**HEMINGWAY’S TRUNK ©**

 A Mystery Novel

 by

 Gerald Arthur Winter

 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 One

**CHAPTER 1 – TOPPING OUT**

 I held out my arm to hail a taxi, but a sudden swoosh blew my hat off into the

street. A body hit with such impact on the pavement that it splattered blood and grey

matter on my freshly polished shoes. I realized instantly who the corpse was. I’d just

spoken to him on the way up to the 50th floor of the Trask Arms. I’d just been set-up

to take the rap. My mind raced in rewind back to the one who’d just sent me there. . . .

 She’d brushed the back of her cool, smooth hand against my rough cheek then

whispered seductively in my ear, “If you need more incentive than a ton of cash, go

for it—I’ll be all yours for the taking. . . .”

 I’d been was speechless, realizing now that her allure had fogged my reasoning.

I had no more insight about her motive than the scent of her expensive perfume redolent

on my lapel. With her hip, she’d nudged me out of her penthouse door with no more than

her wisp of a promise to pay my fee. Now I’d have to meet her billionaire husband and

face the dire consequences of my quickly fading prurient interest.

 I should’ve bailed on this case while I still had the chance, but Sophia Trask’s

inappropriate proposition had turned my mind in a whirl.

 Sometimes just a breath of fresh air can be worth more than anything money

can buy, but when you’ve lingered through a financial drought, the smell of hard cash

is the best way to start the day.

 I had no proof yet that an old steamer trunk was authentic, but the intrinsic value

of its contents had quickly become the motive for murder. Now that the first body had

shown up right at my feet, I felt sure that a trail of body bags would soon follow.

An hour ago, my taxi had pulled in front of a superstructure where a six-hundred-

foot crane towered above me. David Trask was holding a topping-out celebration on the

roof of his future multi-billion-dollar high-rise. According to his wife, Sophia, he’d be

expecting me, but I already lacked the confidence that anything Sophia Trask told me

would be the whole truth. I sniffed my lapel. With her scent was still on me, like

yesterday’s leftovers, my time had come to ante up with her husband.

 Ahead of me, waiting in line to enter the caged exterior elevator, and going through

the same security check, was a tweedy senior with a shock of white hair and full beard.

He had a diminutive stature reminding me of Kris Kringle in *Miracle On 34th Street*. His

thick granny glasses gave him a scholarly air and his curt tone with the security guard

was more cross than merry.

“Of course I’m here to see Mr. Trask,” he said. “Why must I wear this foolish

looking hat if I’ll be *on top* of the building? Do you expect the sky will be falling?” He

turned to me with a wink. “I may be short, but I’m no Chicken Little?”

 The guard replied sternly, “You can’t enter the superstructure of the construc-

tion site without a hard hat, sir. Regulations.”

 “Oh, well. If I must,” he sputtered as I followed him into the elevator that took

us to the top of the latest Trask project, which looked like one of my father’s Erector Set

projects from the Fifties. It was merely the skeletal framework of the luxury that would

follow when the billion-dollar *Trask Arms* was completed. The ornate façade overlooking

the Westside Highway toward New Jersey confirmed my opinion that David Trask suffered

from an *edifice* complex. Time for me to see through that masquerade.

 “Excuse me, but you don’t look like an architect, an engineer, or worse yet—a

pandering politician.” I said to the scholarly old gentleman.

 “Neither do you,” he replied with a squint. “What’s *your* business here?”

 “Not sure yet. I was summoned to show up just an hour ago. ”

 He nodded with mutual understanding as if to say—join the club.

I prodded, “Why are *you* here?”

 “I’m retired from the Smithsonian Institute,” he said with a deep cough. “Rare

documents . . . too much dust inhaled over many years . . . I was head of the Archives

Division of Antiquities since 1973.”

 “Interesting work, but why were you invited to attend David Trask’s topping-out

party?”

 “Coincidental . . . a private matter,” he said as we reached the roof. “Mr. Trask’s

schedule was too full to fit me in any other time to review my report.”

 “What kind of report? Is it *Doctor*?”

“Dr. Sean McCullough,” he said proudly. “Coincidental, yes, but also confi-

dential—no one else’s business—Mister?”

 “Tom Larkin.” I handed him my card. “I believe we’re both here for the same

purpose—to assure Mr. Trask that the rare find is genuine before he bids on it.”

 “A private detective?” he said, reading my card with a sneer. “That’s absurd.

Is Mr. Trask investigating *me*?”

 “No,” I said with conviction, since it was Sophia Trask, not her husband, I was

working for. “I won’t interfere with your expertise, Dr. McCullough, but I’ll be tracking

the steamer trunk’s path back to its source to match the history, hearsay, or even the myth

about its contents.”

 McCullough pouted, seemingly satisfied that I wouldn’t be tampering with his

scholarly efforts. He stared at me before we got off the elevator then said, “I’m sure

you’d like to know my opinion after examining page one of the manuscript. But since

Mr. Trask has paid me generously for my expertise, I owe him my professional confi-

dentiality regarding that information.”

 “Maybe so, Doc, but if they were fakes, I believe just a phone call would’ve

sufficed.”

 His face flushed as he crumpled my card and littered the rooftop of the Trask

Arms. I followed him to a group of people, which included both contracted and potential

tenants. They were ushered to their seats by Trask’s personnel identified by security tags

and matching navy blazers with the company logo: Trask Enterprises, LLC.

 Publicly, Trask was never at a loss for political schmoozing. His helicopter landed

on the rooftop where both of the U.S. senators from New York, the governor, and the

mayor of New York City came out of a second chopper. Trask minions escorted them to

cushioned folding chairs. There were nods of recognition from the other guest and future

tenants, which included a variety of wealthy international business men and women.

 U.S. Marines unfolded an American flag and raised it ceremoniously on a

pole thirty feet above the rooftop. Dominica Scala, winner of Trask’s TV talent show

competition sang the national anthem. I remained standing with my hat over my heart

as the others took their seats. I quickly surveyed the audience. Dr. McCullough had

distanced himself from me by squeezing between Japanese moguls, Saudi dignitaries,

and Russian oligarchs several rows behind me.

 Before he began to speak, Trask eyed me curiously, so I sat down. He thanked

all the politicians for coming, apologized for disrupting their busy schedules to come to

the celebration, and promised to fulfill his commitment to New York City by providing

meaningful luxury housing that would attract businesses with an influx of new wealth.

 He asked the mayor to say a few words, which were of praise, and the governor

followed in kind, while the senators of opposing parties were let off the hook because

of recent non-related political issues under controversy. Their nods of approval sufficed,

though both parties were deep into Trask’s pockets for campaign contributions.

The ceremony took about forty-five minutes, the average time for a wedding

without partaking of the Eucharist. That’s how I felt when Trask motioned me to come

forward on the red carpet. As the other guests departed in the elevator, I headed toward

the podium to partake of the body of Trask, but preferred the sweet taste of his wife.

Distracted by Trask’s motion for me to come forward, I’d lost track of Dr.

McCullough. Trask’s two bodyguards, the helicopter pilot, and I were the only ones

left on the roof with the real estate magnate. In his sixties, Trask stood six-feet-four

with unruly salt-and-pepper hair often referred to by late-night talk show hosts as his

wife’s “pet skunk.”

He wore a navy suit with a white silk shirt and a solid vermillion tie. He was

almost a head taller and thirty pounds heavier than I, but concealed his senior paunch

with expensive tailoring. His fine threads euphemized the truth—he wasn’t just a fat

cat, but an out of shape lard-ass. Trask’s foul breath blended with his musky cologne

that choked me with a stifled gag.

 A splash of his spittle hit my right cheek as Trask rasped above the city sounds

six hundred feet below us. His milky blue eyes flashed from side to side as a warning to

me of his bodyguards’ threatening presence.

With a slight lisp, he asked, “Who the hell are you?”

 “I’m Tom Larkin, Mr. Trask.” I handed my PI card to him. “Your wife told me

I would find you here.”

Trask wrinkled his sharp nose.

“She said you would understand because Tim Barnes referred me to you in

regard to your recent rare *find*.”

 Trask’s posture shifted to a relaxed tilt on one foot as if ready to chip a golf ball

out of a sand trap.

“Timmy was my college roommate at Rutgers.” Trask smirked. “Yes, Mr. Larkin.

I wasn’t always a rich man, but Rutgers gave me the liberal education I needed to provide

the opportunities to become the worldly real estate guru I am today. The key to success is

to know a little bit about everything, so those who know a lot about only one thing can be

bluffed into thinking you know more than they do.”

 ” I went to Rutgers, too, Mr. Trask. That quaint old Jersey town likes to brag

about its successful alumni, so I’m surprised I’ve never heard that you attended there.”

He grinned, admitting, “I pay them *not* to tell. Otherwise, the Scarlet Knights

wouldn’t have that new stadium, at least not for another generation. I subsidize their

athletic programs.”

 “And I thought our biggest claim to fame was Tony Soprano.”

 “I’m hiring you as of this moment, based solely on Timmy’s recommendation,

so our contract will require your silence in regard to my education background, as well

as total confidentiality about all my business. Got it?”

I nodded in agreement and shook his hand. His grip was firm, but felt like a

skinless, overcooked chicken breast, dry and pale with liver spots.

“Though I spent three-and-a-half years at Rutgers, I never graduated,” Trask

admitted. “My grades were failing, so I enlisted in the Marines and served in Vietnam.

I started investing in real estate when I was twenty-three and never looked back. I have

my honorary degrees from several Ivy League schools, but I’m a summa cum laude

graduate of the School of Hard Knocks.”

“What can I do for you?” I asked, wondering if my prior agreement with his

wife might conflict with what he wanted me to do.

 “Next time you see Timmy, tell the bastard that Davey told him to fuck off.” He

laughed heartily then put a hand on my shoulder and nodded for his bodyguards to back

away so he could speak to me privately. “I saw Timmy in D.C. a month ago. He mention-

ed you, just in case I’d ever have use for your line of work. At the time, I didn’t. But I’d

never mentioned anything to him about—my *find*—as you discretely put it. So either

you’re the best at your game, or I have a security leak at the top of my organization.”

He looked me up and down for the answer, but I’d given away zip under physical

torture by Mexican drug dealers in my undercover years with the DEA so I revealed *nada*

about my contract with *su esposa*, the source of that information.

 “OK, Larkin.” He conceded with a shrug. “I’ve ruined a lot bigger fish than you

could ever hope to be. So if you cross me, you’ll be *numero uno* on my shit list. Got it?”

 “Understood.”

“Call my office and ask for Julie,” he said. “Give her your routing and account

numbers and you’ll find twenty-five thousand dollars on account in your bank within

the hour. I expect a report daily and a monthly accounting of your expenses against your

retainer. This is my twenty-four-seven hotline.” He handed a card to me. “Are we on the

same page, Larkin?”

 “Yes, Mr. Trask. I’ll need to know where you first learned about the steamer

trunk. If that source is questionable, you’ll have a problem with the authenticity of its

contents.”

 “I have no problems.” He turned his back to me and waved one hand over his

head with a dismissing gesture. Before boarding his helicopter he turned around and

shouted back to me, “That’s *your* problem. You’re the detective. Find out and tell me

by tomorrow or—you’re fired!”

 As I watched the chopper take off, I realized I hadn’t seen Dr. McCullough

speak to Trask, and he was nowhere in sight. Before my elevator descent, I tried to

reach Tim Barnes to thank him for his referral, but more so to ask him about Sophia

Trask. I couldn’t reach him through the federal bureaucracy, so I called my secretary,

Mona, to tell her she could pay the rent this month as well as my overdue Verizon bill

still crumpled in my pocket.

 As usual, Mona replied sarcastically, “Let me check my calendar, Tom, to be

sure it’s not April Fool’s Day.”

 Reaching street level, I started to hail a cab, but was suddenly shocked by an

alarmingly thud. I wasn’t sure if the body fell from the roof or from some mid-level

of the Trask Arms superstructure. Regardless, just a few steps away, the corpse looked

like a burlap sack stuffed with rotten tomatoes, but the bloodied sack was tweed, and

the shock of pink-tinted white hair and beard made it obvious that Dr. McCullough

had taken the plunge, most likely with unwarranted assistance. It appeared that David

Trask’s topping-out party had just bottomed out.

**CHAPTER 2 – A BODY OF WORK**

It was only an hour after I’d agreed to take this case and already blood and

grey matter from a dead body had splattered my shoes. My instincts said it wouldn’t

take long for other murders to follow—so much for that breath of fresh air. Whether

authentic or not, as I’d predicted, the contents of an old trunk at auction had become

the motive for murder.

When I’d met Sophia Trask earlier, I was hesitant to become ensnared in the

trappings of the ultra-rich. Now I wondered—would the last corpse thrown onto the

heap be *mine*?

As NYPD patrol cars came to a screeching halt and encircled the dead body in

the street, I was sure my taking this case had been a mistake, but it was my consideration

for the innocent elderly scholar who just died that kept my wheels turning. Despite his

gruff demeanor, I liked Dr. McCullough in our brief encounter and felt I owed it to him

to find his killer.

When I saw Homicide’s Chief Detective Sloan’s accusative expression, I had to

sort out in my mind what had led me to this precarious position before he tried to drag

me down to the precinct for questioning. As Sloan eyed the blood on my shoes, I retraced

my steps to free me from suspicion. I gave Chief Sloan an abbreviated account of the past

hour, omitting some facts to protect both my client and myself, but the details still stuck

in my mind.

Cost was no object to Manhattan real estate mogul, David Trask. His deep

pockets had toppled his adversaries worldwide. I felt uncomfortable among Trask’s

elite entourage, but I was a month behind paying bills and wasn’t about to cut off an

infinite source of cash just because Trask’s aristocratic airs rubbed me the wrong

way. Neither David Trask nor one of his minions had contacted me, but rather his

wife.

 “Mr. Larkin, this is Sophia Trask,” she started to leave me a voice mail, and I

hesitated to answer, figuring it was just another collection agency. “I must see you

immediately, but I’m unable to come to your office—”

 I answered, still assuming this was some prank of one my buddies from my

DEA days before I became a shamus, “Tom Larkin, private investigator . . .”

 “Timothy Barnes referred you.” She dropped the name of my former DEA

supervisor, now Foreign Office Chief. “Tim met us at the Kennedy Center Awards

last month . . . You come highly recommended. Tim knows my husband—*El David*.”

“I trust you know who *I* am. . . .”

In media interviews, she pronounced her husband’s respectful title *El Dah-veed*

with a taint of her Spanish accent. Sure, she could trust that I knew who *she* was—under

thirty, a retired supermodel on track to become the next breeder for her billionaire hus-

band more than twice her age. Although she was obviously a trophy wife and next in the

long line of ex-wives who’d eventually out-lived their spawning days, Sophia Trask was

highly respected by the media as a woman of elegance. The paparazzi swarmed her with

adoration long before she’d married David Trask, and “Sophia” was all that was needed

to identify her among high-fashion icons.

 “Of course I know who you are, Mrs. Trask,” I said. “But I can’t imagine why

you’d need my services. It’s difficult for me to imagine that your husband is cheating

on you. Even if he is, with a pre-nup, I doubt you’d care.”

 Her long silence made me wonder if she was covering the phone to stifle the

sound of her laughter over such a ridiculous notion. Five years ago she was considered

the most beautiful woman in the world. Still, I knew from personal experience that it

took more than just a woman’s good looks to keep her man on a short leash.

 “This isn’t about me. I overheard my husband tell an appraiser that he would

stake his life on the authenticity of a rare item of antiquity, and if it were genuine, it

would be—a deal to *die* for. He’s become so obsessed with obtaining this rare item

that I fear for his life. I can’t discuss this on the phone. I need to speak with you at our

Fifth Avenue penthouse—immediately.”

“I work by appointment, and only at my office, but I’ll make an exception in

your case, since Tim Barnes referred me to you. I’m on my way.”

\* \* \*

 I took time for a quick shoe shine at Grand Central before hailing a cab. Otherwise,

Sophia would have to take me as is. I didn’t need reminding that I was no blueblood.

Those in Trask’s narrow circle had a way of sizing you up that made you feel your

clothes would be better off in a dumpster than to cross their luxurious threshold. Though

I resented her demand to appear on short notice, I had enough respect for Tim Barnes to

comply. Obviously Tim had been clicking champagne glasses with the D.C. elite and

potential presidential hopefuls like David Trask. Sophia’s inviting me for high tea within

the inner circle of the one-percenters made me feel out of place—not a feeling I relished.

I preferred to run free with the herd of no-accounts.

 Facing Central Park from Fifth Avenue and 63rd Street on the 50th floor, Trask’s

penthouse was a few blocks north of the Trask Trade Centre where David ran his multi-

billion-dollar real estate empire. Though Sophia forewarned me, passing building security

in the lobby made me feel like an illegal alien applying for a driver’s license. If I’d paid

my phone bill on time, I’d have tossed it in the trash. But it was crumpled in my pocket

in case I needed it toward my six points of ID verification to gain entrance.

 The guard smirked when he saw the phone bill with Mona’s note in red ink—

**Verizon will cut off your service if you don’t pay by the 15th !!**

 I told the guard, “My mom still puts my name inside my sneakers when I go to

summer camp.”

Deadpan, the guard said, “Only a formality in your case, Mr. Larkin. Mrs.Trask

phoned ahead to clear you. Homeland Security on all Trask properties usually requires

additional identification, and here, for anyone going above the 5th floor. In your case,

we’ve made an exception. Please take the express elevator directly to the penthouse.”

 After the 5th floor, the glass elevator provided a view of the Plaza Hotel to

my left and the skating pond to my right. When I reached the penthouse, I could see the

George Washington Bridge then the Tappan Zee north around the bend with the New

Jersey Palisades in between them across the Hudson River. With binoculars at the 50th

floor, I could’ve spotted the Bear Mountain Bridge twenty five miles upriver.

 None of the luxury surprised me in the outer foyer where another guard stood

ready to clear me for entry to the inner sanctum of the Trasks’ refined abode.

 “More Homeland Security?” I asked the guard humbly, reaching into my suit

jacket to show my six degrees of separation from the upper one percent.

 Shaking his head, the guard said, “Not necessary, Mr. Larkin. We had a

robbery in this foyer last month when Mr. Trask had a cocktail party. I merely provide

virtual discouragement to theft. I’m not here but on the 49th floor below where I can

prevent a thief from escaping. You’re looking at my hologram.”

 I ran my hand through the specter of the guard’s image.

 “You’re telling me about it seems to defeat its purpose—I’m not discouraged.”

 “Mrs. Trask said it would amuse you. I just follow orders.” He pressed a button

 to signal my arrival. At least his image did.

 Much to my surprise and pleasure, rather than the expected servant to greet me,

Sophia’s voice came on an intercom: “The door is open. Please come in.”

 I pushed the door open and her voice echoed across the hardwood floors: “I’m

on the balcony. Please join me.”

 As I came onto the balcony, I saw no one. Then her voice startled me from where

she stood on her head against the wall behind me. “I’m so pleased to meet you face to

face.”

 And what a face, with an inverted glistening smile that could contribute to

global warming. Her head was cushioned by a satin pillow. Upside down, the gravity’s

pull on her white short-shorts and halter top revealed a lacey purple thong and bikini bra.

Her deep tan revealed a paler pattern of scant swimwear.

 She pushed off the wall and fell backwards into my arms. Her scent wafted in

my face when she shook her long raven hair as smooth as silk in my face.

 Though she’d gained her balance, she didn’t seem to mind my continued grip

around her slim waste with both hands. Then she abruptly turned to face me.

 “Well, now we are face to face,” she said with a grin. “What do you think of our

penthouse security?”

 “I’m old school—too Disney for me.” I glanced back toward the foyer. “What

did the thieves take?

 “Mostly everything that was in the foyer that night, a few rare vases, a Cezanne

sketch, an Eighteenth Century Rococo love seat, and an oriental rug formerly owned

by the last Shah of Iran. Thank goodness they didn’t take El Dav*eed’s* prize possession.”

 I raised an eyebrow observing the only item in the foyer then asked, “Not this

moldy old steamer trunk?”

 “How did you guess?”

 “If they were pros, they would’ve come prepared to protect the breakables by

putting the rare vases in the trunk for easier transport,” I said. “They couldn’t that night

because the trunk was full and too heavy, so they took everything else. If they had the

time, they might’ve come back for the trunk, but someone made an executive decision

—a bad one, since the most valuable items were inside the trunk.”

 Sophia furrowed her brow and pursed her lips with a flip of her hair that draped to

the base of her spine. As she turned to lead me to a patio chair, I saw a two-inch, heart-

shaped tattoo encompassing “EL DAVID” just above her butt cleavage. Trask’s brand on

his sacred cow.

 “I see why you come highly recommended. How did you guess that there had

been something valuable in the trunk?”

 “You said the thieves had left your husband’s *prize* possession. If you’ll excuse

my candor, this trunk is a moldy piece of junk—unless it belonged to Abe Lincoln—

so the value had to be its contents.”

 “Close. May I call you Tom?”

 “Call me *El Tomasso* if you like.”

 “Only if you earn the title,” she cautioned me.“ David believes the trunk belonged

to Ernest Hemingway. The trunk is a hundred years old and went for two hundred fifty

thousand dollars at auction.”

 I blew a low whistle, though that amount was probably Sophia’s monthly allow-

ance for shoes. She sat across from me on the balcony overlooking Central Park as an

Indonesian houseboy bowed and served us iced tea and bite-size watercress sandwiches.

 “What was in the trunk?” I jested. “Hemingway’s body?”

 “Not far from the truth. We’ve since removed its contents, which actually may

be Ernest Hemingway’s body—but of his earliest work—unpublished—never seen

before.”

 “Manuscripts?” A mouthful of watercress stuck in my throat. I washed it down

with iced tea and gulped.

 “Yes . . . a dozen short stories and probably his first attempt to write a novel. I

don’t know what this means, but David said the novel would have predated Hemingway’s

Nick Adams stories, of which rough drafts were contained in the trunk.”

 “*The Nick Adams Stories* were written around 1925,” I told her. “Hemingway’s first

novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, was published in 1926.”

 “Then you know more than I do. I grew up in Spain where Hemingway was greatly

appreciated as an *aficionado* of the bullfights, but I’ve never read any of his work. How

much do you know about his writing?”

 I took a deep breath and tried to speak respectfully in Papa Hemingway’s behalf,

“His crisp prose, simple and concise, hit his readers like a left-hook followed by a right-

cross, which he hoped would knock his readers—and his critics—on their butts.”

 “Doesn’t sound like the romance novels I read on the French Riviera,” she said,

raising an eyebrow and cutting a dimple in her perfect, high-boned cheek.

“Definitely Mars rather than Venus.” I agreed. “But he romanticized his views of

the women he loved, in life as well as in his writing, which usually reflected characters

from his own experiences.”

 “How many of his books have you read, Tom?”

 “All of them—and all of them about him—including his war correspondence

articles during World War Two.”

 Rather than seeing my Hemingway experience as an advantage, Sophia’s eyes

glazed in thought and her full-lipped smile twisted as if I’d just soiled her expensive

oriental carpet. I seemed to have hit a nerve.

 I shifted gears with: “If the manuscripts are no longer in the trunk, where are they?”

 “David has them. I’m not certain where,” she said. “He’s hired an expert, someone

he trusts to evaluate the authenticity of the first page of the novel.” She admitted with an

impatient huff, “He’s still waiting to hear the results, perhaps today.”

 “This has been an entertaining deviation from my usual routine, spying on cheating

spouses, and I’ve enjoyed this walk down Memory Lane through American Lit 101, but

I’m a private detective, so why would you need to hire me?”

 “These manuscripts could be fakes. You need to cross-check their authenticity,” she

said, suddenly pulling a long thin cigarette from her cleavage, which surprised me, know-

ing Trask’s long-standing, well-publicized opinion against smoking.

 When she reached in the back of her shorts and pulled out a 20-karat gold lighter,

it became obvious that Trask had no knowledge that his next heir’s mama was commit-

ting what El Dav*eed* considered a cardinal sin—especially if she was already pregnant. I

wondered how many other rules Sophia was willing to break, but more importantly—

why?

 “No video surveillance here,” she said with a wink and a long drag on her cigarette.

 I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “I’m not qualified, but I’m curious, why does

your husband want a cross-check if he’s already hired an expert?”

 “David doesn’t want a cross-check.” She grinned with an exhale of smoke in my

face. “*I do*.”

 I turned my head to avoid the smoke knowing the temptation to take just one drag,

even ten years after crawling out of the nicotine abyss, would always be there luring me

back down that black hole. I’ve had the whiskey lure under control, too. But what I still

couldn’t avoid was my addiction to any smart woman with a cutting edge. If I took this

case, there would be that added taboo—aligning clandestinely with the gorgeous young

wife of one of the most powerful men in America.

 I stood up and stared her straight in the eye. She sat in an expensive, designer patio

chair with her supermodel’s slender limbs cross-legged as she dragged on the long, thin

cigarette. *Capri*—I noted on the pack she set on the coffee table.

 She glared defiantly at me when I asked, “Am I to conclude that El Dav*eed* knows

*nada* about *El Tomasso*?”

 “He’ll have to know about you.” She grinned. “You’ve appeared in our foyer

surveillance video. Since the robbery, he reviews every pixel. I called my husband just

before you arrived. He’ll be expecting you soon at his *topping-out party* on the Upper

Westside.”

 “Just like that?”

 She brushed the back of her cool, smooth hand against my rough cheek and

whispered seductively in my ear, “If you need more incentive than a ton of cash, go

for it—I’ll be all yours for the taking. . . .”

 When the tip of her tongue diddled at my earlobe I knew I was in too deep.

 Apparently I hadn’t taken the bait quick enough, because I was still in shock as

she nudged me with her hip out of the penthouse door. I wedged my foot in the door

before she could close it.

 I held up my card to her face, for her eyes only.

 She read it silently without expression, continuing her aloof attitude.

 She saw: Fee $500 a day— plus expenses. Two-day retainer required.

 She made an X in the air with her index finger then held up two fingers in a V and

blew me a kiss from her pursed lips to indicate she was doubling my fee. I nodded and

slapped my left palm with the back of my right hand, demanding my retainer. She pouted

assuming her Trask credit was beyond question.

 I twisted my face to one side and shrugged, saying with deep satisfaction from

the depths of my libido, “You’re the boss, *Sophia*,” wondering if Trask and I were

the only ones to get to call her that up close and personal. I relished the thought, but

so far she was always one step ahead of me.

 “What’s the address?” I asked, wondering what had just transpired between us.

 “You can’t miss it.” She shrugged. “It’s the only high-rise under construction in

that section of Manhattan’s Upper Westside.”

 “What’s a *topping-out party*?” I asked. “If it involves a *bris*, I already gave at the

office.”

 She shook her head, oblivious to my attempt at humor, then assured me, “You’ll

know it when you see it.” She closed the door, leaving me in the foyer with the friendly

hologram.

 “I just want to take a closer look at the steamer trunk,” I said to the guard’s

holographic image, which promptly nodded.

 As I stood the trunk on end and opened it, a musty smell wafted in my face,

 reminding me of the smell of old comic books in a damp basement from my youth—

a cool place to escape a dog-day afternoon into the realm of superheroes. I put the trunk

back in place and nodded to the guard as I entered the express elevator and departed.

 As my taxi cut through Central Park, I wondered if today’s hiring would lead

me deeper into a land of make-believe created by the rich and famous, but theimage of

the inscribed initials *E.M.H.* inside the weathered trunk gave me sharper focus on reality.

Hemingway’s middle initial stood for his great uncle’s name on his mother’s side,

*Miller*, but I still could be dealing with a criminal mind capable of pulling off a multi-

million-dollar scam on David Trask. I’d barely scratched the surface, but realized when

I saw the fifty-story superstructure of Trask’s newest high-rise, that if I wanted to get

to the bottom of this case, I’d have to start at the top and work my way down.

**CHAPTER 3 - BABY RUTH**

 I gave Chief Sloan an abridged version of the previous hour, but without giving

him any details about my business with either of the Trasks, even when he looked down

with suspicion at my bloodied shoes.

 “You could use a shine on those shoes, Larkin.”

 “I can explain, Chief.”

 “No need. Witnesses said the body almost hit you. Could’ve been a two-for in

the morgue—must be your lucky day. But we’ll need your shoes for DNA to check the

blood—routine. What were you doing on Trask’s property?” Sloan wrinkled his red,

whiskey-weathered nose. “This high-end neighborhood’s out of your league.”

 “I had business with Mr. Trask. You can confirm that with him or his bodyguards,”

I said, keeping Sophia’s connection out of my story in case Sloan questioned Trask.

Trask would never involve his wife in this nasty business. If Sloan connected Sophia to

me as my client, David would find out, and I’d be fired. For twenty-five grand, I was in

for the long ride.

“Already spoke to Security,” Sloan said. “Trask and two bodyguards were air-

borne in his chopper when McCullough’s body hit the ground, so he has three witnesses

to corroborate his story, including his pilot. The elevator operator said you and this Dr.

McCullough had a conversation on the way up to the roof. Anything you want to add

to your statement, Larkin?”

“Sure. The old scholar didn’t seem particularly depressed, not enough to jump.

In fact, I think he was elated to be bringing Mr. Trask some good news—so I’d say he

was pushed, if not thrown, from the soaring heights of his elation.”

Sloan grimaced. “I understand the professor worked in the archives at the

Smithsonian. What kind of good news could he have been bringing to David Trask?

 “Client confidentiality, Chief. Will that be all?”

“I’ve got a pair of CSI slippers for you. Gimme your shoes and don’t leave

town,” he said. “Are you carrying?”

 “No, I left my weapons of mass destruction at home. I try not to carry until

after dark. Trying to quit. Besides, my case was about rare documents—not a crime

of passion, at least not in *my* book.”

 Sloan gave me back some of my own jive. “You can’t always tell a book by

its cover.” He nodded toward the crumpled heap of bloodied tweed that used to be

Dr. McCullough.

 I conceded with a nod. “I wouldn’t have had access to the Trask Arms rooftop

if I was carrying a piece—Trask’s got metal detectors.”

I thought, *or to the Trask penthouse to see his wife*.

 “No way was I handing over my gun for that privilege, not in this town, so I

left my Glock in my safe at the office.”

 “OK, Larkin, you can go for now,” Sloan conceded, “but you may be hearing

from me again for any needed corroboration.”

 I nodded then hailed a cab. On the way back, I called Mona at my office. “I

need you to do some research,” I told her. “I want you to check the Thursday classified

sections of the New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Florida papers, and the

Sunday *New York Times* for the past month. Then check Google and Craig’s List, too.”

 “What’s up, Tom?” Mona asked.

 “David Trask is a fast mover on a deal, so I think he obtained some rare

documents from an estate tag sale, either from the tri-state area or Florida, where

he resides at his private winter getaway in the Keyes.”

 “Wouldn’t a big shot like Trask deal only with places like Sotheby’s, Tom?”

 “Not for something like this, something he thinks is a steal and wants kept

confidential. Me thinks there’s a bit of larceny in the man, leftover from his youth.”

 “I was under the impression that Trask was born into wealth. You know,

prep-school and Ivy League la-dee-da—a spoiled rich brat.”

 “So he’d have the media think. I know this is a load to put on you before the

weekend, but I need to narrow it down fast. Look for anything listed in an ad that

mentions a steamer trunk. Put the classifieds in the scanner then go to FIND. Put in

‘trunk’ and ‘manuscripts.’ That will save time. It’s a long shot, but for the moment, I

don’t have much else—except a body.”

 “You mean the professor that fell from the Trask construction site today?”

 Mona was a quick studied. That’s why I’d bribed her to quit the DEA office in

Kingston. Jamaica to join my private practice. I lost my red Porsche convertible to Mona

in that negotiation, but she got the short end of the deal. Mona oiled my moving parts.

Sometimes she made me wonder, not only if God is a woman, but a black woman.

“How was that old professor connected to this case?” she asked.

 “He was Trask’s expert to authenticate some rare manuscripts. For the moment,

not much I can do about *his* body, but I have a much better body of evidence in mind.”

 “Thanks for the compliment, Tom, but I thought I’d be too busy squinting at

microfilm all night with no time for dinner.”

Our repartee hadn’t changed from the day we’d met, but it was all in good

humor without fear of sexual harassment since neither wanted to mess up our cage,

which was my office and home-away-from-home for both of us. With no third party

witnesses it was like whispering through a locked door, but a fun distraction just the

same.

 “Sorry, *Beyond-say*,” I kidded her. “The body I have in mind is Sophia

Trask’s with a bundle of information I need to untwine to get at its contents.”

 “Ooh, sounds like a plan.” She sighed. “Some girls have all the fun. Do you

want me to call you later if something glares out at me from the classifieds?”

“Might as well, Mona. Later, Babe.”

 \* \* \*

 I figured a phone call to Sophia Trask was a waste of time so I went to the locker

at Grand Central Station where I kept my auxiliary piece, a custom-made German pistol

that felt like a quarter pound of butter in my hand. The action on the lithe lucky seven-

shot was just that—like *buttuh*. The nasty weapon was designed especially for me by

Karl Heinzenknecht, formerly of East Berlin, who worked as an American CIA counter-

intelligence agent in a network run by my good buddy, Tim Barnes, still unreachable,

probably of his own accord.

As a favor to Tim, Karl had designed the pistol to my specs as a weapon easily

concealed. It was a prototype plastic pistol created by a three-dimensional copier well

before its time. Its case was disguised as a candy bar. In anticipation of my possible

captivity by the Mexican cartel with killers who tortured their victims for sport—I’d

asked Tim to get me the unique pistol in case I ever needed to use it on myself rather

than suffer the indignity of having my *cajones* hotwired by a car battery.

The pistol, which I called *Baby Ruth*, had come in five parcels to Guadalajara

over three months. Instructions for its assembly came separately and in code. If I were

caught carrying *Baby Ruth* in Manhattan, I’d be doing time and would lose my PI

license. This was the first time *Baby Ruth* came out of confinement since I’d put

her there on a lark more than a year ago—as if I had enough cases to justify the

extravagance of the locker charge for a weapon I’d probably never use. What I

lacked in client quantity I’d have to make up with quality. Trask’s cash-flow was

a quick start with a potential gravy train for yours truly..

 Thinking of a young Hemingway’s unread manuscripts as I slipped *Baby Ruth*

 into the breast pocket of my suit jacket, I recalled a Steinbeck story about a Mexican

immigrant who chose to carry a knife to work one day, foretelling his fate to inevitably

use it and get shot by the police.

I planned to carry my special candy bar in the breast pocket of my suit jacket in

plain sight, knowing it would pass through security metal detectors. If I ran into the one

who’d forced Dr. McCullough off the roof, it would be comforting to know I might have

 at least seven shots to even that score. With that assurance, I headed for Trask’s pent-

house for another close encounter with Sophia Trask, this time on my guard. . . .

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