**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 Nine

**CHAPTER 17 - A FAREWELL TO ARMS**

“Since you don’t have a ride back to Manhattan,” Chief Detective Sloan said,

grinning at me. “You and Baskins can take a ride downtown with me and the boys as

soon as CSI arrives. You ride with me, Larkin. We need a chat to fill in the blanks.”

I nodded and sat in the backseat of the unmarked car behind Sloan’s driver.

Baskins got in the patrol car with two other officers just as CSI arrived. Frank Scardo

led the crew toward us. His stature resembled Phil Rizzuto in the Sixties, short, slim

and grey. I rolled down the patrol car’s window to speak with Frank.

Sloan nodded to Scardo. “Your buddy in back thinks we’ve got a connection

between this one and the old professor who fell from the roof of the Trask Arms

construction site on Friday. Larkin thinks the dead body inside did the pushing. He

thinks you should be looking for canine hairs on the deceased and chlorine under his

fingernails. After you check his fingerprints, see if his police record shows any aliases,

anything to connect him to anyone else who stands about six-feet-eight. Larkin will

give us a description for a sketch artist on the tall guy.”

Frank nodded and winked at me.

“Frank, there’s a boat tied to the dock in back,” I said. “Scrape its bottom for

fiberglass fibers, and if there’s any algae, take a sample too. I have a sample of fiberglass

scrapings left on rocks behind this guy’s father’s house on the other side of the river. The

flora and geology at the base of the Palisades will differ from this side. You ought to look

for any fingerprints, DNA and the like from the body inside that connect him with the

boat and the possible murder of the father in Upper Nyack last Monday.”

“OK, Tom. Call Mona,” Scardo said. “She’s worried.”

“I’ll bet they just line up to worry about your sorry ass, Larkin,” Sloan nodded

with curled lips.

“Some have it and some don’t, Chief,” I said taking a deep breath.

“If you’ve been withholding evidence from me, like paint chips from the boat that

tie in with an ongoing investigation, your booty call will have plenty to worry about—

like how’s a shamus gonna pay her if he’s lost his PI license?”

“Look, Chief, I’m not withholding squat from you,” I fired back. “I took that

sample from across the river on a hunch and I had no connection to this boat till just a

few minutes before I heard the gunshots coming from the house.”

“Breaking and entering?” he suggested.

“He invited me to come for three-thirty appointment to meet his son. When I heard

the shots, I called to him inside the house, and he asked me to come in. Ask him yourself.”

“I will. So where’s his son now?”

“Up your butt for all I know, Sloan.”

He grinned. “Ah! Insulting an officer.”

“Look, Chief. I apologize, really,” I huffed. “There are people in serious danger,

maybe even people in *high* places.”

“Who?”

“People who could break even you, Sloan..”

“Is that a threat, Larkin?”

“No, Chief—a fact. I’m trying not to step on toes, but I’m also obligated to

protect my client’s welfare, so why can’t you just accept my gracious additions to

your own hard work on this investigation, and let me share what my conscience will

allow without jeopardizing my client’s confidentiality?”

“What *your* conscience will allow? That’s a hot one, Larkin—effing hot!”

Sloan remained quiet for most of the ride back to Headquarters, probably

weighing the evidence in his mind, which I’d provided from the funeral. Without it,

he’d have zip to make any tie-in.

Reluctantly, Sloan released me with a warning. I went straight back to my office

where Mona sat at her PC and glared at me. I took the envelope from my pocket that I’d

taken from Baskins’ mailbox. I took off my jacket and loosened my tie, then put my

handkerchief in my desk drawer and flopped into my recliner.

I opened the letter to *Hume S. Baskins, Hudson Manor Literary Agency, LLC*.

A top publishing house said they wanted to purchasethe manuscript by the new author

Baskins represented with a million-dollar advance, which was twice their initial offer.

Apparently Baskins had begun a bidding war for the book by a first-time author. The

letter didn’t mention the author by name, only the book by its title—*Crossings*.

His success outbidding the competition over a book by a new author would have

made the grandson proud to show his grandfather before he died, so I couldn’t see him

taking part in either his grandfather’s or his own dog’s demise. The style of the bidding,

however, reminded me of someone intimately familiar.

“So much for redheads,” I huffed at Mona.

“Maybe not, Tom,” she said. “This was left with the doorman downstairs.”

Seeing my expression, she shook her head. “Private courier . . . I checked—no trail.”

I wished I could pour myself a Johnny Walker on the rocks as I opened the

envelope. I took a deep breath that hurt my cracked rib when I saw a photo of Bess

gagged with duct tape around her mouth and tied to a steel girder atop the Trask Arms

superstructure, apparent by the view behind her. Handcuffed to her bound wrists was

what appeared to be an explosive device.

Mona rolled her eyes when she saw me go over to my safe behind the photo

of me and my DEA buddies in Mexico. I took the plastic baggies from the safe and

tossed them on the desk in front of Mona.

“Take those to Scardo,” I said. “He knows the matches he’s looking for.” The

original first page from the manuscript remained there intact in a Ziploc bag, but I took

it in my grasp, knowing it was my only bargaining chip for Bessie’s life.

The note with her photo said: *You know what I want. Bring it here*.

They must have taken the Mylar protected version from Bess then realized it

was just the copy I’d made. At least my switch spared her life a littlelonger with

some hope of saving her. I’d have to make a few phone calls on my way to the

Trask Arms construction site to try to even the odds that I might escape with my

own life as well.

I opened my safe and handed Mona the documents that left her half of

everything I own. She looked at me with a dumbfounded expression that looked

like what I imagined her innocent teenage face would’ve resembled the first time

she’d seen a grown man naked. I felt naked at the moment, before one of the few

people I’d ever completely trusted—my precious Mona.

She glared at me as I reached for the unopened bottle of Johnny Walker

Black from my safe. I shrugged as I broke the seal on my whiskey stash.

“What’s this?” she asked, pushing my Will and financial statements aside

as if they were junk mail.

“My niece gets the rest, but it’s half of everything I’ve got—in case I don’t

come back.”

She shook off my resolve as if I’d surprised her with nothing more serious

than an inappropriate birthday card, then she waved a phone message written on a

pink pad.

“Tim Barnes called. This is his direct line. He’s in town and wants to see you.”

I paused and hissed under my breath, “It’s about time.”

I put the whiskey bottle back in my safe with the seal half broken. I started to

close the safe, but Mona cleared her throat loudly. I turned around to see her waving

my Will in her hand and frowning. I shrugged, took the packet from her then put it

back in the safe and spun the lock closed.

“My attorney still has the originals.”

“Seriously, Tom, this could be a trap,” Mona echoed my opinion—as usual.

“Little Red Riding Hood might turn out to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing looking

to get back her original just to close her deal with David Trask.”

My expression confirmed that I had that angle covered.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going into this all by yourself, Tom.”

“I’ll never endanger you, love, so whom else can I trust but *moi*?”

She frowned. “I said *don’t* tell me that!”

I waved my phone as I went out the door. “In a pinch, I hope I can still rely

on friends in high places—*sky* high!”

\* \* \*

I made my calls in order of priority. The last call was to David Trask’s hotline,

which gave me clearance to his security team at the elevator leading up to the roof of the

Trask Arms superstructure on West 79th Street.

“Has anyone been to the roof in the past few hours?” I asked a guard as I flashed

my ID.

“Not since this morning,” he said, looking at a roster. “Police business. A Chief

Detective Sloan had a warrant and took a CSI team to the roof for a couple of hours then

they re-examined over there, where the body hit the street last Friday.”

He pointed to the yellow police tape surrounding the chalk outline in the street of

what had remained of Dr. McCullough post impact from fifty stories to the street.

“That’s it,.” The guard said.

“No other way to get to the roof?”

“Not without wings,” he said with a smirk.

“Any UFOs then?” I asked, dead serious.

“Only the Trask choppers,” he said. “The boss often brings VIPs by helicopter.”

“When was the last time?”

He looked at me as if I had two heads. “We never track the boss, Mr. Larkin.”

“All I’m asking is, did you see anything land on the roof today?”

He rubbed his chin nervously. “Not my job,” he said. “I’m paid to look down,

not up.”

“I appreciate your loyalty, and even your good sense,” I said.” But I’m glad our

government has a few checks and balances to watch our CEO in the White House. Did

you *hear* a chopper?”

“You kiddin’? Above this street noise?” he said, though it was relatively quiet.

“Did you see the shadow of a chopper?” I nodded to where a beam of sunlight

might cast the shadow of an aircraft from above.

“Nope. *Nada*,” he said, confident he’d saved his job without compromising

himself in an ongoing murder investigation.”

“*Bueño*,” I returned, tapping his ID badge with backward flicks of my index

finger. “Because I wouldn’t want to see you named as an *accessorio a homicidio*.”

His defiance waned with my Chief Sloan mimicry. I gave him the thumbs up as

he pressed the control to take me fifty stories to the exposed roof. My neck stiffened as

I stared straight up prepared for an assault. I kept Baby Ruth in my breast pocket in the

event that my element of surprise might get me and Bess out of a jam.

When I got to the roof and stepped off the elevator, I saw no sign of Bess. I was

startled from behind as the elevator creaked, suddenly descending and leaving me no

means of escape. It was a clear, nearly cloudless day, so I could see twenty-five miles

in any direction, except to the southeast where midtown skyscrapers blocked parts of

my view of Brooklyn and Staten Island through a man-made colonnade.

The rooftop ambiance was serene from where I stood, a bird’s-eye view of

everywhere I’d been since last Friday when I was summoned to the Trask penthouse by

Sophia. Mentally, I tried to put together the many pieces to the puzzle, but couldn’t help

wondering why I ended up back here, like a rodent trapped in a maze.

My quiet thoughts were disturbed by a muffled groan from behind the housing of

the elevator car. I imagined that, on a windy day, the housing would give construction

workers some feeling of protection when walking out onto the flat roof with the high

possibility of being blown off.

Cautiously I circled the elevator housing.

The first thing I saw was a pair of shoes then I recognized the skirt Bess had been

wearing since our dinner at Morton’s. Her ankles were bound with duct tape. As I contin-

ued moving closer, I saw her blouse then the back of her head with her red hair mussed.

Her hands were bound behind her as in the photo sent to me. She was handcuffed to a

girder and to the device that looked like a time bomb.

I heard Bess moan again, but moved closer with caution. When I got close enough

I saw her tears. She sighed with relief when she saw me. I gave her a smile, but nodded to

the bomb. She shuddered with a nod.

“I’ll get you out of this, but first, I’m sorry, but I owe you one.”

I grabbed the duct tape from the side of her face and yanked hard. I was sure

her echoing scream could be heard by security five hundred feet below.

She took a deep breath and said with a choking dry throat, “Behind you.”

I didn’t have to turn to know who it was because his long shadow cast ahead of

me as I knelt beside Bess.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” she whimpered. “They caught me off guard when you went

to the house. They were tipped after your phone call. The short bald one followed after

you while *he* took me. I should’ve known better.”

A familiar voice came over my stooped shoulder. “You’re still my favorite

cougar, Bessie. Let’s have it, Larkin!”

I reached into my jacket and took out the original manuscript page in the Zip-loc

bag. I dangled it between thumb and forefinger as I stood and turned to see Mr. Sandman

pointing a pistol at me.

When I toyed with the page he pointed the pistol at Bess and said, “No tricks, or

Bessie gets it.”

“Why would you shoot your girlfriend?” I asked, calling his bluff, but the look

of disappointment on her face told me I was wrong.

“No offense, Bessie,” he said, “but I’ve got a new doll now, much younger,

and we’re starting a family.” He smiled that toothy grin I’d learned to avoid.

As I went to hand him the plastic bag, I heard a chopper approaching. The

distraction allowed me to drop the bag, but before I could knock the pistol from his

grasp, he knelt on one knee and pointed the gun at me again.

“Keep’ m high,” he said, waving me to move back near Bess. “I don’t need to

implicate myself by shooting you Larkin. There’s no way out for you anyway. Sorry,

Bessie. No way out for you either.”

The chopper landed with its *Trask Enterprises, LLC* markings as bright as the

afternoon sun. Only the pilot was onboard. Mr. Sandman ducked his head beneath the

spinning propeller blades. A wave of nausea cramped in my gut realizing, even if I took

down the chopper by shooting the pilot with Baby Ruth, the helicopter was our only

means of escaping the bomb. I chose to shoot Mr. Sandman in the foot instead, but it

only delayed the inevitable as he managed to limp into the chopper and take off.

I turned back to Bess with a smile and said, “I don’t think you’re so old.”

“Tom, the bomb?”

I reached into my pocket for my handy skeleton key, but it didn’t work. With

her look of despair, I shook my head. I reached in my suit jacket for my handy cutters.

I had to use all of my strength with both hands and three tries before I cut through the

handcuffs.

Then she heard it, too. The sound of the chopper returning, probably to make

a mercy killing, by shooting Bess before the bomb went off.

“He’s coming back to shoot us, to be sure we’ll have no chance of escape,”

she said.

“I think not,” I said, turning toward the approaching chopper. “We’re outta here.”

The unmarked chopper made a quick landing. I was happy to see Tim Barnes

waving us aboard.

“Calling it a little close, Timmy,” I said.

“Not close enough if you don’t shut the door,” he said with concern.

We lifted and quickly turned away toward the Hudson River. The explosion

shook us in flight and steel debris spewed from the roof of the superstructure. We

moved over the river in case a direct hit took us down, I turned to see the super-

structure crumbling from the top down until only a billowing cloud remained

where Trask’s prize real estate had proudly stood before.

Bess turned to me with mouth agape probably realizing how we might’ve

been just body parts coming down with the building’s debris.

“I guess the Trask Arms won’t be ready for fall occupancy as planned, Tom,”

Tim said, “You failed to mention there was a bomb.”

“I know what a candy-ass you can be when there seems no way out, Timmy.”

“Sometimes he can be one sick, son of a bitch,” Tim said to Bess. “That was

one for the book, Tom.”

“I’ve got the title for that book,” I said, winking at Bess. “*A Farewell to—*Trask Arms.”

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**CHAPTER 18 – A CLEAN WELL-LIGHTED PLACE**

The media rattled with coverage of the Trask Arms disaster, but the mayor and

governor were quick to quell any talk of terrorism.

Addressing TV news, the mayor said, “This was a tragic result from an ongoing

NYPD investigation, which was triggered by what, at first, appeared to be an unfortunate

accident, but may now have been a homicide, and merely the prelude to several other

attempts to harm Trask Enterprises this week.”

I watched TV from Bess’s bed at her Ridgewood home in Jersey. She came from

the shower with just a towel around her and sat on the edge of her king-size bed.

“What’s happening?” she asked as I watched Chief Sloan come to the podium to

address the media.

“This ought to be good,” I said, propping up my neck with a pillow.

Sloan cleared his throat. “My staff is working around the clock on this case,

which stems from a conspiracy to defraud David Trask and his company. We have a

series of connected incidents and a variety of suspects linked to a plot, which ended

with the destruction of the Trask Arms before its completion.”

“Who was responsible for the bomb?” one reporter asked.

“It was a type the FBI has identified as used by Colombian drug cartels against

interference with their network,” Sloan said, which made me swing my legs out of bed

in protest. “Mr. Trask’s firm stance against drug use and his advocacy of stronger

measures against the South American and Mexican pipelines to the United States have

brought on retaliatory measures from these foreign sources against David Trask’s

financial operations in the past.”

I turned to Bess. “We were set up.”

“Set up . . . how?”

“We’ve been crossed, Bess, but I’m not sure how or why.”

“My ex-boyfriend has the rest of the manuscripts, fake or not,” she said drying

her hair. “He probably ransomed it to Trask for millions. That’s his style. Trask wouldn’t

blink at a high price as long as he got what he wanted.”

“That’s my point—what did Trask want? Where do you think your ex went?”

She shrugged. “He had drug connections in the Florida Keys.”

Something rang a bell as I recalled a newscast saying David Trask had taken a

sabbatical from the hounding media to his retreat on Isla Premio. An island about one

square mile, most of it a terraced villa of luxurious gardens and patios with exquisite

pools and fountains. Three quarters of its gentle shores were proclaimed the finest

beaches imaginable.

About ten miles north of Marathon, Isla Premio was on the fringe of Florida

Bay where it became the Gulf. Once just a worthless coral atoll south of the Everglades,

the island became priceless real estate when Trask sank millions into his precious jewel

in the Gulf of Mexico.

I waited on my iPhone while Mona booked my flight to Miami. We’d take

a chopper from there to the Keys.

“May I come along, Tom?” Bess asked teasingly with her towel sliding down

around her ankles. With her lips pouting, she said, “I’ve never been to Key West.”

“Mr. Sandman never took you there?”

“Who?”

“Your ex.”

“Yes, but why do you call him *that*?”

“Long story. What do you call him?”

“Davey.”

“Davey *what*?”

“Smith, Jones, whatever worked for him. He had numerous phony passports and

driver’s licenses.”

I looked her figure up and down. “So, was it the mystique of the bad boy in

Davey that captured your heart . . . or did you catch him with that orange tribble teasing

him like an angler’s lure?”

“*Tribble*?”

“Fuzzy, cuddly, little creatures that took over the Star Ship Enterprise.”

She looked down at her Venus mound, which matched her redheaded coif then

picked up the towel in a ball and threw it at me. “You’re a deviant, Thomas Larkin!”

“Whoa! The last chick who called me *Thomas* became flotsam and jetsam at the

headwaters of the Amazon River. Formalities to the end, she still tried to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t harm a fly.”

“I was kind of hoping you would.”

“You’re incorrigible!”

“Do you want to go south with *this* bad boy or not?”

“Yes . . . please,” she said coyly.

“Make it two tickets,” I said to Mona on the line. “Me and *Red* are goin’ south.”

“Tell me about it,” Mona sighed. “Business class?”

“Nah! With all that cash floating around from the Trasks, we’ll go First Class.” I

winked at Bess. “How much time do we have to get to Newark?”

“First thing in the morning.” Mona said.

I nodded to Bess as she played peek-a-boo with the towel and slipped back into

bed.

“Nice,” I said.

Mona cleared her throat on the other end to get my attention. “Speaking of the

cash, Frank Scardo sent me an e-mail about the hundred dollar bills you wanted tested

for fingerprints, the cash that was supposed to go to Tony Imperato, but you got to it

first in the Grand Central locker. . . . ”

“Sorry, Mona. I got side-tracked.” I shook my head at Bess. “What’ve ya got?”

“Frank cross-referenced Imperato’s file as you requested, and the tall guy you

wanted to connect to him did time for drug trafficking and met Tony in prison. We have

a verbal description of your Mr. Sandman that fits your sketch from the other day, and

his fingerprints match those on the bills you provided, but mug shots were either removed

or never taken of Davey Jones alias Smith alias Brown . . . Need I continue?”

“I’ve got the picture. Thanks.” I recalled another piece of evidence that might tie

up some loose ends. “Tell Frank to search for a loafer in the alley between our office

and the Korean consulate next door. It’s Tony Imperato’s shoe, which might have some

DNA from sweaty feet that could tie him to Dr. McCullough and Hume Baskins. Though

he wouldn’t have been wearing that shoe at the time, the shoe size might match footprints

on the shore in Upper Nyack and at Croton-On-Hudson.”

“Will do. How did the shoe end up there?”

“Long story for a rainy day. What about the other items you gave to Scardo?”

“Nothing, Tom. Frank complained that he’s overwhelmed with other cases—

no time, yet.”

“OK, I’ll be patient for now. Call Tim Barnes and give him the list of what I’ll

need in Florida. Have him call me with the contacts I need to make in the Keys.”

“Be careful, Tom,” Mona offered.

“Always, love.”

Bess gave me a jealous frown, which quickly melted into the lure of seduction

. . . as if I needed any more encouragement.

\* \* \*

The next day, Tim Barnes booked us at a B & B between Marathon and Grassy

Key, which was a DEA safe house that never had any vacancies. The sign above *No*

*Vacancy* was in the shape of a dolphin and read, *The* *Dolph~Anna Inn*, named for the

hosts, DEA informants in an agreement with Florida’s state attorney general under a

Witness Protection Program.

Dolph Wendler had been the link in a drug pipeline from East Berlin when the

Berlin Wall came down in 1989. His connection with Colombian kingpins during the

Nineties made him an ideal informant in exchange for amnesty. Retired at seventy, he

and his wife Anna were granted citizenship and served the DEA through their B&B

cover to assist agents on assignment in the Keys by providing a safe haven and direct,

undetected contact with Headquarters in Virginia.

I instructed Bessie to act as my wife and warned her of the dangerous cones-

quences if she didn’t act like an innocent tourist. All official business and communica-

tions were conducted and transmitted from the private rooms as a means of maintaining

security in the event of infiltration. Such a long established safe house would be impos-

sible to replace and required the utmost scrutiny for entry. Without Tim’s approval, this

opportunity would’ve been impossible to obtain. A Hemingway image came to mind

when we entered the vintage 1920s inn – *a clean, well-lighted place.*

I shook Dolph’s hand before signing the register as Mr. and Mrs*. Tomaso Cabal*,

my former DEA alias in Mexico. His grip was strong and boney, like his wife, Anna, ten

years younger, but a likely candidate to flip the *on* switch for the showers at Dachau—

cold. Her looks fell within the short scope between Maria Navratilova and Lottie Lenya,

but I preferred a whack from a tennis racket to a spiked shoe in the shin.

To the eye of the beholder, Dolph still showed his open affection for his hard-

looking, but dedicated wife, more than likely a trophy acquired when the Berlin Wall

crumbled. Anna smiled often enough, but her jagged teeth made me think she’d be good

on a fishing excursion if I needed my line cut in a hurry. If any oral affection was being

exchanged between the Wendlers, Dolph was surely getting the sharp end of that stick.

“I hope you *findt* da *roomp* to your *like-ink,*” Anna said.

When we closed the door behind us, Bess turned to me with a hug and a smile

then whispered, “*Frau Blucher*.”

I rolled my eyes and whinnied, but our brief moment of fun was interrupted by

a call on the untraceable cell Dolph had provided.

“Señor Cabal?” the voice asked.

“Speaking.”

“Your scuba dive excursion has been arranged. A cab will pick you up at your

B&B at 7:00 PM to take you and your wife to dine at Marino’s on Long Key. Order the

oysters for your appetizer. You will say you feel ill and go to the men’s room, where

someone wearing your same clothes will come back out and return to the Dolph~Anna

Inn with your wife while you, in a change of clothes, will exit through the kitchen,

where a car will be waiting with a driver to take you to the Sebastian Diving dock in

Islamorada by 8:00 PM. There, you will board for your evening excursion.”

“How will I identify the boat?” I asked.

“The Chief said to tell you your watercraft will be *unmistakable*.”

“OK. Don’t you want to know what I’ll be wearing tonight for my double to copy?

“Turquoise silk shirt, white chinos, Tommy Bahama sandals, Fendi sunglasses.”

the voice said with assurance.

“OK . . . and you know this, how?”

“Because we saw it was the only evening wear in your carry-on, which we

searched when you and your companion went to the restroom on the plane in First

Class.”

“Tell Chief Barnes I appreciate his thoroughness. Later.”

“Roger that.”

Bessie looked at me cross-eyed. “What was *that* all about?”

“You’d better order up some food from Frau Blucher, now, because we won’t be

having much to eat later. You’ll be brought back here before we order dinner. You’ll be

safe here while I do my search of Isla Premio in the dark.”

She gave me the bar code scan to see if my sum total would register. “Who the

hell are you, Tom Larkin? Really?”

“If I told you—”

“Forget it. I trust you,” she said. “But who all these other people are and how

you know them is scary.”

“I know, Bess, but believe me, without these other folks on my side, it’d be

much scarier.”

“You want to see something really scary?” she said, cocking her head and

scrunching her lips as she backed toward the bathroom to shower then motioned for

me to join her.

I pulled off my clothes as I followed, but warned her, “I’m like those fuzzy little

gremlins, cute and cuddly, until you get me wet.”

“Gremlin meets tribble,” she said with a giggle, which continued for over an

hour before a rap on the door from Anna broke the spell.

“Your *foodt*,” she said, putting a tray of sliced pot roast, baked potatoes, carrots,

and broccoli on the coffee table.

“Thank you,” I said, automatically reaching into my pocket for cash to tip her.

When I looked up, she was already closing the door as she left. She gave me the kind of

glare you’d get from a grammar school teacher, who’d caught you looking up a girl’s

skirt.

“Smells great, Tom,” Bess said, coming up behind me with a hug.

I agreed, then we indulged with satisfaction before we got dressed to go to our

mock dinner date at Marino’s.

A cab picked us up at 7:00 PM and drove us to Long Key. A simple Italian

fare on the bay, Marino’s offered a romantic sunset view, which, on another occasion,

would have been inviting.

I gave our waiter a nod when I sipped my Virgin Bloody Mary because at

least the oysters, which were supposed to make me ill, were plump and delicious. I

made sure I finished them before excusing myself to go to the men’s room and

pretending I had a cramp in my gut.

At the men’s room an orange cone blocking the doorway warned—*Caution,*

*slippery when wet*. When an attendant saw there was no one behind me, he waved me

in and nodded to the last stall where I found my change of clothes—kaki shorts and a

gray t-shirt. As I came out of the stall, I peripherally caught a blurred version of myself

exiting as the attendant nodded to the fire exit, which I pushed open. I saw a red Jeep

convertible with the top down and a woman driver waving me to get in.

She backed up with a jerk and chirped the Jeep northward. “So you’re Tom

Larkin,” she said, turning to look me over. “All the wild war stories I’ve heard about you

were like watching you on the big screen . . . in person, I feel like I’m only getting the

Walmart nineteen-inch TV version.”

I turned to her with a squint. “Are you just a plant from Chief Barnes to bust my

balls and piss me off?”

She grinned and shrugged.

“Whether you’re Timmy’s idea of a joke or not,” I said. “you couldn’t handle

nineteen inches of me if it were staring you right in the face.”

She laughed aloud and bobbed her head as if to indicate she was up for the

challenge. “It’s not Chief Barnes, but an old friend of yours who just wanted me to

bust your chops. He’s waiting for us in Islamorada.”

“You could fill a stadium with cops who’d love to break my balls,” I said. “So

who the hell are you, sweet cakes?”

She took her right hand off the wheel and extended a handshake strong enough

to break a man’s neck, so in this case, she was at least a Fed *sister* of the spear.

“Name’s Sandy. I work Marathon to Key Largo. I’m just one of the guys—

Special Agent Fernandez,” she said, more relaxed. “Actually, I’ve heard many stories

about you, but not from Headquarters, or even directly from the field.”

“Really? Don’t tell me it was one of my old girl friends,” I said as we pulled

off the road under a sign that said, Sebastian Dive – Scuba Excursions.

She laughed. “You wish.”.

Then I saw a familiar sight, but it seemed like a dream with a sense of *déjà vu.*

Moored along the dock was a sea skiff designed exactly like one I used to know. I saw

the captain, looking like a ghost from my past. He waved to me from the cabin.

I approached the bulkhead and read the name of the boat, *Sea Bitch II.* There

he stood, a little grayer, a little rounder, with his dark, smiling face,but without his

Constabulary white uniform from Jamaica. Retired in his sixties, Colonel Theo Witt

was a welcome sight on a precarious mission.

“Hey, mon!” he called out to me, then gave me a bear hug and slapped me on

the back. “Timmy, said you needed the best for this night dive, so here I am. You’re not

as tan as I remember, Tom, but you still look like you could eat sharp steel for breakfast.”

“Whatever it takes, Theo. Your gal here knows how to serve up some jagged

metal that’s too hard to swallow.”

Sandy grimaced.

“What’s goin’ on with you, Theo? How’d you end up here?”

Theo shrugged. “Got my pension after forty years with the constabulary in

Jamaica. Chief Barnes made me an offer that was too good to turn down. I’m retired,

but I still get to feel like the law. And now I even get to play again with the joker in

the deck, Tom Larkin.”

“Last time we worked together the stakes were clearly defined, Theo. This

time who the bad guys are is anyone’s guess.”

Theo nodded over his shoulder toward the bay. “What you messin ’with these

high-rollers for, Tom? Isla Premio may look all pretty like a weddin’ cake fresh for the

slicing, but there’s some high security on that little island that could challenge the U.S.

Navy Seals, devilish crap that puts David Trask a notch above his competition. Tim

knew this guy before he had a dime, so he knows what he’s capable of. Best be sure

this case is even worth your bother—or your life.”

I took heed to Theo’s warning, but shrugged it off. “Hell, Theo, you know I’m

always in—just for the fun of it.”

“Maybe fun for you, Tom, but not for the rest of us backin’ up your butt.”

“It’s eight o’clock, Theo. Are we ready to go dunkin’ for billionaires?”

“I’ll brief you on the way about what I know, but what I don’t know about that

little island would fill an iPod.”

“Is Sandy just along for the ride?” I said, giving her a nod.

“Just as a favor to the Chief,” she said with a frown. “Tim got me the promotion

I needed to cover my daughter’s college expenses after my divorce. My ex was DEA too,

but he had a thing for our maid in Quito. I can’t imagine what you ever did for the Chief

to make him think you deserve his blessing on this *unofficial* business.”

“I keep Tim’s sex change surgery a secret, Sandy—I’ll do the same for you.”

“Oh, you are a sweetheart,” she said with a smirk, but we all laughed in the

manner of cops busting each other as a matter of course.

I boarded the *Sea Bitch II*, and was pleased to see the hi-tech digital gizmos that

might get me onto and off of Isla Premio undetected.

“Do you know how to use all this stuff, Theo?”

He shrugged and nodded to Sandy. “I’m just the navigator on this gig, she’s the

techie.”

I gave her a grin. “And I’m the perpetrator. I don’t know, Sandy, a woman like

you with so many moving parts . . . something’s bound to break down.”

“It’ll be you breaking down before me, sweetie,” she returned, lighting a cigarette

with a Zippo lighter and folding her arms defiantly.

“OK, Theo . . . Sandy . . . let’s roll.”

Theo briefed me about what I could expect during my dive. “The buzz says the

Trasks are throwing a VIP party tonight,” Theo said as we took off and he navigated the

reefs to deeper waters. He nodded toward Sandy as she prepared my tanks and gear.

“Sandy covers the club scene and heard from a bevy of thong-clad snorters in the ladies

room that the Isla Premio party could be crashed by willing participants. Someone named

*Davey Jones* spread the word that he could add names to the guest list and no one would

object.”

I made mental note of that without changing my expression.

“Private boats will dock at the bulkhead within the protective reef around the

island, all that’s left of the original atoll since Trask gave it a billion-dollar make-over,”

Theo said, as Sandy assisted me with my scuba gear. “At least all of his alterations met

with every code and environmental inspection.”

“Since his guests think their shit doesn’t stink, how could they ever pollute the

Gulf and the Everglades?”

Sandy smirked in agreement as she roughly tugged at my wetsuit.

Theo warned, “The low life on the Keys who might want to crash such a party for

more than just a good time have been grumbling about some new security system on the

island, which was recently implemented because of an attempted robbery by boat and scuba

divers last year.”

As Sandy zipped me up tightly, I stared into her smoky hazel eyes. The taint of

tobacco wafted in my face from her parted lips as I said, “I’m ready—how about some

safe sex?”

She squinted one eye, and said,” that would still require consenting adults . . .

so maybe when you decide to act like a grownup, I’ll give you a tumble. Till then.”

She shrugged.

Theo laughed at her put-down, and I felt I’d met my first verbal match since

my late wife, Vera.

“That might be worth working on,” I said.

“You bet your ass it is,” she assured me, “every minute.”

“I prefer to count the hours.”

“Then start counting now, Larkin—you’ve got three,” she said, pushing me

backwards and overboard.

The warm water was salty in my face mask, so I had to blow my nose clear when

I surfaced.

“Your tracking chip is in your right flipper!” Sandy hollered.

“What if I lose the flipper?”

“Won’t matter. Between the currents, sharks, and whatever else might lie in wait

for you, without *both* flippers, you won’t stand a chance,” she said. “That’s the only way

we can find you. With it, we can stay far away and zoom in quick to get you. Without it,

you’re good as dead. . . .”

I waved and turned westward where the sun was just disappearing on the Gulf’s

horizon and spreading ripples on the water from yellow to orange to crimson to mauve. I

saw the party lights about a half-mile away to the north. As I went underwater the sound

of the evening breeze hushed. Only my pulse and the bubbles from my exhaled breath

kept me company as the barbarian at the gate headed for Isla Premio, El Dav*ee*d’s

castle in the Gulf.

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