**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 Three

**CHAPTER 6 - *EL EXELENTE***

 Patience might be a virtue—but that’s no consolation to an alcoholic waiting

for Happy Hour to commence. That’s how I felt waiting for a call from either David

or Sophia Trask regarding their missing jade dragon. I expected a call back from

Bessie Snowden, too, but returned to my apartment that Saturday night and dozed

on and off waiting for the phone to ring. No action until nighttime security in my

building buzzed my apartment from the lobby at 9 PM.

 “A gentleman to see you, Mr. Larkin,” Miguel, the night doorman, announced.

“His name is Hume Baskins. He’s the director of acquisitions at Scribner’s Publishing.”

 Scribner’s was Hemingway’s publisher, so I was curious to learn why Mr. Baskins

had to see me this late, and on a Saturday night with no previous introduction. Who had

tipped him off about my involvement with the Hemingway manuscripts? Was it one of the

Trask’s minions or could it have been Bessie Snowden? The BY APPOINTMENT ONLY line

on my PI business card was quickly becoming a joke—on me.

 “Send ’m up, Miguel,” I said, and took a minute to brush my flattened hair then

straightened my tie before greeting Baskins at the door.

 The man in his forties seemed nervous when he entered my office with his beady

eyes flashing askance. He wore a white suit and a lavender silk shirt—no tie, but a double

string of white gold bling around his neck where tufts of black chest hairs were tangled

in the chain links. His white Panama hat with the three-piece suit reminded me of *El*

*Exelente* from Columbian coffee commercials, but his stature was shorter—five-six

tops. He wasn’t what I envisioned as Scribner’s personnel, but in an anything-goes

fashion climate, who knew?

 “Come in, Mr. Baskins,” I said, and led him to the leather recliner reserved for

high-end clientele, though few rarely came to my office. I played ignorant, asking,

“What brings you to me late on a Saturday night? I take clients by referral only.”

 “I was referred by estate liquidator, Bessie Snowden,” he said. “She gave me

your card.”

 I cocked my head with an expression of doubt.

“She told me that you have some rare letters which might interest me.”

 “I’m afraid Ms. Snowden misled you. I’m a buyer, not a seller. I’d never part with

my collection.” I leaned back in my swivel chair behind the desk with my elbows on the

arms and my hands prayer-like with fingertips tapping together.

 “I see,” he said, shifting in the recliner uncomfortably. “Perhaps as one collector

to another, you’d allow me the pleasure of at least seeing them. I’m most interested in the

Hemingway note to his editor. As you can imagine, it would be of great interest to us at

Scribner’s . . . if it’s authentic.”

 “I don’t have my collection here,” I said. “I have a home in the Hamptons where

I keep my treasures. Perhaps another time—when you call my secretary for an appoint-

ment.” His sudden shift in the recliner alerted me to a move I’d seen often enough.

“Excuse me, Mr. Baskins.” I shrugged. “I didn’t have dinner tonight and I’m diabetic. I

have a craving for chocolate and need something sweet.”

 As I took the candy bar from my shirt pocket and lowered it behind my desk as

if unwrapping it, I looked up to see Baskins facing me with a pistol in his hand. His

expression changed so drastically it was as if he’d removed a mask.

“I know enough about you, Larkin, to know this one bedroom condo contains all

you own, which isn’t much,” he said with a grin. “So give me the damn Hemingway note

—now!”

 I grinned. “Sorry about my sweet tooth, Mr.? I don’t imagine you’re Hume

Baskins after all, huh?”

He shook his head and sneered.

“Didn’t think so. A classy outfit like Scribner’s wouldn’t let scum like you dust

off their bookshelves.”

 “Give it here, wise ass!” He aimed the gun at my chest.

 I continued smiling. “Neither of us are who or what we pretend to be. So let me

tell you that my handy candy bar is actually a gun, and it’s aimed at your crotch. Through

this knee-hole desk I’ve got a clear shot, so it’s up to you if we’re going to continue this

conversation as gentlemen, or have a pissing contest. Based on my target, you could be

pissing out your ass by morning—your choice.”

 “You’re bluffin’,” he challenged with his literary heirs going down the toilet.

“Bull shit! What’s a fag dealer doin’ with a piece?”

 “And you thought you knew all about me. *Tch-tch*. I’m a private detective.

My client wants to authenticate some Hemingway manuscripts obtained from Bessie

Snowden because m’ lady’s resumeˊ is a bit shady. He hired a legit scholar for an

appraisal, but that appraiser played Humpty Dumpty from fifty stories off the roof

of the Trask Arms yesterday. I wonder if you might’ve had a hand in that unexpected

shove. I’m sure Chief Detective Sloan at Homicide will want a chat concerning your

whereabouts at the time.”

 “No chance,” he shook his head. “I rough people up for the right price, but

I’m no hit man.”

 “What’s with the foppish garb?” I asked, squinting and shaking my head, which

seemed to infuriate the imposter.

 “OK, wise-ass,” he said. “I’m backin’ out this door, so don’t try anything stupid.

I was misinformed . . . no harm, no foul . . . I’m leavin’.”

 Backing toward the door, he didn’t know I had a dimmer control at my desk for

the overhead track lights. When he reached for the doorknob, I turned off the lights, and

he stumbled losing his balance. Before he could regain his footing or fire his gun, I

pressed “Baby Ruth” to his right temple, and my left hand squeezed his wrist until his

gun dropped to the floor.

 I whispered in his ear, “No need to enlighten my neighbors in the building across

the street about our negotiations.” His Panama hat had fallen off, so I saw in the dim light

from the buildings out of my office windows that the man was bald. “Who are you, and

who sent you?”

 “Fuck you!” he rasped.

 “Fuck *me*?” I jerked him to his feet with his arm twisted so painfully behind his

back that he wasn’t aware he had another. As we passed my desk, I put my gun on the

blotter and used both hands to jerk him toward the sliding panoramic windows that took

up the entire wall of the room and faced north with a close view of the Ed Koch Bridge

on 59th Street.

 “What the fuck ’re ya doin’?” he whined in pain.

 “Thought I’d give you a taste of what Dr. McCullough felt before you threw him

off the roof,” I said. “This is only thirty stories—a piece of cake if you go head first then

tuck and roll on impact. You might not stop rolling until you reach Battery Park.”

 “You’re fuckin’ nuts!” he struggled to get free, but an elbow to his throat took the

wind out of him with such pain that I could easily slide the window open with one hand.

I jerked him half-way out the window with both hands.

 When he got enough air to shout, I grasped him with a hand around each ankle

and hung him all the way out the window.

 “Shut up!” I shouted. “All I want to hear out of you is the truth, but you weigh

more than I thought, chubs. My arms are shaking. So spill it before I drop you.”

 “Oh, shit! Jesus, don’t let go!” he whimpered.

 “Let’s have it.” I shook him, pretending I was straining.

 “Aw, Christ, gimme a break,” he said, but I let him slip a little farther, so I’d

soon be holding him just by his shoes.

 “Speak now or forever hold you peace,” I said. “Oops! I just realized you’re

wearing loafers—poor choice. If they’re not a snug fit, you might slip right out of

them. Nothing I can do about that. It’s up to you.”

 “You wouldn’t kill me,” he said hopefully, so I let his one leg slip out of a

loafer, which fell into the dark abyss of the ally thirty stories below.

I held him with two hands by one ankle. “One down, and one to go. Stop

flailing your legs or I’ll have to drop you.”

 “OK! OK!” he stammered. “I’m Tony Imperato, but I don’t know who hired

me. I was paid to come back with the Hemingway note. I don’t know why. I never

see my clients. It was a cash drop.”

 “If you don’t have the cash on you, it could still be a *drop*. Where were you

supposed to leave the Hemingway note?”

 He squirmed. “I’ll tell ya—just pull me up, fa chrisakes.”

 “Where?”

 “A Grand Central locker, number one-two-nine,” he said. “Please, I got a

daughter in college.”

 “OK, Tony. You got that locker’s combination?”

 “Sure.”

 “What is it?”

 “Five-seven-four-four.”

 “OK, don’t struggle. I’ve got a good hold on you, so don’t panic.”

 I lifted Tony high enough for him to grab the window for leverage as I eased

his feet to the floor. I took my gun from the desktop and led Tony to the door. He

bent over to pick up his crumpled Panama hat then eyed his pistol on the floor.

 “Uh-uh, Tony.” I waved him away and picked up the gun, removing the

magazine and tossing the gun back to him.

 “What’s in this for you?” he asked.

 I shrugged. “Mostly curiosity . . . now you’ve made me even more curious.”

“Ya know what curiosity did to the cat, Larkin.”

 When I turned on the overhead lights, I saw the yellow stain at the crotch of

Tony’s white pants.

 He looked down and saw it, too, then sneered at me. “You son of a—”

 I nodded for him to leave. He limped out the door with one shoe on and his

crumpled Panama hat in hand.

I called to him down the hall as he waited for the elevator, “There’s a Korean

twenty-four-hour cleaners around the corner on Second Avenue.”

 As he entered the elevator he yelled back, “Wait’ll next time, shamus!”

 I saw by my watch that it was almost 10:00 PM. I decided to check out the

locker at Grand Central. I left my building and passed the cleaners where I saw Tony

through the window, wearing a white robe and waiting for his white pants. I rapped

my knuckles against the window to get his attention and gave him a thumbs up. He

returned my gesture but with a different finger.

I nodded to the owner, Mrs. Han, and held up my index finger. A friend, she

nodded back with our mutual understanding that Tony’s pants would take an hour

to clean and press. That gave me time to go to the locker without Tony sneaking up

behind me. I went to the next block toward Lexington and got a large black coffee

at the all-night McDonald’s then walked south on Lexington to Grand Central

Terminal’s entrance at the Graybar Building.

 Uncertain if Tony made a call to his client, I kept my eyes focused for

anyone watching me going to the locker. The cocktail lounge on the terminal’s

Westside balcony was closing, and only a few late trains were scheduled to depart

on the Southside schedule board. I passed by the clock in the center of the grand

arched room and stopped for a late

edition paper, but looked back to see if I was being tailed. If so, they were pros,

but I assumed I’d been cautious enough and headed for the locker.

 With final looks over each shoulder, I spun the combination and clicked

open the locker. I wasn’t expecting much since Tony’s client wouldn’t have paid

the bill until my bogus Hemingway note was in Tony’s hands. I’d played this—I’ll

show you mine if you show me yours—game before, and often enough to know

the rules—one price for delivery and that much again when authenticated.

Tony would’ve been instructed to call when he had the rare Hemingway

note in hand, giving his client time to put the cash in the locker for stage-one of

their agreement. To my surprise, a thick manila envelope was already in the locker.

 I thought. *Jeez, Tony*, *you jumped the gun and told your client you had*

*the note before you even got to my apartment. Instant gratification never pays*

*off in this game of chance. You’ll end up with your balls in a sling yet.*

 I put the envelope to my nose and smelled the cash inside then tucked it

in my belt and buttoned my suit jacket. I swiped my hand around the inside of the

locker to be sure I had everything. I felt a crumpled piece of thick paper the size

of a gumball with sharp edges. First I assumed it was only litter from the locker’s

previous occupant, but when I unraveled the paper, I saw it was my business card,

not one of my fakes like the one I gave Bessie Snowden, but my PI card with my

license number.

 I wondered if this was carelessness on the part of Tony’s client or an intentional

warning. My card was torn around the edges, but there was nothing written on the back.

Then the message rang clear. This was the same card I’d used to put Trask’s express

elevator temporarily out of service. One of Trask’s security guards must’ve turned it

over to David, which reminded me that I had less than an hour to call him with my

report. It was close to eleven o’clock, so I headed back to my office to make the call.

 In the lobby of my building, I told the doorman, “No more visitors tonight”

Then slapped a ten in his palm.

 “Sure, Mr. Larkin,” he said. “That guy came off the elevator with only one

shoe on and hobbled down the street. Man, he looked pissed.”

 “Nah!” I shrugged. “Tony has a great sense of humor. Once you get to know

him, he’s a real *pisser*.”

 \* \* \*

 In my office, I put the thick envelope on my desk. I took off my jacket, unbutton-

ed my collar, and yanked off my tie. I took a deep breath and opened the payoff envelope.

I made five stacks of c-notes worth five grand each. An interesting number, since that’s

what Trask said he’d pay me for my retainer. Perhaps that was Trasks minimum outlay in

negotiations for a low life like Tony Imperato—and me. The magic number, twenty-five

Gs had *El Daveed* written all over it—nickels and dimes to a billionaire.

I took one c-note from each stack with a tweezers and slipped the five bills into

a letter-size envelope. No way would Trask have handled this cash, but maybe one of

his hirelings had, and without plastic gloves, or it would’ve raised some suspicion at

the bank. In an outfit the size of Trask Enterprises, I couldn’t assume that everyone

loved his job so much that he’d look the other way on absolutely *anything* Trask did.

 The five bills were for my buddy Frank Scardo at CSI to check for fingerprints

and DNA. It would have to be a random check just on the five bills, because if I showed

up at headquarters with twenty-five thousand in cash, Chief Sloan might relish sending

me through the U.S. Patriot Act routine as a likely money laundering terrorist. Ball-buster

Sloan would surely get his jollies over that episode.

 I put my feet up on my desk and called Trask’s hotline he’d given me yesterday.

Trask’s secretary put me through. When Trask answered gruffly, I wondered if he and

Sophia were stirring the pot to produce his next heir, hopefully male for poor Sophia’s

sake. I imagined her doing another headstand against the wall to aid the sprinting male

swimmers to her billion-dollar ovaries. There was a certain cold streak in Trask’s eyes

that made me wonder, if Sophia had a daughter, would he just set the child on an ice

flow at the North Pole for the wolves? If his daughter survived, she might be tough

enough to take over Trask Enterprises when he bought the endless dirt nap.

 “What’ve you got?” Trask asked, probably seeing my name on his caller ID or

realizing this low-life wasn’t about to return twenty-five Gs on a technicality for not

responding within twenty-four hours as agreed. “At this hour, it’d better be good,

Larkin.”

 “How could you put your faith in Bessie Snowden to be sure that these

manuscripts were written by Hemingway?” I asked, hoping to throw him off

guard with a question rather than an answer. The one who speaks last is the fool,

I thought, posing a question to stay ahead in the game.

 “OK, Larkin,” he said tiredly. “You’re still on my payroll and you’ve

established my source. I assume, all on your own, since no more bodies have

shown up on the Eleven O’clock News—but what else have you got? I’m not

a patient man.”

 I hoped that didn’t mean he was waiting for Sophia to finish her shower,

and he’d started the conjugal ritual without her.

“I had a nasty visit from someone’s hired help tonight,” I said. “I can’t see

you putting good money after bad, but please confirm that this wasn’t *your* man

trying to shake me down for a Hemingway note.”

 “I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about, Larkin,” he said. “I’m in the

business of making money and have no time for such nonsense.”

 He said it with such certainty that I wanted to believe him, but in the PI

profession, a bluff is a bluff. Trask had bluffed so often in life to make his billions

that I assumed he’d given me no answer at all.

 “Just the same, Mr. Trask, if he was your man, he neither got what he was

sent for, nor the money he was paid to get it—a long shot that failed.”

 “Now you’re just talking in riddles, and I may fire you anyway,” Trask said.

“More to the point, when Dr. McCullough died, the first page of the manuscript went

with him. I never got his opinion, nor did I see him at my topping-out party. He wasn’t

invited, so if he came, it was not by *my* invitation. Whoever killed him had taken the

first page.”

“Why would he have come without an invitation?” As I asked the next question,

Sophia’s beautiful face came to mind. “Did anyone else know about your topping-out

party who might’ve invited him? In the brief conversation I had with him on the elevator,

he didn’t strike me as the type who’d invite himself—unless, of course—he was so

excited that the manuscripts were genuine that he had to see you immediately wherever

you happen to be.”

 “You’re right. He wouldn’t come unless I’d asked him to, and I didn’t,”

 I wondered if Sophia was taking all of this in during *coitus interruptus*, so I

asked, “How about your not-so-little woman?”

 There was a long pause then I heard Trask say softly, “Sophia, darling, please

bring me a glass of water.” Then he said, “That’s your job, Larkin. Whoever lured Dr.

McCullough to the Trask Arms has the answer I paid him to provide—if the manuscripts

were written by Hemingway or not.”

 “Have you read the manuscripts, Mr. Trask?”

 After a pause, he said, “Frankly . . . no.”

 “Would you buy a building without seeing it?” I challenged

 “In the old days, no. But now I have people I trust to do that vetting.”

 “This is a little out of your field,” I reminded him. “Have you read at least some

of Hemingway’s work. If so, you might have a gut feeling about the style being similar?”

 “In high school, “*The Old Man and the Sea*—I needed to write a book report in

a hurry so I just read the *pony*.”

I appreciated his honesty. “I’m no literary expert, but at least I’ve read everything

he wrote, even if that was a long time ago. I’d appreciate a read myself, just for my own

gut feelings.”

 “The manuscripts are at my winter retreat in the Florida Keyes,” he said.

 “Are they in *safe* hands?”

 There was a long pause, perhaps Sophia was returning before he answered. With

what I interpreted as a tone of sadness, perhaps even regret, he said, “Yes, they are as

safe as I could hope to expect.”

 “OK, Mr. Trask. That’ll have to wait for now. Do you know a Hume Baskins?”

 “No. Who’s that?”

 “It’s the name a thug used to gain entrance to my office on the grounds that

he was director of acquisitions at Scribner’s publishing and had interest in a rare note

Hemingway had written to his editor, which I pretended to have—just a rouse I to

troll for some big fish who might be hungry for that tempting bait.”

 “Be careful what you fish for. You might end up like Hemingway did with his

marlin,” Trask referred to *The Old Man and the Sea*, which reassured me that he’d at

least knew what the novel was about on its surface. “One big fish struggling on a hook

will draw many sharks.”

 Perhaps Trask had fished for marlin himself, no doubt in the comfort of a padded

 chair, unlike Hemingway’s old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, who’d struggled without a

pole, holding onto the line with bare, weathered hands for the fight of his life for many

hours.

 “I’ll try to contact the real Hume Baskins on Monday for some genuine input

from the publisher,” I said. “I’ll see if they have interest in rare unpublished Hemingway

manuscripts and see what else I can learn about your steamer trunk turning up out of the

blue a century later.”

 “What’ll you do tomorrow?”

 “My day of rest,” I said. “Even the big boy upstairs takes Sundays off.”

 Obviously not a religious man, though his high-rises seemed like cathedrals

dedicated to some higher power than his own, Trask grumbled, “I wanted authentic-

cation—yesterday. So if you expect to keep your retainer, I want an answer pronto.”

 “I’ll be more worth your money and my time with Sunday off.”

 “Monday then,” he muttered and hung up.

 I stretched and reached into the pocket of my jacket draped over the chair to move

my i-Phone to my shirt pocket. I felt something crinkle in my jacket pocket and pulled

out the plastic bag containing Sophia’s lipstick smudged cigarette butts. Tired, I was

about to toss the bag in the trash then thought better of it and put it in my desk drawer

instead. As I stretched out and dozed off, I wondered if Trask’s blue pill had begun to

work for Sophia’s benefit. Putting my finger tips to my nose, the redolent scent of her

perfume from our handshake gave me a vicarious rise without the aid of any pharmacy

crutch.

**CHAPTER 7 - SUNDAY PICK-UP**

I called Mona at 8:00 AM with the hope that a heavy Saturday night date

hadn’t left her sleeping in and she was alone.

 “What, Tom?” she answered abruptly with her—*I’ve been up for an hour and*

 *already showered* tone—that I’d come to recognize.

“Sorry to bother you on Sunday, but I need to go to New Jersey this morning

to catch Bessie Snowden off guard. I need the red wheels again—just for a few hours.”

 “So much for the day off I’ve earned,” she grumbled. “I planned to drive to the

Jersey shore today. That’s why I’m up early on a Sunday morning.”

 “I’m sorry, Mona, but I drove the Porsche to her sale the last time and need to

maintain that image. Tell you what, I’ll pick you up and drive us to Ridgewood. It’ll

take just an hour. Then I’ll pay for *our* day at the beach and buy you a fine seafood

dinner after we’re sun baked, thirsty, and starved.”

 “What makes you think I don’t already have a date?” she huffed.

 “God knows you deserve a one-in-a-million kind of guy, but my guess is you

haven’t found him in New York yet. Am I such a bad second choice on a sunny Sunday

 in June at the *Joisey shaw*?”

 “On one condition, Tom, if Mr. Right rears his handsome head, you’ll get lost

and take the bus home.”

 “Deal.”

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 We headed north on the Henry Hudson Parkway with the GWB glistening ahead

of us in the morning sun. We ran into the usual seasonal traffic heading northwest over

the bridge to the *mountains*, as easterners generously refer to the rolling hills of New

Jersey, Pennsylvania, and upstate New York. Thanks to the Blue Laws of Paramus,

the shopping malls were closed on Sunday, so we breezed from Rte. 4 West to Rte. 17

North and reached Ridgewood within half an hour from midtown Manhattan..

 When we pulled up to the house,the *Bessie’s Best Tag Sales* sign was still

planted on the lawn from the Friday-Saturday estate liquidation. A few trucks in

the driveway were clearing out sold items that were too large to take away on the

crowded sale days.

 Puffing on a cigarette at the door, Larry cocked his head and squinted when

he saw us pull up in the Porsche with the top down and Mona beside me. When Mona

got out to stretch, Larry’s eyes bulged, taking in her figure, which I’d come to take for

granted by close association in our work environment. Larry continued to look past me

at Mona as I extended my hand to him.

 “Are you her chauffeur, Bud?” he grinned, flicking ashes from his cigarette and

clearing phlegm from his throat. “Nice eye candy . . . if you’ve got a taste for chocolate.”

 “My intern . . . just trying to teach her about the finer things in life, Larry.”

 “Whew! She’s fine enough herself.” He nodded. “Hope yer pumpin’ that daily.”

 “Only when she begs.”

 “You wish, Pancho,” he grinned, knowing when his chain was getting yanked.

“You pickin’ somethin’ up today? I didn’t know you bought anything yesterday.”

 “I didn’t, but there was a jade dragon figurine I’d seen and wondered if it was

still available to make an offer on it.”

 “I don’t have that answer.” He shrugged. “Be my guest young man.” He waved

me into the house. “You’ll find Her Majesty at the cashier’s desk counting all her money.

I’ll stay out here and keep an eye your honey.”

 I entered the house and noted that Bessie didn’t seem surprised to see me. If

she’d hired Tony Imperato, she would’ve expected me to look beat up or not show up

at all. She appeared genuinely glad to see me.

 “Mr. Larkin, what brings you back so soon?” she asked. “I haven’t had a chance

to research anything for you yet. Sunday mornings can be frantic, and today is no excep-

tion. Was there something you were interested in from this sale? There’s not much left.”

 “There was a jade dragon statue on the table in the other room, but I didn’t see it

there as I came in,” I said. “My friend’s into jade, so I thought I’d come back to haggle.

Am I too late?”

 She gave me a penetrating stare.

 “I have some bids on it, but the owner is very negotiable because she wasn’t

even aware her mother had it.” She shook her head with her spiked red coif jiggling

like a fly fisher’s lure. “None of my staff remember listing it either, and I certainly

don’t—sort of a mystery.”

 “What’s it gonna take to put that jade dragon in my pocket for my friend?”

 Bessie saw Mona standing in the doorway and distracting Larry from seeing

that nothing walked out the door without a SOLD sign on it.

 “I have bids from some of my regulars, so you’re putting me in a rather

awkward position.”

 I imagined a few positions I’d enjoy putting her in.

“How about that Hemingway note you spoke of? I could do well for you on

that. Still no interest in selling it?”

 I took a deep breath and rubbed my chin. “You’re putting me between a jade

 dragon and a hard place, Ms. Snow”

 “Call me, Bess,” she smiled warmly, sitting back in her desk chair and folding

her arms.

I nodded toward Mona at the door, where she played Larry’s game. “The young

lady sure loves jade, Bess. You go first.”

 “I need more than four thousand to beat the best bid.”

She challenged my billfold, but I countered, “Your asking price yesterday was

twenty-five hundred.”

 “Not *my* asking price.” She shook her head. “Without my approval, there is no

 price. Once I was aware the dragon was in the sale and spoke to my client for approval

to sell it, I opened bidding on the statue with my reputable buyers. I had no knowledge

of your interest, so I couldn’t include you. Having researched the piece last night, I began

the bidding at three thousand just for feelers, but two of my buyers are deadlocked at four

thousand.”

 “Will four thousand one hundred dollars take it?”

 “Hardly.” She shook her head and frowned as she leaned forward for a sip of tea

from a china cup with a lipstick smear on the rim. “I never nickel-and-dime my buyers.

This is my livelihood, and I have a reputation to uphold.”

 I recalled her mug shot from the police files as I asked, “What’ll it take then?”

 “I know my other two buyers were prepared to haggle up to five thousand,” she

said. “At that point, only intervals of five hundred dollars would make a difference.”

I turned toward the door as if sizing up the worth of milady Mona’s curvaceous

profile. “Six thousand is my best offer,” I said, expecting more haggling.

To my surprise, she conceded. “It’s yours.”

 “You don’t want to bring my bid back to the other bidders for counter offers?”

 “I know my business, Tom.” She grinned. “They wouldn’t go that high, but I

have to tell them the price that beat them—just to maintain our long-time relationship

—professional courtesy.”

 “What’s in it for you?” I asked.

 “I get twenty-one hundred—thirty-five percent,” she said. “I prefer cash.”

 A woman after my heart, but I haggled anyway. “I’m not used to carrying that

much cash. I hoped the twenty-five hundred dollar price tag would take the jade dragon.

I have that much on me, but will you accept a check for the balance?”

 She glanced at the Porsche.

“I want to establish a continuing professional relationship with you, so your

check for three thousand five hundred for the balance is fine . . . just put your driver’s

license number and phone number on the check—for my client.”

 I wrote the check, knowing David Trask’s twenty-five thousand dollar retainer

 would clear by Monday, and I used twenty-five Franklin’s from the stash I found in

locker one-two-nine intended for Tony Imperato. I was applying one of David Trask’s

well-known mottos: *When you’re taking a risk, always use other people’s money.*

 Bess lifted the heavy jade dragon from her desk drawer and put it on top of her

portable desk with hinged legs, making it easy to take it from sale to sale like a gypsy.

 “It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Thomas.” She smiled as she stood. “I

hope to see more of you.”

She leaned across her desk and spread her arms to give me an unexpected hug.

Her perfume was subtle, fruity not floral, and her smooth cheek felt warm against mine.

I assumed she was staring at Mona in the doorway to get some reaction as she kissed my

cheek, leaving her mark.

 Knowing Mona, I was sure she had no reaction, so I figured Bess probably

questioned any physical intimacy I might share with Mona. Stepping back and sitting

down, Bess seemed to be sizing me up.

 “I’d love to see that Hemingway letter,” she persisted. “For sale or not, I’m really

curious about it, especially for a client who’ll pay top dollar. At least you’d find out what

a another collector is willing to pay for it.”

 “Perhaps over dinner,” I said, deadpan. “An even trade—if you show me yours,

I’ll show you mine.”

 “You mean the rare manuscripts of undetermined value?” she asked.

 I shrugged and cocked my head. “Of course—what else?”

“I’ll have to work on that.” She twisted her mouth and looked pensively into

space. “I’ll need to speak to my client. He’s given me a hefty deposit, but I think he

could be swayed to sell—for the right price. It’s not like I’m a real estate broker, so

I have no ethics of conflicts of interest to deal with. That means I get thirty-five percent

of the negotiated sale price of an item from the seller then, just for bringing you together

and closing the deal, I get another ten percent finder’s fee from the buyer.”

 “So on a hundred grand deal, you make forty-five percent?”

 She nodded and waited for my reaction.

 “That would be the height of greed,” I said thoughtfully.

 “You think I’m greedy?” she huffed.

 “Not you—me. If I cared what someone else made on a deal when I got what I

wanted out of it. More power to you, Bess. When can I see the manuscripts?”

“I can’t lug the manuscripts around. They weigh a ton, but maybe I can borrow

a page for you to see—as you’ve suggested—over dinner?”

 Bess glanced toward Mona across the room for another test, but I just smiled

and said, “I’m in.”

 “Like Flynn, I’ll bet.” She smirked. “Your girlfriend doesn’t strike me as the

jade type, Thomas. More like diamonds.”

 “Mona’s opinions are jaded, but I’m her blood diamond—in the rough.”

 “And in the buff as well?” she challenged.

 “No,” I confessed. “She’s just along for the ride—just kissin’ cousins.”

 “Dinner for two then. I’ll call you when I have something to show you of

interest.”

 “Till then,” I said and turned, feeling her eyes at my back all the way to the

door. “Come, m’ love,” I said to Mona as I nodded to Larry, whose blue eyes had to

be following Mona’s booty all the way back to the Porsche.

I started the car and waved to Larry as we left, but felt Bess’s eyes on me all

the way as she stood watching us from a window and talking on her I-Phone.

 “Mission accomplished?” Mona asked.

 “And then some,”

As we drove to the Garden State Parkway, I noticed a black BMW in the

rearview mirror that appeared a minute after we’d left the estate sale and remained

behind us on Rte. 17 South. When the BMW continued to follow us onto the GSP,

I still didn’t think much of it until I noticed it again a few cars behind us after it had

several chances to pass us.

I changed lanes several times, and the BMW followed suit. In my rearview

mirror I saw a solo driver wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. The sun visor was

pulled down, so I couldn’t make an ID accept for a New York vanity plate on the

front bumper marked, *SON 1*.

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