ASSASSIN

Nobody knew his real name, or even where he came from.

He had seven different passports at any given time, and spoke eight languages fluently. He went by the names Simon Hunter, Miguel Torres, Ivan Borodin, Spiro Kallis, Sergio Cavetti, Turget Bayar, or Robert Cross -- adding or dropping names as needed. He had no fixed address, living instead in hotels around the world. He never used credit cards, and paid cash for everything. He was thought to be thirty-three years old, and was rumored to be brilliant, even though he never attended college. He blended so well in a crowd that one would rarely notice him. His clothes were plain, his habits modest. He was not suave or debonair or a connoisseur like a James Bond. He had no real vices. He was 5'9'' tall and weighed 160 fit pounds, with dark chestnut hair and cobalt-blue eyes. He enjoyed the sexual comforts of women, but avoided any deeper romantic involvements. Being a solitary personality, he was most relaxed while enjoying sailing, archery, or fishing for salmon or trout. He was an expert in martial arts, firearms, explosives, and lethal poisons, and was also a master of convincing disguises.

He was a professional killer, an international assassin who could charge anywhere from $500,000 US to $10 million US for a hit. Nobody -- it was said -- was better at his job. For our purposes, we will refer to him as Simon Hunter.

Some thought that Simon was born in Malta, or Cyprus, or Lebanon, or Corfu. Perhaps he was an orphan, or the bastard child of a underworld crime boss. His only known phobia was a dread of being trapped alone inside of a stalled elevator. As a result, he took the stairs whenever possible.

Hunter studied the long history of assassination (exciting to him, but shocking to everyone else) down through the ages, and its many uses by the bold and the elite to gain political, economic, and military power. As a result, he saw his profession as continuing a kind of noble tradition. He read about the exploits of Alexander Solonik (a.k.a. 'The Superkiller,' now dead), Charles Sobhraj ('The Serpent,' currently behind bars in Nepal), and Ilich Ramirez Sanchez ('Carlos the Jackal,' life-imprisoned in France). Being a perfectionist, Hunter's biggest thrill was not earning his hefty fee, but rather in the meticulous planning, then careful rehearsing, and finally the execution of the kill. He saw himself as somewhat of an artist -- creative, gifted, singular. The world was a nasty, brutish place in his view, so Simon was both apolitical and uninterested in most aspects of popular culture. Religions to him were likewise a delusion, for man, in his analysis, was but a soulless animal. As a result, Hunter lived in his own tightly controlled reality. He did keep himself constantly aware of major international news events, however, for it often related tangentially to his work.

The assassin had been practicing his profession for ten years now, and he suspected he could successfully continue for another ten before age began to slow him down. So far, Simon had killed twenty-four people. He had never been caught, or even spent a minute in prison. He had eliminated dictators in South America and Africa. He had terminated the cheating lovers -- male or female -- of celebrities and the wealthy. He took out overly ambitious captains of industry, dishonest bankers, military leaders, governmental secret spies, organized crime upstarts, and pesky investigative journalists. Hunter was wanted by Interpol (earning him a dangerous 'Red Notice'), the CIA, Israel's Mossad, Britain's MI-6, Germany's BND, France's DGSE, and Russia's FSB. Yet he had outsmarted them all -- with skill and healthy dose of luck -- for a full decade now.

Potential 'clients' contacted Simon through an elaborate maze of steps using his codename: 'Odysseus.' First, they were required to leave a contact number on a disposable 'burner' cell phone which was answered by an unidentified man in Goa, India, who had never met Hunter in person. The contact number, written on a scrap of paper in code, was then delivered by another unnamed man to an obscure post office box. Finally a third man, unknown to the other two, collected the paper and posted it on Tor, on the so-called Dark Web of the internet, where Hunter could access it anonymously and set up an appointment anywhere in the world. Being fluent in English, Turkish, Spanish, Greek, Russian, German, French, and Italian, Simon could later strike a deal -- if the challenge pleased him -- without needing an interpreter. He refused, however, to do business with only one nationality -- the Chinese -- because whatever their money offer, they were notoriously difficult to work with and ultimately untrustworthy.

His current lodging was at the discreet Rochester on Vincent Square in Westminster, London. He never stayed at flashy hotels like the Ritz or Claridge's , because there were too many closed-circuit cameras and lurking paparazzi, even though he could readily afford a deluxe suite. After accessing Tor on his encrypted laptop while sipping his breakfast orange juice, Simon checked for any new messages for 'Odysseus.' It was a fine, bright spring morning. Tree buds had finally burst open, displaying their young green leaves. He had earlier opened his balcony window for some refreshing air.

The third message he noticed was from someone named Emmett Lane, a U.S. State Department official. He wanted to meet in front of the King's Arms Tavern on Duke of Gloucester Street in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, on 19 May at 13:00 EST. He would be recognized by wearing a navy Izod polo shirt, a gold Seiko watch, and an Annapolis class ring on right hand. He had a very important job offer. Top dollar.

Intrigued, Hunter responded after a few moments of reflection with the single word "Confirmed," then added that he would ask Lane a question about the poet Homer by way of establishing identification when they would first meet.

Simon realized that 19 May was three days from now, so he booked a seat on-line using the name Robert Cross for a British Airways flight to Washington, DC . Then he wondered what new challenges would be coming. He spent the rest of the day at the British Library researching Colonial Williamsburg and the Virginia area. The following day, he went to a pistol range for practice in the morning, and then to a health club in the afternoon for an extensive workout and vigorous swim session. Afterwards, he was ready. He slept deeply that night after a healthy, pleasant dinner.

Arriving at Dulles International Airport early on 19 May, Simon rented a Jeep Grand Cherokee at the Avis desk. He used a fake driver's license (with the name Charles Kent, from Raleigh, North Carolina), and paid US cash for the 24-hour rental and for the car's security deposit. He then drove the 160 miles south via Richmond to Colonial Williamsburg. The drive took about three hours, under partly cloudy but blustery skies. He eventually found a nice jazz station on the car's satellite radio , but the other channels annoyed him with their endless absurd commercials and banal political talk. Americans were such simpletons, he mused. So much potential, but most of it was wasted. They had the money, but not the class. And the ugliness of their strip malls and other low-brow amusements were utterly pathetic. At least the country had spectacular National Parks and other natural wonders, he allowed. Hunter was unarmed for this particular meeting, because Washington, DC was not one of the cities around the world where he kept a Glock with extra clips (along with wads of assorted foreign currencies) in a bank safety deposit box. But he was not really concerned, and felt confident of his personal security.

Hunter found the Colonial car park upon arrival, about an hour before his appointment time according to his wristwatch. He was wearing a tan and brown checked sport shirt, light gray slacks, and casual black loafers. While still sitting in his vehicle, he carefully inserted brown-colored contact lenses to disguise his cobalt-blue eyes. Next, he affixed clear, virtually invisible, plastic fingerprint guards on each of his fingertips, so as to leave no trace on anything he might soon be touching. He got out of his car and slowly walked around to orient himself to his new 18th century, American Colonial surroundings. He stayed far back from the appointed rendezvous spot, but kept it in visual sight, looking for any suspicious dangers. He then took out a small electronic receiver to scan for any shortwave signals or active police monitors. The device came up clean. At 12:55, his contact arrived as described and was witnessed casually looking around at the milling tourist crowds. The assassin knew with certainty that the man he was about to meet was neither armed nor wired with a recording device.

Simon approached Emmett Lane on time at 13:00 in front of the King's Arms, and introduced himself by saying, "Pardon me, but by any chance have you ever read Homer?" Lane alertly answered, "Why yes, and I especially admire his hero, Odysseus. Don't you?" The men did not shake hands, but merely nodded in mutual greeting.

"*Est-ce que tu parles francais?"* Emmett then wanted to know. "I think it is best not to use English for our upcoming lunch conversation. Besides, French is the preferred language for we negotiating diplomats, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"*Mais bien sur, comme vous le souhaitez,"* Simon easily responded, adding a perfunctory smile. The pair entered the tavern and went directly to Lane's reserved table.

The conspirators both ordered the waiter's recommendation of the special peanut soup and the chicken pot pie with vegetables, along with iced tea. They spoke French for the next two hours, throughout their meal and during their casual walk afterward down Duke of Gloucester Street to Bruton Parish Church and back.

Emmett Lane was in his mid 40's, looking much like the bureaucrat he was, with hair going gray and carrying a bit of a paunch. He was a few inches taller than Hunter. "It's remarkable how many famous Colonial American patriots walked these very streets," Lane remarked. "Patrick Henry, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe...of course, all before this 1920's Rockefeller restoration you see around us." The sun was behind the clouds now, the skies more gray but unlikely to rain. "But just like those Revolutionary days, our country's liberty is once again at stake, and patriots must rise up and protect our endangered freedoms." Simon sensed this last pronouncement was simply blather, but he kept silent and calmly waited for the point the man was surely about to make.

"Odysseus, I represent an influential international consortium who needs to eliminate -- in the next 45 days or so -- the President of the United States, Clifford Preston. We are well aware of your recent successful efforts in Yemen and the Congo, and are very impressed with your...er.. outstanding talents. We also know that your standard fee for the disposal of Heads of State is $10 million US. If I may get straight to the point, I am now authorized to offer you double that amount to take out President Preston. We are thus talking $20 million US for this one hit." He stared at the assassin with seriousness.

"Why does your group need Preston out of the way?" Simon Hunter asked, his curiosity aroused. "He has quite high approval ratings from the American people. In the upper 60% range, if I recall correctly."

Here, Lane let slip a flash of anger. "The public? What do those cretins know? Preston is an idealist. He was just sworn-in five months ago, and there is already talk of a second term. He thinks that by pulling the U.S. back from all of its international commitments -- and concentrating on purely domestic issues -- that he can bring about a new nation-wide American Renaissance of peace and prosperity. But my global banking-industrial-military-political partners simply can't tolerate such a drastic disruption of our long-range plans. We need Preston out and his Vice President, Daniel Pierpont, in. Dan knows the score and is one of us. He's a team player. I also have other influential Senators and Congressmen secretly on our side, as well as several top military officials. Together, we looked at all possible options -- even claiming a bogus state of emergency and staging a coup -- yet we concluded that assassination is the only permanent solution to our current predicament."

Hunter quickly dug deep inside his mind to remember everything he could about President Cliff Preston. Formerly a popular two-term Senator from Montana, he was later elected as the first Independent Party POTUS by a wide margin over both his Democratic and Republican opponents. Tall, rugged and handsome at age 42, he was touted as the new JFK. Had the viral mane of thick hair and the perfect white-teeth smile. Family made a fortune in the mining business. Ran a ranch outside of Glendive in eastern Montana, raising herds of bison, in part to help re-populate the Northern Plains with such iconic buffalo. Navy fighter pilot. Graduate of Georgetown University. Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Likes to wear a Stetson cowboy hat at political rallies. Idolized Theodore Roosevelt. Married to a gorgeous former Miss Montana, Pauline Weber. Two attractive and bright children, Cody and Lisette. His only flaw was repeated but never completely disproven rumors of rampant infidelity. Secret Servicemen sneaking in bimbos to the Executive Mansion whenever the First Lady was out-of-town. It appeared that Cliff was a proud, but insatiable cocksman. A primo lady-killer. Couldn't keep his zipper closed. Women threw themselves at him. Did his wife know? And if she did, did she care...or had she resigned herself to turning a blind eye?

"Alright, Mr. Lane...I'll do it. You know, one of my favorite movie quotes is from the Godfather-Part Two, when Michael Corleone says, 'If anything in this life is certain, if history has taught us anything, it is that you can kill anyone.' And that's absolutely true." Hunter paused briefly to let that fact sink in. "But under these circumstances, my non-negotiable price is $25 million US, because this is an important, specialized job with added risks. Payment will be half now, half when the work is finished. I'll give you the necessary foreign bank routing numbers within 24 hours." Simon paused again, his eyebrows arched, awaiting Emmett's response.

"Fortunately, Odysseus, my connections have what is crudely referred to as 'deep pockets,' so I am authorized to agree to your conditions. We now have a deal, as specified." Lane smiled, visibly relieved. "What's the next step? What do you need from me, in the short term?" Emmett asked.

"Give me your encrypted contact number, and a list of all of the President's travel activities for the next forty-five days," Hunter directed. "And am I correct in assuming you want him removed before your Independence Day on 4 July?" Simon wanted to know.

"Yes. And if possible, we want the moment to be highly dramatic -- you know, something outdoors, big crowds, nationally televised -- so as to send a clear message to anyone who thinks he or she can ever thwart the will of our global consortium again," the State Department official coolly replied.

The pair soon parted. Hunter returned to his Grand Cherokee and drove to Richmond, where he found a Holiday Inn and checked in, and waited for the necessary information from Lane to appear on Tor.

Six hour later, Simon had what he needed. His best opportunity was President Preston appearing at noon in front of the Idaho capitol building in Boise on July 1, to deliver a major address touting his controversial proposal of building a massive water pipeline from Lake Superior in the Midwest to the parched yet continually-growing states of Arizona and southern California. Afterwards, the Chief Executive was scheduled to head to his Montana ranch where he would later celebrate the 4th of July. Hunter flew to Idaho the following morning to carefully plan the assassination -- having abandoned his rental car at the Richmond airport after thoroughly wiping it down to remove any trace of fingerprints.

For the next six weeks in Boise, Simon used all of his special skills to set up a perfect kill. He had kept in regular encrypted contact with Emmett Lane during the entire time, both sharing and receiving vital, updated information. He had a rental car at his disposal, and he changed hotels every week --naturally registering under various assumed names.

Hunter had the 'who,' 'when,' and 'where' of his hit, but now the challenge was selecting the 'how.' A manned or remote-controlled high-powered rifle shot from a lofty sniper's nest a few blocks away? An explosive diversion during the President's speech, then a pistol shot in the head from up close? If that option was chosen, could he get an official Boise policeman's uniform and special clearance to be on stage near the President? And what about the escape route once the job was done? Could he get away quickly and cleanly?

Suddenly, Simon had an idea. He would rig a lethal explosive device inside the microphone on the president's podium stand, and detonate it with a remote control button from beyond the blast range. He would need to ask Lane the specific microphone model, then somehow get a duplicate here in Boise. Simon would craft the installation of the C-4 plastic explosive and its detonation micro-transmitter himself. The blast radius would not only kill Preston, but anybody else within a 25-foot area of him -- and furthermore, injure those another 50-feet beyond that. It would be somewhat messy -- with extra, peripheral casualties -- but it would certainly get the job done, Hunter surmised. Tough luck for the innocent bystanders. Probably the Idaho governor, the First Lady, and other local dignitaries. Yet another reason for people to avoid politics, Simon thought ruefully.

When informed, Emmett praised the idea as ingenious, and he soon had the microphone model number that Hunter needed. He added that a quick switch could be made on-stage with the other back-up microphone that was always kept in a nearby equipment truck-- in case the original microphone ever failed during the setting up of a speech. Lane would receive the explosive mike from Simon in an easy hand-off, and attach it. Once the swap was made, the assassin would simply press his detonation button later about ten minutes into Preston's live noon time address from a safe, 125-foot distance away. Boom...Good bye, Mr. President. It would make for great TV. Thrilling and dramatic...and beautiful too, in the assassin's sociopathic mind.

Hunter had another system that he designed for fool-proof 'insider identification' for this particular hit, one that he had experimented with in other jobs. A dap of invisible ink on the right cheek of each 'friendly accomplice' could be detected when Simon wore a specially adapted pair of aviator sunglasses. Any friendly would show up in his dark vision scanning range with an orange cheek marking, so the assassin would know who to trust, how many were supporting him, and hence who he could turn to in an emergency for help.

Hunter next went to the Wal-Mart Superstore and then to Target, where he bought two dozen cheap, bland clothing outfits. These he would rotate wearing every few days, as he wandered around the streets near the Capitol building -- mentally checking, measuring, timing both walking and jogging distances, marking traffic patterns at various stop lights, and so forth. He had earlier dyed his hair blonde in his bathroom sink on the last day before checking out of one of his weekly hotels, wearing a hat so the desk clerk wouldn't notice the change. He needed to make sure that no one would recognize him day after day in roughly the same scouting area. He would also resort to on and off false beards and mustaches, or even make-up to make himself appear older.

The area in front of the Idaho State Capitol could hold an overflow crowd of about 10,000 people. The space was bisected by W. Jefferson Street, with Cecil D. Andrus Park in the southeast corner and the large U.S. Postal Service building in the southwest corner. The first street past the perimeter was W. Bannock. There was a multi-story car park there right off of N. Capitol Blvd., as one walked south and west. It connected to a third-floor elevated walkway which led into a high-rise bank building. Simon figured that would be his escape route. From there, he could head for his vehicle parked about three blocks away at the 9th and Main Garage. But rather than use his Ford Fusion to escape, he would abandon his rental car at a local shopping mall the day before the assassination, and instead use a mid-sized motor home -- which he planned on purchasing soon -- and getaway by driving north to a quiet campground near Coeur d'Alene. Hunter would stay there for a few weeks, fishing and lying low, until it was safe for him to slip into Canada and make his way to Calgary. His ultimate objective was to fly away from that city to a secure international destination -- probably Uruguay -- via Los Angeles or Houston.

Simon now needed more money if he was going to buy a motor home with cash, so he had the main branch of Chase Bank receive a $100,000 wire transfer from one of his discreet accounts at Credit Suisse AG in Zurich. After speaking in German with the Priority Division and giving the Swiss banker his pass-code, Hunter was also pleased to be informed that a $12.5 million US transfer had arrived and was there, ready to be used by him, if and when needed. Simon took his $100,000 as a $75,000 bank draft, and requested the remaining 250 crisp $100 bills be given to him in a small, unmarked, zippered canvas bank pouch.

Hunter next needed the C-4 explosive material, so he contacted Lane, who soon obtained the exact lethal 5" x 1" amount with micro-detonator from a military insider who was stationed at an Army base near Washington, DC. Emmett had it carefully wrapped, as instructed, in powdered charcoal and then placed inside a Zip-Lock plastic bag -- which Simon knew would thwart any bomb-sniffing dogs at any package security checkpoints. The packet was sent through General Delivery via US Express Mail to yet another fake name, and was easily retrieved by a disguised Hunter two days later, showing a phony I.D.

Now, it was time to get the mike. The large music store Simon visited didn't have the exact microphone model that he needed, but it was soon found and ordered and shipped from Denver. It arrived back in Boise in three days, via UPS.

Next, Hunter asked Lane to procure and send him a complete black Boise policeman's uniform with tie, fake name tag, weapon belt, and the special identification lapel badge which would be needed to move freely within the security perimeter surrounding the President during his visit. Simon included his clothing and shoe sizes. This would arrive for pick-up at a Fed Ex store on June 29, two days before the planned assassination.

The date was now June 22. With the necessary microphone, the killer constructed the C-4 explosive and trigger. He cleverly circumvented, then re-rigged his Ford rental car key fob to be able to detonate the bomb from 125 feet away by merely pressing the car alarm button rapidly four times. This way, if he was ever searched and his pockets emptied, there would be only an innocent-looking, common car key fob rather than the usual small detonation transmitter. Because Simon knew how to handle a variety of deadly explosives, there was no need to test the device. It would work like a charm, for one performance only, on July 1.

The time came now to buy a motor home. Hunter drove to Happy Camper RV and told the salesman, Ted Ward, that he wanted to pay a non-negotiable $75k in cash -- including tax and license and a full tank of gas -- for a nice, reliable vehicle that he would be driving north for camping and fishing. He would pay today, but pick up the motor home on June 30. Ward eagerly showed Simon the new Winnebago Spirit 22M, an attractive, pristine 24-footer with slide-out that once listed for $108k. The smooth deal was soon made, the paperwork signed, and Hunter filled in the Chase bank draft with the name of the very happy dealership. Ted promised that all would be ready for 'Mr. Franklin' at month's end, as Hunter specifically instructed, and then effusively thanked him. "You got a great deal, George!" he gushed.

Meanwhile, the countdown to the assassination continued. Simon sent Emmett the list of ingredients to make the invisible orange marking liquid that had previously been explained. It was made in small, per person batches, little more than enough for a dap on the cheek with a cotton ball, then the remainder flushed down any toilet. The chemical mix worked well on any skin color. It was also easily removable afterwards using any common alcohol-based hand sanitizer. In a pinch, whiskey or any other alcoholic drink dabbed on a Kleenex or handkerchief would also work.

Countdown to The Kill

June 29 -- Fed Ex package with black cop uniform picked up by Simon. Last message on Tor to Emmett informs Lane that Hunter will have black hair and a dark fake mustache for the event. He will wait, then hand Emmett the innocent-looking, rigged microphone on stage an hour before the President arrives. The moment to make the switch will be when the rogue State Department official pretends to test the mike, tapping and blowing, and then says the words, "Damn, it's not working right...who's got the back-up mike?" The conspirators confirm the set-up, then Emmett informs Simon that six friendlys, including himself, will be chemically- dabbed on their cheeks for quick identification through Hunter's specially-modified aviator sunglasses.

June 30 -- Rental car abandoned in shopping mall parking lot. Taxi taken to Happy Camper RV. Winnebago picked up and later safely parked in the 9th and Main parking garage.

July 1 -- Sunny day with a perfect weather forecast, 78 degrees at noon. Boise very excited about upcoming Presidential visit. Massive crowds forming around the Capitol Building, ready to see Cliff Preston in person and hear him deliver his speech. Simon Hunter checks out of his final Boise hotel. He goes to his parked motor home and changes into his Boise policeman's uniform with special purple triangle security lapel pin, after dying his hair black and affixing a false dark mustache. He walks three blocks to the activity zone in a relaxed manner, clutching the microphone bomb carefully wrapped in that morning's newspaper. He goes unhindered towards the front stage area, and waits for Lane to do his replacement microphone script and 'act.' The assassin is hurriedly waved through by a female Secret Service agent to allow access to Lane and the podium. Simon calmly hands Emmett the microphone after expertly dropping its newspaper covering by his side a few seconds before, unnoticed by the distracted, excited throng of people.

The time is 11:12. Dozens of police barricades, media trucks, patrol cars, ambulances, and photographers. Secret Service agents with their earpieces and tiny hand-mikes milling around the stage. Hunter slowly scans and soon spots the five other 'orange cheeks' apart from Emmett Lane: a hispanic Presidential aide, an Asian Boise policeman, the Secret Service woman who let Simon on-stage, an African-American paramedic, and a female press pool photographer. Simon waits in position, about 125' away from the podium. He sees Lane replace the microphone, and test it, and it works perfectly as the assassin designed -- despite being packed with deadly C-4 explosive. About ten minutes into Preston's speech, Hunter will detonate the bomb using the car key fob in his right pocket. So far, so good...Simon allowed himself a private smile, waiting for the murder and the chaos that would soon erupt.

Air Force One lands at 11:22. President Preston and the First Lady are greeted by Idaho Governor Bob Bradford and his wife, Tammy. The armored Presidential Limousine, nicknamed "The Beast," is expertly positioned in the motorcade and makes its way toward the Capitol building past cheering spectators who line the route. With all roads cleared and secured, the ride takes just ten minutes. The Beast pulls up in the back of the Capitol building, and the President and First Lady are escorted and whisked through its marble halls to the front portico, where the presidential podium with its official seal is positioned. Introductions are made, then Clifford Preston is presented -- tall and tanned, grinning with those winning teeth, and sporting his rakish Stetson. The crowd swoons into ecstasy, as media cameras zoom into the thundering, cheering masses, then to individual faces in the crowd, most reflecting adoration or festive joy. First Lady Pauline Preston is likewise splendid in a breezy yellow, sleeveless summer cotton dress, with matching sensible shoes and handbag -- looking like Every Ideal American Wife, her auburn hair stylish...she is smiling too, of course, and waves to the crowd to approving applause.

After thanking his hosts and guests, and removing his Stetson so as to better display his wavy hair, the President begins his speech. The time is 12:07.

"My dear friends...For more than a century, hidden from the trusting eyes of most of us, American foreign policy has been systematically manipulated by a shadowy cabal of international financiers, industrialists, political leaders, and even evil men who would cause -- and then profit from -- death in war. These shadow controllers are powerful, insidious, twisted, and corrupt. But I stand here before you today and I say: Enough! No more! It all stops now!" (wild crowd applause)

"I and my administration hereby sever any ties to such exploitive globalism. In good faith, as always, the United States will continue to maintain all of its alliances and treaties around the world. We will likewise continue to trade vital goods and services with other honest nations, and always offer disaster and humanitarian relief wherever and whenever it is needed. These are long-held and honored American traditions. However, it is time for our proud country to hone and perfect what we already have here at home, my friends...I am therefore announcing the beginning of a new American Renaissance!" (more wild applause)

[Hunter coolly checks his watch: It's 12:12. He'll give Preston five more minutes before detonation. He moves his thumb to the button on the car key fob in his right pants pocket.]

"We will begin by rebuilding America, and again make it the undisputed world leader in manufacturing, agriculture, technology, education, medicine, and science. Innovation, diligence, and hard work will be our pledge now and going forward. And I promise you -- we will make it HERE, and buy it HERE, whenever possible!"(Raucous cheering now, and chants of: USA! USA!)

"We will fix our aged schools and public buildings, our National Parks, our highways, levees, and bridges. We will modernize our airports, ship ports, and rail systems. And just as the Tennessee Valley Authority and Hoover Dam brought electricity where it was most needed back then, I am proposing an ambitious, new infrastructure project which will bring more than 325,000 long-term, good-paying jobs to our fellow citizens across this land. (Strong applause) Consider this: If we can move oil thousands of miles through a pipeline, why not move the lifeblood of fresh water to where it is truly wanting? I am talking, my fine friends, about building a massive water pipeline from Lake Superior to the continually-growing desert areas of the Great Southwest! (Still more thunderous applause.)

"I have spoken at length with the governors of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, and California, as well as with our fine Canadian friends, and they all assure me that by sharing a portion of this precious water resource..."

But the President paused when he noticed the First Lady quietly approach him at the podium out of the corner of his eye. "What is it, dear? Is there something wrong?"

"Cliff, the children and I can't take the disgrace of your shameful infidelities anymore. It all ends now." Suddenly drawing a .22 caliber pistol from her handbag , she calmly fired two quick shots into her startled husband's face before anyone could comprehend what was truly happening. The First Lady's outstretched bare arm was sprayed with Preston's blood, brain tissue, and bone fragments, as was the upper front of her cute yellow dress. She let the smoking gun slip from her fingers and drop to the stage. Pauline seemed relieved, and appeared to be in some kind of daze, eerily at peace.

Two Secret Service agents tackled the First Lady to the floor and pinned her, while a third yelled into his hand-mike: "EVEREST IS DOWN! I REPEAT, EVEREST IS DOWN! NEED EMERGENCY MEDICAL TEAM HERE NOW!" People in the crowd -- finally realizing that something horrible had happened -- started running and screaming like a panicked herd, and Simon Hunter thought: Oh shit...

The assassin knew he had to flee too. Simon took his hand out of his pocket -- there would be no explosion on TV today. He pushed his way through the shoving and frantic mob, barking orders like a policeman would normally do in such an emergency. But he kept moving to the southwest until he crossed W. Bannock Street and slipped into the four-story parking garage. He had to get up to the third floor and take the sky-bridge walkway into the high-rise bank building it connected to, then go down from there to ground level and walk the additional three blocks to the 9th and Main garage, where his motor home was parked. Only then could he be safe.

Hunter froze, however, when he saw that the parking garage stairway was blocked off with a locked metal mesh barricade. Shit! Probably done by the Secret Service for security purposes just before the President would deliver his speech. Simon stared at the elevator, temporarily helpless, and internally wrestled with his one serious -- and debilitating -- phobia. But those few moments of hesitation were costly. He heard a strange male voice behind him.

"Don't turn around, Odysseus...or whatever the hell your real name is. I've got a red laser pistol sight aimed at the back of your head. And don't go for your holster either."

"Yeah, I've got him, Emmett," the man then said into his shoulder radio. He was one of the five friendlys with the orange cheek spot -- the Asian Boise policeman that Hunter had earlier spotted back on the Capitol lawn.

"This was too big a job to let you get away, pal. Win or lose, you would have to die. Your purple security lapel pin had a sweet little homing device in it so we could track you anywhere...or didn't you notice? And that crazy-ass wife of Preston's really did your work for you back there, didn't she? But don't worry. We already recovered our money from your bank account earlier this morning. You know, the Swiss are cooperative and never ask questions -- for the right price and with the right connections, of course. Now -- slowly -- take the car key fob out of your right pocket with your left hand and gently place it down by your left foot...Good...Now, kick it away," the voice commanded as Hunter obliged. Simon's focused mind was racing, trying to figure out how to survive in this dire situation...maybe if he dropped and spun around, it would give him a second to unsnap his police pistol from its holster and get off a crucial round. He would try to stall. "Look, friend, we are both professionals. How about we make a..."

Two shots rang out, muffled by their gun's silencer. The infamous international assassin crumbled dead to the cold and naked cement floor in front of the parking garage elevator.

The bogus Boise City cop walked over and carefully picked up the key fob. "Emmett? It's done," he said into his shoulder radio. "Send in a full clean-up crew. I'll wait until they arrive, and keep any curious civilians away. What a day. And what...say again? You say you switched the mikes back and had the explosive neutralized? Good.That's a relief...I thought we still had a hot potato." The man looked at the useless key fob in his hand, then pocketed it. "The beer's on me tonight, Boss."

Simon's motor home was discovered by Lane's security squad forty-four hours later during a final area sweep. Hunter's laptop was found hidden inside. This very valuable item was covertly sent by special courier to Lane's State Department office in Washington, DC. He was very pleased when it arrived. What important secret files and information, what treasures, were stored inside, he could only hope and anticipate!

But when Emmett used the wrong password a second time to try and open Simon Hunter's personal computer, the device cruelly exploded in Lane's stunned face, killing him instantly...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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