

## A HEMINGWAY TALE

### Chapter 1

August 21, 2023

*Theodore Roosevelt Park*

*Potomac River*

*Northern Virginia*

Seated in his Land Rover, Hernandez watched a battered Chevy pull into the empty parking lot and stop a dozen yards away. Thick muffler exhaust from the ancient car signaled the cold outside. It had to be down to ten degrees, Hernandez thought, shaking his head. Washington, D.C. fried you in the summer. The least it could do was give you a break in the winter.

He turned off the ignition and stepped across crunching gravel to the passenger side of the Chevy, where he leaned to look inside.

In the dim light he made out a short figure behind the wheel, wrapped in a long heavy jacket and sweat pants, with a full, gaitered head wrap that covered everything but the eyes. Those eyes looked forward in silence.

Hernandez opened the door. “Terry?” he asked.

The figure nodded.

This whole meeting was strange enough without this. “Okay then. You going to take me to the thing?”

Another nod.

“You got a voice, Terry?”

The figure looked his way and spoke. “*Yes. Now get in the trunk.*”

The command wasn't what startled Hernandez. It was the voice. The sound that came through the head wrap was the high pitch tone of a small girl.

"Hey, what's the ..."

"*You'll ride in the trunk or nothing,*" the voice instructed. Only now it was deep and masculine.

"We playing Halloween?" Hernandez muttered, unable to hide how the shifting voice disconcerted him.

The driver leaned down and the trunk lid popped open. "*In the back,*" the man's voice repeated.

Hernandez reluctantly walked around to climb in. This had better be good, he thought as he curled into the small space in front of a spare tire. This had better be as advertised or he'd kill the bastard.

Terry appeared, leaning over him. "*For your eyes,*" a swarthy teenage boy's voice fluttered. Then he reached out with twin black pads connected with tape.

Hernandez knew he'd lost all control here, unmanned by the voice. Swallowing hard, he nodded his assent.

The pads were placed over his eyes, taped and glasses settled onto his nose. Then the trunk lid slammed shut like a stone over a well.

They rode in wide circles long past the point that Hernandez had any idea where they might be. It could have been an hour, but was probably less when the car came to a stop. The trunk lid popped open and Hernandez felt a rush of cold air drop over him.

Hands pulled him hard from the trunk, then one hand led him across concrete until the reached a door, which keys unlocked before Hernandez was led inside. A few turns later and

Hernandez heard the slide of an opening door and the light give of an elevator floor as they entered.

The elevator creaked as it rose. Hernandez counted off the seconds of its ascent.

“This is an elevator, Terry,” Hernandez said at last. “There must be security cameras on it. Don’t you think it’s a little suspicious, one guy leading another onto an elevator in the middle of the night, with one of them looking like he just got out of eye surgery?”

“*The cameras are shut off tonight,*” a woman with a French accent responded. “Don’t touch your eyes.”

Hernandez could barely stand it. “Hey, what’s with the voice? Shut that damn thing off.”

Silence.

The elevator jolted to a stop and its doors slid open. Terry jerked him roughly forward.

Cold air hit Hernandez in the face, signaling open air again. They were on a roof, Hernandez figured, counting as they walked. Twenty-nine. Thirty. Thirty-one.

They stopped again and there was the sound of fumbling with keys. In the distance, and below, a truck rattled by – then, nearer at hand, a key slid into a lock and a metallic door opened.

“We’re on a roof somewhere, Terry. Which means we’re visible to someone. This wasn’t a bright idea.”

“*Shut up.*” The teenager again. Terry grabbed his elbow. They took several steps forward. The door closed behind them.

They were out of the open air, inside an enclosed space. A loud motor hummed and vibrated only feet away. Fingers roughly removed the sunglasses and padding and Hernandez blinked.

They were in an HVAC compartment, with a heating unit roaring beside Terry. The ceiling was just beyond reach overhead. Terry held a flashlight. Hernandez took the opportunity to look his companion over for the first time.

Terry was about five foot ten inches. Baggy clothes and gloves gave no sense of shape or physical condition. The mask hid any clue as to hair or shape of face. With the voice and the clothes, Hernandez couldn't even hazard a guess as to age, let alone gender. A bulge beneath the mask around the mouth hinted at the device converting the voice. A hand in one pocket probably controlled the timbre of the words.

Terry retrieved a short ladder, resting it against a wall to climb. A screwdriver appeared and Terry fiddled with a ceiling tile that finally opened into a space above.

*"Climb,"* came a child's order.

They soon sat on the edge of a hatchway, their heads thrust up into darkness. Terry turned the flashlight's glow overhead.

Hernandez took an involuntary breath.

*"Madre de Dios,"* he whispered. "Is this real?"

Suspended only inches over their heads was a long, oval object with tail fins, perhaps twelve feet long and four feet wide. It was dull green in color, with a large red star painted near the nose above the words *'Papa II'*.

*"It's real,"* Terry replied.

Hernandez's breaths quickened. "It could be dangerous being so close."

*"You're the one who insisted on seeing it."* The voice had settled into the even, calming cadence of a middle-aged businessman with a hint of the Bronx. *"You're the one who didn't believe me."*

“Is it the RDS4 class?”

*“That’s right.”*

“How long has it been here?”

*“Since ‘61.”*

Hernandez looked about the small dark chamber. “These walls secure?”

*“Lead lined.”*

“Unbelievable,” Hernandez muttered again. “This could take out half of Washington, D.C.”

*“All of it. And half the Virginia suburbs.”*

“I’d need a technician to examine it.”

*“If we reach a deal.”*

“Unbelievable.”

\*\*\*

The car had been stopped for several minutes before Hernandez heard the pop of the trunk. Hands helped him out onto the gravel again. Fingers removed the eye coverings, and he blinked before his eyes adjusted and he saw that they were back in Theodore Roosevelt Park along the Potomac.

Hernandez followed Terry to sit inside his car.

Looking out the window at the shadowed shapes of tall trees along the river, Hernandez realized that he hadn’t believed such a weapon could really be on the market until the moment he saw it for himself. “Are you going to tell me how you got it, Terry?”

*“No.”* The businessman’s voice.

“How much.”

*“Thirty million dollars.”*

*“Ridiculous.”*

*“That’s the price if you want to keep hanging as a decoration. If you’ll use it within a month of the sale, I’ll return all but ten million dollars.”*

The eyes blinked through the ski mask, unwavering and without doubt. Like they were negotiating the sale of an I-phone, Hernandez thought.

*“Why don’t you detonate it yourself?”*

*“Because this weapon must be used in service to revolution. That takes a plan and credibility. A known revolutionary movement with a purpose. I could have given it to anarchists if all I wanted was to see the city burn.”*

*“Are there other bidders?”*

*“Yes.”*

Hernandez hesitated. “We’d need a technician to evaluate it, and information on its history to gauge how safe it is from capture. That includes the identity of anyone who knows of its existence.”

*“If we reach a deal.”*

*“Alright. We’ll get back to you.”*

Hernandez left the car, walking the few yards to his own; got in and started it.

This ‘Terry’ was insane. Thirty million dollars? What a joke. Who could move that much money anywhere in the world without the FBI and United States Treasury learning about it? Ten million would be hard enough.

But then, did Terry really think the location was still hidden after tonight? A six-story elevator, creaking with age, leading to a roof. Thirty-one paces to a large HVAC shed, obviously

for an apartment or business building. Hernandez would have it figured out in forty-eight hours. If that was the limit of Terry's talent for secrecy, it was a wonder the device was undiscovered after all these years.

Not for long.

The Chevy was backing up to drive away as Hernandez pulled his encoded phone from his pants pocket and punched in a number.

After a single ring, a voice answered.

“Did ‘Terry’ take you to it?”

“Yes.”

“Is it real?”

“I think so. Looks like a Soviet RSD4; maybe 1960.”

“Amazing. Where could they have gotten it?”

“Don't know. Originally it must have come from the Soviets or somebody with access to Soviet nukes. If we're talking the 1960s, there's only one country where Soviet nukes were housed besides the USSR and the eastern bloc, and that was Cuba.”

“How much?”

“Asking price is thirty million dollars – less if it detonated within a month. Not sure if ‘Terry’ understands that the weapon's worth more as a threat than as a radioactive hole in the ground. Anyway, the price doesn't matter. We can find the bomb ourselves. We'll move on it after I've squeezed more information from Terry about its origins.”

There was a tap at the driver's window. Startled, Hernandez looked up at the thick, bundled shape of ski masked Terry beside the glass.

“Just a moment,” he breathed into the phone, setting it aside to roll down the window.

“What do you want?” Hernandez demanded.

The thick barrel of a silenced handgun was set against his forehead – a Glock 21, his mind automatically registered.

*“You’re no revolutionary,”* the gravelly voice of an ancient man growled. *“And I bugged your car while you were in the trunk.”*

There was a ‘*thoom*’ from the silenced gun. Then black.

\*\*\*

Terry reached across Hernandez’s slumped body for the phone.

*“So you’re interested in the bomb?”* the Bronx businessman’s voice asked.

Silence. “Where’s Hernandez?”

*“Stepped away. Did he tell you the price?”*

“Yes. Thirty million dollars.”

*“That’s the price I quote bourgeoisie traitors. Except the thing is, I don’t sell to bourgeoisie traitors.”*

Terry pulled the sim card from the phone, walked to the river’s shore, and threw both far out in the Potomac.