**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 Two

**CHAPTER 4 - CLOSE ENCOUNTER**

I nodded to the security guard as he examined my IDs. A different guard than

before, he buzzed Trask’s penthouse and gave me a glaring once over. I couldn’t be

sure if hubby was home, but at 6:00 PM, I figured El Daveed had his hands full with

the media buzz over Dr. McCullough’s plunge from Trask’s prize project whether by

—accident—suicide—or murder?

“Mrs. Trask will see you, Mr. Larkin,” the guard said, nodding toward the

express elevator.

“Thanks. I know my way.”

Before the elevator closed, with my back to the security camera, I began to press

the CLOSE button, but took one of my business cards from my pocket and jammed it

behind the thin space around the red EMERGENCY button. I pushed the button so it

stuck and began to clang with a deafening sound. I shrugged with a helpless nod to the

guard, who motioned me toward the standard elevators for peons like me.

“Take it to the forty-ninth floor then use the utility stairs to the fiftieth,” the

guard said in a tone that reminded me of hall monitors when I was a kid—anal. I never

had much respect for self-righteous authority. Taking the stairs was my primary intention,

using the alarm as my MO to distract Caspar the friendly hologram.

When I got off at the 49th floor, the guard was too busy to notice me because he

was answering the lobby about the express elevator’s alarm. I walked up one flight where

the foyer to Trask’s penthouse showed no holograph to dissuade me from swiping a jade

dragon figurine, smaller than my trusty *Baby Ruth*, but five times its weight. I slipped the jade dragon into my jacket’s hip pocket.

Sophia opened the door before I could knock, leaving my fist suspended at her

cleavage. There wasn’t even a chance for a quip as she yanked me through the door by

my tie.

She straightened my tie and said breathlessly, “I heard on the news about what

happened at the construction site today, but David hasn’t even called. His secretary said

David had to deal with the media and wouldn’t be home until after nine o’clock tonight.

What happened?”

“Little old bookworm full down and go boom,” I said sarcastically. “Where were

*you* at the time?”

“Me? Right here,” she said with a blank expression, but I caught her flinch toward

the kitchen where Hey-boy was fussing about. Besides the domestic help, I assumed that

the security guards would be backing Sophia’s alibi as well. “Why would I want to harm

some old man I’ve never even met?” she challenged with a frown.

“Maybe you knew about his analysis of the manuscripts and didn’t like his con-

clusion.” I cocked my head, raised an eyebrow then said. “Feel free to smoke, Love.”

As she pulled a cigarette from her cleavage and the lighter from under her skirt,

she spun toward the balcony in a huff with Hey-boy close behind her with a portable

electric air filter in hand. I followed leisurely and, without invitation, sat down in a

comfortable lounge chair.

I turned to Hey-boy and said with a nod, “Johnny Walker Black on the rocks.”

Like a trained dog, he turned his head to Sophia and waited for her command.

When she nodded her approval, I said, “Obviously you and your husband are at

odds with issues other than the hazards of tobacco. If I get the picture right, you hired me,

but want your husband to believe I’m working solely for him.”

She grinned with a long exhale and cocked her head. I expected a giggle, but

nothing came out of her sensuous mouth.

“Glad I got that right,” I said as Hey-boy placed the JWB on the side table with

a Sterling silver coaster.

I’d been such a good boy for many months—even sent a Christmas card to my

AA sponsor—but when I turned to the scotch, the ice popped in the tumbler as if to

remind me—once a drunk, always a drunk.

Had the Mexican hitmen known my weakness, they could’ve spared me the

car battery hook-up to my scrotum and just offered me a drink, then I might’ve offered

them the Attorney General’s home address and where his kids went to school.

I felt my right trigger finger shake a little as I imagined reaching for that cold

tumbler and savoring the scotch sloshed around my tongue before its warmth hit my

belly. The image of *Popeye* swallowing a can of spinach came to mind with muscles

bulging, but I knew better. The test of just inhaling the peaty aroma from a distance

was enough to relax me.

“*Salud!*” Sophia said, nodding with a grin and dual streams of exhaled smoke

through the nostrils of her finely sculptured nose. “David has paid you well for your

services, so what’s the harm?”

“I’ve got this silly notion about something called integrity,” I said. “I’ve got

nothing against working two cases at once. I’ve even worked three small cases simul-

taneously to pay my bills, but there were no conflicts of interest—completely unrelated

cases—and I billed each client only for the actual time I spent on each case—no overlaps

or double dipping.”

“My husband and I want the same thing.” She shrugged. “There is no conflict

of interest. We both want to know the authenticity of the Hemingway manuscripts. I

fear that David’s zeal on this extraordinary find could undermine his judgment. That’s

my reason to keep informed by you, but as a disinterested party, so that my husband’s

reputation is protected.”

“It goes without saying that the money he’s paid me automatically gives him

that protection.”

“I respect your honesty,” she said, delicately holding her smoldering cigarette

butt with thumb and forefinger.

Hey-boy scampered to catch it with his container of water for quick disposal.

“I know from Tim Barnes that you work on a first-come-first-served basis,

which gives *me* priority. You have my permission as your employer to accept my

husband’s generous fee and to work diligently in his behalf, but you need to keep me

in the loop—for his protection.”

I thought that through, then visualized my having to tell Mona to hold off on

paying the bills because I was about to turn down David Trask’s twenty-five Gs. I eyed

the scotch melting the ice and wafting toward me—still time to back out of this mire.

“You’re husband’s a powerful man,” I conceded. “He could make it difficult for

me to work in this town if he perceived any conflict with *his* interests.”

“He need never know . . . Someone has already died over this. My husband is

worth more to me alive than dead.”

I challenged her with, “That doesn’t add up.”

“Our pre-nup gives me only one million dollars when he dies, ten times that if I

bear him a child, ten times that if it’s a son, and ten times that if his child eventually takes

over Trask Enterprises. The funds are in a testamentary trust with those stipulations on

me as David’s primary beneficiary.”

“So the beneficiary distributions to you increase accordingly, quid pro quo in each

case up to a billion bucks.”

“Yes, but David tends to think of himself as invincible, and he’s over sixty-

five year’s old and our conjugal time together is minimal . . . and precisely orchestrated,

because he wants a son and has read up on how to increase the odds that I will bear him

a son. Fun for him, but a chore for me—standing on my head against the wall so his *boys*

will better survive their sprint to my ovaries.”

Her revelation distracted me from the booze, imagining those male sperms squig-

gling like salmon swimming upstream to spawn in Sophia’s sweet spot. I must not have

missed that ejaculation by much on my first visit with Sophia standing on her head like

an upside down cake when David left for his topping out party.

“So by hiring me while I’m working for David, you’re applying the same logic

as the mounted police down there in Central Park.” I pointed below from the balcony.

Pupils dilated, she asked, “What logic is that?”

“Two heads are better than one.”

“Well put,” she tittered. “Are we clear now?”

“Look, Sophia. I still have some reservations, but I’ll go along for now. I came

here for more information to help me find the source of the manuscripts.”

“OK, what do you need to know?”

“How did David learn about the trunk? And how did he obtain it?”

She stared into space pensively. “The first I heard about it was about two months

ago. David spoke by phone from our limousine on the way to the premiere of his TV

show, *Rags to Riches*.”

“Sorry, I don’t watch much TV. What’s that?”

“It’s a reality show he produces,” she explained. “He starts with one hundred

homeless people from various American cities. They get to tell their stories, and the

public votes contestants off the show each week until it’s narrowed down to the final

three who compete to excel in any field of their choice. The one placing third wins a

car and a home for a fresh start. Second place gets one hundred thousand dollars a

year for ten years. First place wins ten million dollars. It’s rated Number One on TV.”

I shrugged with ignorance, but thought: That’s more than you’ll get if you

don’t have a kid, and the same after going through labor, but with its gender still a

coin toss.

“I heard David’s side of a phone conversation that night,” she continued.

“Perhaps it wasn’t the first he knew about the manuscripts, because he spoke only

about the steamer trunk.”

“Who was he talking to?”

“I don’t know, but his conversation was agitated, and he mentioned Ridgewood

and set up a meeting for the following week.”

“Ridgewood, north of the Bronx?” I asked.

“Ridgewood near Yonkers is most familiar to me as a New Yorker, but I heard

him repeat some directions mentioning the George Washington Bridge and Paramus.

I’ve shopped in Saks at Riverside Square off Route 4, so I’m familiar with Paramus as

a concentrated area of shopping malls. Isn’t there a town called Ridgewood in that same

area of New Jersey?”

“There is,” I said, perking up and noticing that all the ice had melted in my

scotch. “Did David mention a name, an auction house, or anything else?”

“Just one name . . . I suppose it’s a first name,” she said.

“Which was?”

“*Beth*. I thought I heard him say—set up an appointment with Beth.”

“That’s it?”

“If David met with this Beth or had one of his people meet with her, it had to

be about four weeks ago, because, since then, his schedule has been full, and the first

time I saw the trunk was May ninth, when we celebrated his son’s birthday. David

showed the trunk to me, his son, and his two adopted Vietnamese daughters after dinner.”

Her story cued me to make a quick departure. Leaving the scotch untouched

left me a bit weak in the knees as I stood to take my leave.

“Is that something you can work with?” she asked, following me to the door

where she pulled at the back of my jacket so I’d turn to face her. “I’m trusting you to

look out for my husband’s best interest. Sometimes he becomes fanatical about deals.

He spoke of the manuscript’s authenticity as—*a deal to die for.* That won’t do me much

good if someone kills him over some old papers. Then I’ll be stuck with only one million

dollars.”

Poor baby, I thought, as the former supermodel stepped closer, so close her

cigarette-tainted breath wafted from her glistening lips, level with mine though she

wore flat slippers. Her eyes seemed to beckon a departing kiss, but I turned aside not

allowing her the right of first refusal.

“Do you mind?” she asked, holding a sandwich-size, plastic Zip-loc bag filled

with extinguished cigarette butts. “There’s a trash can in the lobby.”

“That might make me an accessory.”

“To what?”

“Jury’s out,” I said pocketing the baggie. I nodded good-bye and opened the

door to the foyer.

“You may use the express elevator to the lobby,” the hologram image said. “It’s

been repaired.”

I took the express down and decided to walk the twenty minutes back to my

First Avenue apartment on 45th Street. I was about to toss the bag of cigarette butts

into the first trash can I saw, but paused when I had that opportunity. I decided to hold

onto that memento of Sophia, perhaps even with residual prurient interest like a

Pavlovian trigger of hunger for The Most Beautiful Woman in the World.

Walking helped me think clearly rather than riding in a taxi where I might

converse with a cabby. Not that I wouldn’t enjoy such an exchange of world affairs,

but the bustle of crowded streets kept me more alert—something I’d learned from my

drinking days trying to sober up before the drive home.

The first clear thought that came to mind was—*what the hell am I thinking?*

Sophia’s got me on a choke chain and her mogul husband could ruin me. I wished I

could reach Tim Barnes for some input on the practicality—more likely, utter stupidity

—of stepping willingly into this squeeze between the rich hubby and his hormonal hussy.

In the lobby of my building, I took a package from Wilson, my doorman, and

tipped him. I ascended in the elevator to my 30th-floor condo where I found Mona at

her laptop researching the back issues of the classified ads as I’d requested.

“Any leads?” I asked, loosening my tie and draping my suit jacket over the

back of my convertible sofa.

When she looked up at me from her laptop, her stare could kill, but I hoped to

relieve her with some input of my own.

“A couple of steamer trunks in Florida, and one in Connecticut,” she said with

an exhausted huff and a glare that said—*May I go home now?*

“If there are tag sales or estate sales, are there attorney’s or liquidator’s names

included in any of the ads?” I asked.

Mona wrinkled her forehead and sighed as she scanned the classifieds she’d

narrowed down.

“Yes,” she said. “What name are you looking for?

“Beth.”

“No, Tom,” She shook her head.

“Any steamer trunks listed for sale in New Jersey?”

“I already told you, *no*,” she said impatiently, probably ready for a glass of wine.

I casually went to the liquor cabinet and uncorked a Sebastiani 2002 cabernet

sauvignon that I’d been saving for special clients. She glared at me with contempt as I

poured the deep red wine into a goblet then swirled it in front of my nose before handing

it to her. She did the same then sipped my forbidden fruit.

“You do know how to get to a girl, don’t you?”

“A good vintage, huh?”

She grinned.

“Sebastiani cabs are all good, but 2002 was an exceptional vintage, just like you.”

“Why’s that, Tom?” She blinked flirtatiously with her chin to her bare shoulder

that shined like a well-oiled mahogany table top.

“I don’t need to tell you why you’re exceptional,” I said. “But Sebastiani makes

a cherry block red that goes for about a hundred and fifty dollars and is hard to find. The

same barrels that were used to make the cherry block that year were saved to make 2002

cabernet. The flavors of all their cabs are deep and rich regardless, but that cherry block

residue from the barrels that year makes the 2002 rare. Can you taste it?”

She swirled her glass again and took a sip. I could see she wasn’t about to

swallow quickly—an admirable trait in a woman who appreciated good taste.

“It’s got legs,” she remarked holding her glass up to the light.

“The wine’s not the only one, Mona.”

She tugged at her short leather mini-skirt and gave me a disapproving stare.

“You owe me, Tom. I’ve taught you the best way to comb the thin hair you

still have left on your head, how to have your suits tailored to flatter your middle-

aged physique, and even which colognes to use, and where to dab them strategically

and minimally to a woman’s delight. For that, which has provided you with a steady

aerobic program on that convertible sofa, you owe me your vast libation experience,

even though you’re no longer an active participant.”

I shook my head in a daze. “My, how difficult it is for you to express what’s on

your mind.”

“I’m taking this bottle of wine home tonight. You’ve been saving it for a special

occasion, but you can’t drink, so *I’m y*our special occasion.”

The wine bottle was quickly half full as Mona relaxed, stretching her arms over

her head with a body language of surrender. We exchanged knowing glances, which

we’d done for several years, always with the same results. My conscience echoed in

my mind—*Don’t spoil a good thing by being a jerk*.

“OK, Love. I want to narrow our search down to tag sales in Ridgewood, New

Jersey. Let’s look through them carefully together. Take tomorrow off if you like, but

I need a lead tonight.”

Mona looked at her watch, set her wine glass aside, and started to search while

I put on a pot of coffee to get us through the night.

It was almost midnight when Mona asked, “Tom, did you say you wanted a

liquidator named *Beth*?”

I grunted affirmatively.

“The *Bergen Record* on May third shows a classified ad headed, *Bessie’s Best*

*Tag Sales*.”

“You said there were no steamer trunks,” I reminded her, but came to her laptop

to look over her shoulder.

“I did,” she said, “but this looks interesting.”

I read the description of the estate’s contents and was attracted when I saw, *rare*

*papers of undetermined value—best offer—leave your bid*. I wondered if Sophia might

have heard her husband wrong. With David’s lisp, she may have mistaken Beth for *Bess*,

which was certainly worth a poke into the only haystack available so far.

I drove Mona home with her bottle of wine in her grasp then took her red Porsche

convertible to pay a visit to Chief Detective Sloan to ask him to run a check on my lead

before he left for home. Reluctantly, Sloan agreed to run a search on Bessie Snowden, but

only after I reminded him of past favors I’d done for him. It had become a two-way street

but with mutual boundaries.

I didn’t need a car in Manhattan and, even if I owned a car, parking was too

expensive. The Porsche had been a barter exchange between me and Mona when she

was my supervisor’s secretary on the island of Jamaica with the DEA three years ago.

I’d given her my car in exchange for inside information that should have put my boss

in federal prison for twenty years for money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the

federal government. But SAC Jim Riley got off easy with a slap on the wrist and an

early retirement. At least he was banned from government service and public office

for life, but without a felony charge. Naturally, he became a corporate lawyer making

seven figures on top of his six-figure DEA retirement package with full benefits. Though

I’d fumed over that end result after all my efforts, I’d put it behind me, feeling that my

acquisition of Mona for my PI practice had evened the score.

I parked Mona’s Porsche in my apartment building’s basement garage. The next

morning I’d drive across the GWB to Ridgewood, New Jersey where I planned to rattle

some bones out of the closet to learn just how good Bessie’s Best could be?

**CHAPTER 5 - TAG, YOU’RE IT**

The next morning I followed the directions from *The Record’s* classified ad to

Bessie’s Best Tag Sales in Jersey where the doors would open at 9:00 AM.

From the mug shot Chief Sloan emailed to me, I saw that Bessie Snowden was

a cross between Princess Di and a Bohemian, semi-psychedelic Mary Poppins. She was

a Brit who’d come to the states at age sixteen, became a citizen at twenty-one, and never

married. I learned this from Chief Sloan’s email because Bessie had a rap sheet for

income tax evasion and material misrepresentation. Sloan gave me this information

in return for my reporting back to him with the information that there may have been

a premeditated motive to murder Dr. McCullough regardless whether the alleged

Hemingway manuscripts were authentic.

I had no handle on why the manuscripts could be worth anything as fakes other

than as an act of fraud with a quick cash exchange and a disappearing act. Sloan thanked

me for the likely connection between Bessie Snowden to Trask as the original source to

the manuscripts found in the trunk, possibly a motive for Dr. McCullough’s murder.

When Trask hired Dr. McCullough to authenticate the manuscripts, his sudden

death created a back draft to Bessie, especially with her previous charges for material

misrepresentation. In her profession, that could be a hair’s width from fraud, but the

question remained if the manuscripts were even worth splitting hairs over.

The connection seemed too obvious to me, as if it might be a setup to lead me

to a dead end—hopefully not mine. Yet, Mona didn’t find that lead without many hours

of effort, so I kept an open mind when I arrived at the second day of Bessie’s estate sale

in the upscale village of Ridgewood.

A line of about thirty people waited to enter the ten-room home set up as a retail

store with a price tag on every item unless tagged, *not for sale*. I’d seen Bessie’s posters

along the route from the GWB, driving what usedto be *my* red Porsche convertible.

Mona thought that my looking like a big spender in elite Bergen County with the

prop of an expensive red convertible would help my image. I wrapped a lemon yellow

Izod sweater around my shoulders and tied the sleeves at my chest for snob appeal and

got some heads to turn—the usual riff raff from out of town who were no different than

typical garage sale hordes. I kept patting my back pocket as I stood in line to be sure

I still had my wallet.

Waiting for my turn to enter the house with a ticket in hand, I recognized Bessie

from her mug shots. She was tall and sleek, and in her forties with a shock of red hair

She shrieked at one of her assistants to bring her a cup of tea.

I could see from the way she gruffly operated with phone bids then turned sweetly

to schmooze a prospective buyer with a high-priced item in hand, that if there were any-

thing of value for sale, it wouldn’t go out the door for a song.

She yelled to a tall, burly man at the front door with a thick crop of white hair,

a rosy complexion, and light blue eyes.

“Larry! We’re crazed in here! No one else comes in until I say so! I can’t think

straight with so many people swarming around me!”

Her eyes glanced toward me with sudden curiosity.

She barked, “Whose red Porsche is parked in the driveway? Can’t people read?”

She seemed to be addressing a flock of Asians clucking at the table by the cashier where

Rolex watches were displayed in a locked glass case.

“I didn’t see who parked it, Bess,” Larry said with a phlegmatic cough and a

gravelly voice. “Who’s got the red Porsche?” he shouted deeply and loud enough to be

heard throughout the large house.

I looked up at Larry, six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than I and said,

“Sorry, Larry—I didn’t see a no-parking sign out there.”

The second he turned to me with a shimmer in his powder blue eyes, I knew

I was facing one of New York’s finest in retirement, and he was about to verbally rip

me a new asshole. The lemon yellow sweater didn’t help me in this case, since this

homophobe assumed I must be gay just by my brilliant yellow plumage.

“This can’t be your first tag sale, buddy.” He sneered. “No parking in the

driveway at a tag sale—that’s an unwritten rule, Bub. Go move it, then take another

number when you come back.”

He’d handled me abruptly as deserved.

“What precinct?” I asked in the deepest voice I could muster, which took Larry

completely off guard. “My buddy, Chief Detective Sloan runs Homicide in the Thirty-

eighth.”

Mouth agape, Larry gave me one more test to be sure I wasn’t just a wise ass

busting his chops. “You know, Mark Sloan?”

I nodded.

“Did you serve under him?”

“No, I served in Bergen County, but the feds offered me a warm nest with

license to travel. I’m retired DEA,” I said, but I could see in his eyes that he figured

I was too young for the pension. He was wondering if my suspected sexual preference

might have given me a premature push out the door. Larry was old school—no need to

ask or tell, just weed out.

“Physical disability,” I lied, but enjoyed watching the shifts of mood in Larry’s

face that seemed to morph from positive to negative until I landed my knockout punch.

“I’ve always admired Sloan’s motto . . . *Never* *relinquish your weapon. If you do and*

*live to tell about it, you’ll be relinquishing it to me*—*for good.”*

With a deep growl from his chest, like a dog when you scratch its belly, Larry

asked. “What’s your name?”

“Tom Larkin.”

“Tell ya what, Tommy,” he grinned, lighting a cigarette with a Zippo and fiddling

with the metal lid making a repetitive hollow snap. “Sometimes the queen bee gets her

panties in a knot over nothin’ just because she hasn’t had her tea.” He winked. “If ya

leave in fifteen minutes, I’ll cover for ya—no harm done.”

“Thanks, Larry. I hope I can return the favor some time.”

He nodded, and motioned for me to enter. “I’ve got Her Majesty covered. Go

ahead in. Just be careful not to disturb any of her *vignettes*—what she calls her special

arrangements around an article to make it more attractive and salable at a higher price.

Ya know, that effing *feng shui* bullshit. ”

When I moved inside, Larry held his hand up to the next one in line, who couldn’t

understand why I got in and he didn’t. The Pakistani man grumbled when Larry said,

“You’ll get your turn soon enough, Gunga Din.”

Browsing, I could see this was a successful sale by the many red SOLD signs on

items that would have to be removed by the next morning. The cashier was stuffing cash

into a metal box and noting in a ledger the items sold for the client. Before I made my

contact with Bessie Snowden, I quickly slipped the jade dragon statue that I’d snatched

from Trask’s foyer yesterday onto a table with other similar items and moved the highest

price sign onto it. No one noticed.

I addressed my question to one of Bessie’s underlings, but close enough so

Bessie could hear. “I saw your ad in the paper a few weeks ago, *rare manuscripts—*

*best offer*. I had to go to the Hamptons that weekend and I haven’t caught up since I

got back with some letters supposedly written by Abraham Lincoln before he became

president. I’m still working with experts to authenticate those letters. If they’re genuine,

I’ve made an offer in the high six figures. I wondered if anything else in that category

ever comes through this venue. I’m a dealer, but also a collector.”

Before her assistant could speak, Bessie asked her bidder on the phone to hold

then she sidled up to me. “What period interests you most Mr.—?” she asked, extending

her hand. “Bessie Snowden—this is my business.”

“Thomas Larkin,” I said, appealing to her Anglican formality and thinking *spit*

*spot*.

Though her speech was sedate, her body language was saying, *Welcome aboard.*

*‘Ow ‘bout a tumble with Her Majesty?* Ms. Snowden looked me up and down as if I were

a honeyed crumpet to sweeten her tea. She detected no gay vibes from me despite my

flamboyant attire, only the scent of money.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” I said with a nod then shook her hand,

smooth to the touch, but warm and moist—probably nerves from all the wheeling and

dealing off the cuff.

“Oh, Mr. Larkin,” she said, smiling sweetly “I’m sure I have a variety of

pleasant surprises for you if you can be specific about what you fancy most.”

“Great,” I said, but considered her offer and wondered if a conjugal prison visit

when she did jail time would do. “My interests are literary, especially the Lost Genera-

tion. I have a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Zelda, which I prize, a marvelous letter

from Thomas Wolfe to his mother, and a note from Hemingway to his editor, Maxwell

Perkins, essentially telling him to bug off.”

Bessie’s eyes glowed as she said, “If your Hemingway note is for sale, I definitely

have a buyer.”

“Oh, no. I would never sell any of these. I’m only looking to buy and add to my

collection.”

I saw by her expression that she was thinking this through as she said, “Well,

I might have something in a private bidding. You’d just die to have it in your collection.”

“Really?” I perked. “When can I see it?”

“I’ll have to get back to you.” She sighed. “One bidder has put down a handsome

deposit, but he’s wavering until he’s satisfied with his own proof of its authenticity.”

“Aren’t we collectors a pain? Here’s my card.” I handed her one of the dozen

cards Mona printed from the office computer that said I was an antiques dealer, but I

hoped the ink wouldn’t smear in her hand. “Please call me about that item, or anything

else that comes up.”

“I’ll get back to you soon,” she said. “I promise. You fancy Hemingway, right?”

“Of course, but anything from the twenties excites me,” I said, wondering if

she assumed I was gay as Larry had, and maybe her body language to make our nego-

tiations more intimate was just window dressing.

She handed her card to me, and I headed out the door where Larry was lighting

a cigarette and said, “I see you just had your fifteen minutes of fame with Her Grace.”

“Thanks, Larry.” I gave him a firm grip. “Next time I’ll park in the street.”

“No sweat.” He nodded through a cloud of exhaled smoke. “When the queen

sees you get in that red Porsche, she’s gonna raise her price on whatever you’re buying.

Think of it as a fine for illegal parking.”

“And what if I don’t buy anything?”

Larry fluttered his cigarette in his fingers like Groucho Marx with a cigar and

said, “Now *that* could really cost ya.”

Bessie had her eyes glued to me pulling out of the driveway, but she was

chattering on the phone, so I wondered if it was David Trask she’d called or someone

else to check me out. Regardless, I now had no doubt where Trask had obtained the

alleged Hemingway manuscripts—Bessie Snowden—tag, you’re it.

I still needed an edge to make the connection between Bessie and either David

or Sophia Trask. I left satisfied that I’d thrown a fly in the ointment by inconspicuously

planting Trask’s jade dragon on the table with other figurines. By sticking the price tag

from another item on it, I figured that might raise some tempers and catch someone off

guard. Having ignited the fuse, I’d wait patiently from a safe distance for that powder

keg to blow. I wondered, would it be just a phone call or a knock on my door rather than

a shove from behind as it must have been for the late Dr. McCullough?

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