were in the trunk and Junior and Tony stole them

from me last night. I can’t seem to put this one together. All interested parties say

they want the truth about the manuscripts, yet no one seems satisfied with the

potential outcome one way or the other. If they’re fakes, they’re worth zip to the

seller without a patsy to fool about their little value.”

 “Got any candidates for that role?” she asked.

 “Not so far. The Trasks aren’t gullible. Bessie Snowden could be the link to the

buyer, and she’s no fool. She already got David Trask to bite, but he’s waiting to authen-

ticate the manuscripts and paying me to do so. Bessie’s out for number one, so she’ll

never settle for the short end of any deal.”

 “Who’s been tracking you and playing kick-the-can with your butt since you

signed on with the Trasks?” Mona asked as she pulled in front of the Trask’s apartment

building on 63rd Street and Fifth Avenue.

 “It appears that Hume Baskins, Jr. wants the manuscripts for himself, probably

so he can make even more money by selling them to his employer,” I said. “Maybe

being head of acquisitions at Scribner’s doesn’t pay him what he thinks he’s worth.”

 “Could he be so disgruntled that he’d hire a thug to beat you up?”

 “Trask put down a deposit for first dibs on the manuscripts till he gets proof

from me, or anyone else, that they’re genuine,” I said, getting out of the car to remove

the trunk and return it to Sophia. “I don’t get the connection between Junior and Tony,

the ass-kicking goon, but I intend to keep following the money for the answer.”

 “Where do you think you’re going?” Mona huffed. “You can’t carry that trunk

in your condition. Besides, I’m taking you to the ER for that concussion.”

 “We’ll see . . . maybe later.” I motioned to the doorman and called Sophia from

my iPhone. “Sophia, I’m returning the steamer trunk to the lobby and having your

security people bring it up to you.”

 “What did you find out from your source, Tom?”

 “That I’m not up to another beating any time soon.”

 “What do you mean? Did you show the trunk to your source?”

 “Never got the chance. I’ve been cold-cocked, drugged, and jailed. I hope the

trunk was empty, because someone popped the lock while I was in dreamland. Even if

the trunk was full before, it’s sure empty now.”

 I heard a garbled, hissy-fit version of the F-word from her end.

“Well, was it empty or not?” I asked.

“No.” she admitted with a swoon.

“What was in it?”

“The manuscripts, of course,” she said with a pained groan.

“What? Whose bright idea was that?”

“David’s”

“Why?”

“He said lightning doesn’t strike twice.” She sighed. “He thought his treasure

would be best hidden in plain sight, especially now, with our high-tech security system

watching the foyer.”

 I didn’t want to shatter her confidence with a reminder that the jade dragon

took a walk under the same security system while her holographic security guard

had been indisposed by yours truly. “Did you tell David that I borrowed the trunk?”

 “No . . . I thought it would be safe with you. If your source wanted to see

the manuscripts, I would’ve gotten David’s OK for you to show them. Everyone

would have been satisfied.”

 “In a perfect world—but I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it up to David

when he gets the news. As for me, you said it was empty and it was locked. That’s

*my* story.”

 “Who stole the manuscripts?” she asked.

 “The two guys who’ve been abusing me on a regular basis.”

 “What will they do with them?”

 “Maybe hold them for ransom until David meets their price.”

 “He’ll be furious,” she said, “but he won’t pay. He’ll be out the deposit

he’d paid his source until he could have the papers authenticated, but if he can’t

return the manuscripts, he’ll have to pay his source the full price.”

 “Who determines the full price?”

 “The source.”

 “Bessie Snowden?” I asked.

 “So that’s her name.”

 “She’s an estate liquidator in Jersey. It would be worthwhile for her to have the

 manuscripts stolen, fake or not, just to keep the deposit and whatever additional value

she can connive to squeeze out of David’s deep pockets.”

 “Not if he can prove it’s a scam,” she said. “He won’t pay her if you can prove

the manuscripts are fakes, and he’ll demand that she give his deposit back, even if he

can’t return the manuscripts to her. David never loses. He’ll sue her ass.”

 “Never? That could take a long time in court unless you can line up *Judge Judy*

for a quick civil court ruling,” I said. “Ms. Snowden has a past history with a UV index

of zero—a reputation that comes from where the sun don’t shine.”

 “Where did she get the manuscripts to sell in the first place?” Sophia asked.

 “I’m overdue for a dinner date with her and intend to find out tonight,” I said,

then I noticed a stretch limo pulling up behind Mona still waiting for me in her Porsche.

David Trask got out, brushed his solid orange tie flat against his chest and cocked

his head toward me.

“Got to go, Love,” I said to Sophia. “You’d better think on your feet, Hubby’s

home and heading up to the penthouse. *Ciou*.”

 Trask pursed his lips and a wrinkled gash cut between his eyebrows with anger

as he nodded for me to come to him. I motioned for Mona to wait a minute while I spoke

with my client. When I stood before Trask, his cleft chin was even with my forehead and

I could smell coffee on his breath as he rasped in his lisping tone.

 “I didn’t think I’d have the pleasure of firing you in person,” he said. “It’s already

Tuesday!”

 “And one of New York City’s ten best days of the year,” I said with a grin, but

my quip fell on the heat of his ill temper like ice water into a sizzling skillet—stand back

if you don’t want to get burnt.

 “You take Sunday off, then you go Monday without reporting to me!” he barked,

spraying my forehead with spittle. “You’d better have something good for me, or we’re

done.”

 Last time I heard that phrase I got smothered with chloroform. Giving the

negotiations expert some of his own medicine, I asked, “Why did you send two thugs

to follow me from Bessie Snowden’s tag sale on Sunday?”

 “What the hell are you talking about?” he said, red-faced.

 “One was driving your car, a BMW registered to Trask Enterprises, LLC.”

 He appeared stymied for the moment, then said calmly, “You idiot. That car

was stolen over the weekend from the underground parking at my office building, the

Trask Trade Centre on 59th Street. Had you been working on Sunday, as I’d insisted,

you’d have had that information.”

 On the ropes again, I appealed to his sympathy. “The two guys who stole your

company car drugged me, broke a couple of my ribs, and dumped me into a south Jersey

bay. When I escaped from that and arranged to meet with two reliable sources from

Scribner’s, past and present, the same nice fellas cracked my scull open. Funny thing

is, they wanted me to tell you the manuscripts are fakes. Any bright ideas on that

angle, Mr. Trask?”

 The powerful business magnate slumped with what seemed genuine concern,

which threw me off guard—an unseen pose from El *Daveed* till now.

 “You look terrible, Larkin,” he said, twisting his mouth. “You’d better have

your injuries looked at. Take this card with you to the hospital. It’ll cover the cost, no

questions asked. Go to Bellevue’s ER. I have friends in high places there. ”

 Dumbfounded, I took the card.

 “I had no idea you were having these problems,” Trask said with an almost

fatherly tone. “Please accept my apology.” He sighed. “I still need your help. If some-

one wants to go to this extent to have you convince me the manuscripts are fakes, then

I have even more hope that they’re genuine and well worth obtaining.”

 As Trask spoke, the hotline on his iPhone buzzed in his jacket. He held up his

hand to excuse himself to answer the call. He nodded several times before he said,

“That’s wonderful Sophia. I’ll be home in a few minutes. We’ll celebrate tonight.”

 I tried to imagine what possible good news precious Sophia could have for

*El Daveed*, but I began to wonder if there was even more to her than met my eye.

Perhaps I’d underestimated her by allowing the flawless façade of her exquisite

beauty drain the logic from between my ears—and legs.”

 “Good news?” I asked.

 “Yes.” He smiled warmly in a way I hadn’t thought possible from the man.

“Something more important than a stack of old papers . . . Sophia’s pregnant.”

 I thought she needed to think fast on her feet to distract her husband from the

stolen manuscripts, but Sophia was already thinking a step ahead—on her back.

Checkmate? Not if I can help it, gorgeous. . . .

 **(To be continued in the next issue)**