

# THE MAN WHO COULD NOT CHEAT TIME

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A ROGER HARPER NOVEL

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Thank you.

*Authors' portrait photograph by Amanda Rose Day*

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## DEDICATION

To Our Grandchildren

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

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## PROLOGUE

PALACIO PRESIDENCIA, LA HABANA,

APRIL 1957

“**I**nforme [Report],” Fulgencio Batista demanded of police *Captán* Esteban Ventura, who stood in front of his desk.

“*Señor Presidente*, we raided an apartment building in Humboldt Street, as you instructed, and found six members of the *Directorio Revolucionario* hiding there. A shootout ensued in which Fructuoso Rodríguez, one of the DR founders, was killed, together with three others.”

“The other two?” Batista asked.

“They have escaped, but we know their names; Faure Chaumon and Raúl Díaz Argüelle. My men are searching for them as we speak, *General*.”

“Very good, *Captán*. Keep me updated on any new developments.”

“*Sí, señor Presidente*.”

Ventura remained at attention in front of Batista.

“You are dismissed, *Captán*. Tell my secretary to come in as you leave.”

The policeman did not move.

“Are you deaf, *Captán*? *Despedido!*”

Ventura opened his mouth and then closed it.

“If you have something else to say, man, spit it out.”

“*Señor Presidente*, there has been an incident at *del Hospital de Dementes de Santamaria*. Twenty-six patients have died from neglect and malnutrition.”

“I am sure the *Ministerio de Salubridad* [Ministry of Health] will deal with it. Probably close it down. That will be a good thing too. Having a lunatic asylum on the outskirts of the city is bad for tourism. Why are you wasting my time telling me this?”

“People are clamoring for the arrest of the doctors at the hospital.”

“Then arrest them. You don’t need me to tell you how to do your job. Now go, *Captán*, before I lose my temper.”

“But *General*; if I am not mistaken, I believe el Director of the hospital, *señor* Carlos Fuentes, is a close friend of yours.”

“Quite so, *Captán*, quite so. Leave the matter with me. Busy yourself finding those two participants in the March 13<sup>th</sup> Palace attack.”

*Captán* Ventura saluted and left. Batista picked up the telephone.

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“Carlos, listen to me. You should leave the country as quickly as possible. Are your research papers somewhere safe? We do not want the formula falling into the wrong hands.”

“Do you know, Fulgencio, you worry too much? I have my bags packed already. Just a couple of things to take care of, and I shall be on my way. *Adiós, viejo amigo*.”

The sound of fist striking jaw may not have reverberated around the interrogation room, but the recipient felt the blow rattle the inside of his skull. “Ouch.”

“Ouch? Ouch is all you can say, Harper?” The speaker, the third man in the brightly lit room with its easy to clean wall tiles, moved to stand inches away, so close the smell of tobacco was discernible upon his breath. “Do you understand, we’re not pussyfooting around, my friend? Give it up, Harper, or Knuckles, here, will loosen one or two of your front teeth. Do you like the nickname Knuckles? I thought it up myself. Rather good, don’t you think?”

“You’re a double douchebag, do you know that Midnight?” Harper was addressing his onetime friend, Kurt Mitchell. Elven years ago, they had conspired together to cheat at cards, winning the pot in a ten million dollar poker tournament by exploiting Harper’s ability to read the other players’ minds. And then Mitchell had betrayed him in an attempt to keep the winning all to himself. Nevertheless, Mitchell had paid the price of duplicity, or so Harper thought, by being thrown off a bridge into the icy waters below. Somehow the traitor had survived. Now, standing there gloating, he had the upper hand.

“I told the FBI, the Camp Commandant, and I’m telling you; I refuse to use my mind-reading ability to interrogate the prisoners locked up in this wretched place. Beating the shit out of me isn’t going to change my mind.”

Mitchell laughed. “Roger, Roger, Roger.” Harper hated anyone but his wife, Julia, from addressing him by his first name. “We’re not here to instill in you a sense of patriotism. What I require from you is the number of the Swiss bank account where you keep my money.”

“Your money? How do you figure it’s your money.”

“Because you stole my share of the poker winnings. I merely want to collect my dues,” Mitchell replied. “With interest, of course.”

“In your dreams, Midnight. In your dreams.”

Mitchell nodded to Knuckles, a brute of a man over six feet tall, weighing over three hundred pounds.

“Fugh,” Harper screamed. “Yuv boke muh jaw.”

In response, Mitchell grinned. “Don’t insult my man. He’s a professional. He hasn’t broken your jaw, Roger. Just dislocated it a little; that’s all. Do the honors, Knuckles. We can’t have our friend speaking funny; now can we?”

There was a cracking sound, followed by more screaming as Knuckles popped Harper lower mandrel back into place.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Mitchell counseled. “Do everyone a favor and tell me what I need to know before Knuckles becomes impatient for his cut.”

“What’s he going to do next; waterboard me?”

“Roger, Roger. I wouldn’t dream of such a thing. However, Knuckles does have a chemist friend who is rather good at administering very unpleasant injections. It will take a day or two to set up. After that, you won’t be able to resist. You’ll be singing like a canary.” Mitchell looked at his wristwatch. “Still, I can’t stand around chatting with you all day. It’s time for lunch. First, however, we’ll get you back to your cozy little cell. Remind me, before I leave, to tell the chef to liquidize your meals for a while,” he added with a chuckle.

The morning following Harper's encounter with Midnight and Knuckles, he lay on his cot, inside what was known as Camp Five Echo. Along with two dozen other prisoners, he was held in the disciplinary block for *non-compliant* prisoners. Their cells were too small to be regarded as humane, with inadequate squat toilets set into the floor, excessively bright lighting, and air that was a foul mix of sweat and human excrement.

One of the detainees, presumably a self-elected *muezzin*, called the inmates to prayer.

Meaning no disrespect, Harper tuned out the sound as his thoughts turned to his wife Julia, and his son Oliver, who he had abruptly left on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral at the time of his arrest. He wondered if they had made it to the home of Julia's Aunt Cordelia in Savannah, Georgia. If so, what were the two of them doing now? *The two of them?* Harper was forgetting; Julia was pregnant at the time of his departure. He wondered when was the baby due, however, the date alluded him.

Separated from the cell itself by rows of steel bars, Harper stared at the roof space. A shiver went down his back as he recalled Mitchell's treat of a chemist who was rather good at administering

painful injections. *What were that prick's exact words? "It will take a day or two to set up." I've got to get out of this place before then,* he told himself, as a guard walked past taking a discreet drag on a cigarette. *Things have become lapse around here,* he observed. *That's a weak link I can exploit. Right?*

In his head, Harper mulled through the problem, searching for answers.

*Escape*

*How?*

*Through the roof?*

*Not easy with the steel bars, although there is a maintenance hatch below the light fitting.*

*Through the cell door?*

*Not unless a guard obligingly unlocks it for me.*

*What would make a guard let me out?*

*An emergency.*

*What type of emergency?*

*A fire.*

*A fire, where?*

*In the roof space?*

*How to gain access?*

*Not easy with the steel bars.*

*Damn it. I'm back where I started.*

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," Harper repeated, this time cursing out loud, which drew the attention of the inmate whose cell was on the other side of the passageway.

As if he were a psychiatrist addressing a patient, the man wearing the same orange jumpsuit inquired, "Is there something you want to talk about, my friend?"

It was the first time Harper had taken any notice of this fellow detainee. Curly-haired, cut in a shaggy bob, with a beard trimmed shorter than the majority of inmates, he did not stand out from the crowd. Not until he spoke, that is. His English was impeccable,

delivered with an almost musical flow that seems to be common to speakers of Romance languages.

“You speak English?” Harper counted, sounding surprised.

“Of course. They taught me when I was at school in Salvador. Founded by the Portuguese in 1549 as the first capital of Brazil, Salvador is one of the oldest colonial cities in the Americas. Did you know that?” Harper shook his head, wondering why a Brazilian was imprisoned at Guantanamo. “By the way, my name is Federico Ramírez.”

“Pleased to meet you, Federico. My name is Harper.”

“Harper, hum. That is an interesting name. Originally that given to a player of the harp. The *harper* was one of the most important figures of a medieval baronial hall, especially in Scotland and northern England. Often the office of *harper* was hereditary. But I expect you knew that already.”

“No, I didn’t,” the American admitted. “Harper is my family name. I prefer not to use my first name.” There was a pause as he further reflected on Federico’s first remarks. Then he continued, “Let me get this straight. You went to school in Brazil, and now you are in here, interned as a terrorist?”

“That’s how they mistakenly classify me. Nobody would listen when I told them I was a war correspondent. My fault. I never bothered to get the proper credentials before I became embedded with the freedom fighters. The fact I was holding a rifle did not help my case when I was captured. But that was only to make myself blend in and not look like a reporter.”

“Terrorists are terrorists in my book; not freedom fighters,” Harper responded, contemptuously. “To me, it sounds as if you drank too much Kool-Aid, buddy. And reporters don’t usually carry guns.”

“Don’t be so judgmental,” Federico countered. “Nelson Mandela was labeled a terrorist once. Later he became President of South Africa.”

Choosing not to enter into a debate about international politics, Harper replied, “If you say so, Federico,” before turning on his cot to face the wall.

There was a lull in the conversation, broken when the Brazilian asked, "Harper, you are American; am I right?"

"That should be self-evident. I'm a freedom fighter, like yourself, can't you tell?" Harper responded, facetiously. "Now leave me alone. I'm thinking."

Federico persisted. "Americans who break the law are locked up in American jails, I believe. So, why are you here, in the same cellblock as me?"

Deciding the only way to be left alone was to answer the question, he rolled over and replied, "It's a long story, Federico."

The other inmate laughed. "And you are short of time, I suppose? Do you have an appointment to be elsewhere? Tell me, please."

"Oh, very well." Harper sat up, scratched the stubble on his chin, deciding he would get little peace by ignoring the request. "If you must know, I was brought here because the Authorities had the mistaken belief that I would help them with the interrogation of prisoners. But I refused. Then they thought spending some time in this home away from home would change my mind. It hasn't."

"They beat you badly, yesterday. Am I right? I see your black eyes and bruised jaw."

"I refused to divulge some information. In a day or two, the interrogator will likely administer drugs to make me talk. Consequently, I need to get out of this place as soon as possible."

"You have a plan to break out?"

"You know, I just might," Harper replied, as the whiff of the guard's tobacco smoke assaulted his nostrils. "But I'll need your help if I'm to escape."

"Escape," Federico repeated, with emphasis. "Certainly, I will, but only if you agree to take me with you. I know the island well and have friends here too."

"Very well," Harper agreed. "We have a deal."