

CLOCKWORK

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The quiet. Absolute peace and quiet.

That's what drew him here, time and again. Down Harwood Street from the shabby little men's hotel where he hung his hat for now. He always noticed the old spreading oak tree first. A beautiful reminder of times past, now forlornly out of place in the stark, concrete downtown landscape. Soon he would hear its crisp, dry fall leaves crackle beneath his shoes as he approached the chapel door.

The Sudie George Memorial Chapel. From the street, a small lonely courtyard with a stone sitting bench led you to thick, wide doors stained buttery brown. Entrance to the chapel proper. At first glance he'd thought three words. Intimate, quaint and friendly. An old fashioned pipe organ nestled just inside its doors to the right. Not in a loft like most churches. He liked that, although he'd never heard it played. And didn't particularly care to for that matter.

The chapel was part of the First Presbyterian Church, hard by the main and much larger sanctuary next door. It was built in 1948 by donation from the George family in honor of their mother, Sudie. She must have been a remarkable woman. By this time, he'd made a friend of the priest, or parson, whatever this denomination called them, and had learned the history of this place. History was one of his favorite subjects. It wasn't just pages in some dry, dusty book. Men like him *made* it. They fashioned history with their own hands. With determination. With resolve and skill.

Its pews were solid oak, austere and narrow. Almost too narrow for adults of a new generation. He sat in one, near the building's middle. Totally alone and savoring the silence like some men would a fine wine. Allowed his mind to clear and then focus. Focus on the task at hand. Soon there would be work to do.

The man himself was unremarkable. Carefully, thoughtfully so. Everything about him- his hair, clothes, behavior, even the way he moved and spoke was designed to seamlessly blend into a crowd of people at any time. Anyone with real perception, and a little time to study him, would quickly conclude that this man was remarkable

indeed.

He'd never really been a child. Oh he'd been small and young, but different. Always unusually mature and intelligent for his age. And when he spoke it often unnerved the so-called adults around him. So he quickly learned to keep things hidden inside. Secrecy became a second, private language for him. An internal, intensely personal monologue, ongoing, that would never be shared. And that suited him very well.

He excelled at school, soaking up knowledge like a thirsty sponge. Became fluent in four languages. Trained his body to be as sharp and flinty hard as his mind. Social life...why bother? He fended off any attempt at friendship or romance away like swatting flies. He was preparing. Getting ready. Most people would never understand, and he was definitely not the explaining type.

The man did more than his share of military training, becoming an expert at weaponry, ordnance and the like. Not that he would ever join the service, none of that banal duty for him. He knew that if he was ready, truly ready...the right people would notice and employ him. At the right time. And of course, that had come true, time after time.

And here he was. Sitting quietly in a pew in the Sudie George Memorial Chapel. Not really for religious reasons though. The God he believed in was different beyond recognition from most faiths. To him, God was a superior spirit of unimaginable genius, something that mere man could never hope to comprehend. He had created this universe, set it into motion somewhat like winding a gigantic timepiece, and then abandoned it to play itself out. In this man's mind, he was just a tiny cog in the vast machinery, with his own very specific part to play. No more, no less. But clocks require precision, don't they?

And precise he was. In his experience, nearly all men tolerated some degree of sloppiness in their work and life. Thought it was unavoidable, inevitable. It just meant weakness to him. Failure was not an option he accepted. Just the thought of it, a task left unfinished or a goal not reached, was like a virus. A virus that he

would not allow into his mind or system, for he knew if he did, it would surely replicate, multiply, until it destroyed his work. And him as well. Not an option. Period and end of story.

So when he'd opened his eyes this morning precisely at 0700, and saw the blue handkerchief neatly folded and pushed under his doorframe, he knew the job was a go. Ablutions, morning exercise and a light breakfast. A walk here to the chapel one last time. He glanced at his wristwatch. 1130 hours. Time to go. Standing near its entrance now, he surveyed the serene chapel, then made for its doors. Turning left, he set out on foot, heading north on Harwood Street. It had been overcast and chilly when he'd arrived here this morning, but the sun was peeking out now, warming things nicely.

He quickly passed the men's hotel. Won't miss that flophouse, he thought with a rueful grin. He made the corner on Harwood and Elm, heading left now on Elm Street. He wanted to avoid the crowds that were already gathering for the parade, so after a few blocks he headed right on Market Street, striding at a leisurely pace. Then a left on Ross, and within two intersections, the rail yard lay dead ahead.

Crossing Houston Avenue, he passed alongside the railroad's administrative office building, making for the train tracks behind it. Carefully picking his way now over several sets of rails and crossties, the man made straight for the Southern Central freight train. Walked past a few cars, and here was the boxcar with the special mark on its side. A quick glance in all directions to make sure he hadn't attracted any undue attention. Satisfied, he reached up and slid the boxcar door open. He clambered up and inside, almost closing the door behind him and allowing just a sliver of sunlight inside.

Two bundles on the floor against its rear wall, unremarkable burlap bags. One contained shabby old mens clothes. The man quickly changed into them, and soon looked the part of a rail riding hobo. He then carefully checked the contents of the second bag. It was to his satisfaction. Grabbing it, he opened the freight car door wide enough to check both ways. All clear. Check on the time. 1205 hours. Let's roll.

He crossed the tracks again, this time pausing to rub a little dirt and axle grease onto his face and hands. A battered, careworn fedora helped to make him as anonymous as possible. As he neared Elm Street, he could hear the buzz and excitement of the crowd. Slowing his gait to a transient's shamble, he made the last hundred feet or so to the motorcade route.

There was a concrete walkway, right by a pretty little hill that gently sloped down toward Elm. It was covered by an awning, and also had a concrete wall running alongside about four and a half feet high. They still called it the stockade fence around here, although cattle had not been stored by it for years now. During recon he'd picked it as his preferred position. Excellent range, visibility and cover. It was absolutely perfect for this mission. Plus he expected to pretty much have it to himself. There was plenty of room for the crowd to gather closer to the route, on the grassy hill. He arrived at his mark and took visual stock. He'd been right.

And what a crowd it was. It seemed as if every downtown worker had decided to spend their lunch break there watching. Later on he would read that they numbered half a million along the entire route. Once again, he was freshly struck how beautiful this city square was. So pastoral and majestic, the great oak trees spread against the late November sky. He could just see the motorcade coming north on Houston, ready to turn on Elm. All attention was on the cars and celebrities now, just as he required. Reaching into the canvas bag, he assembled the high powered rifle and scope in six super efficient moves. Probably for the tenth thousand time. Locked and loaded.

He kept the rifle hidden against his leg for now, behind the concrete wall. The first car had made the turn and was approaching his position. This was the 'pilot' car, full of police scanning the crowd and looking for potential trouble. It was quickly followed by six uniformed policeman riding motorcycles. Then came the 'lead' car, containing more law enforcement plus government agents. Next was the Lincoln.

The Lincoln Continental convertible was just now making the turn

onto Elm, at around seven or eight miles an hour. Two things gave him considerable relief. No bubble top. Even though they weren't bulletproof, they could wreak havoc with trajectories. And even more importantly, no Secret Service agents riding on its running boards. They could easily spoil a good shot in that position. Instead, they were walking alongside, maintaining about five or six feet away from the car. Better than he dared hope.

Within a few hundred feet it would speed up to take the freeway to its destination. This was the perfect spot. Triangulation, the classic sniper kill. Three shooters at complimentary angles, hopefully all in position and ready. He certainly was. Lifting the rifle now to the top of the wall, he closed one eye and looked through its sight. His crosshairs were squarely on the target, but he would wait just a second or two for the perfect shot. He barely heard the crack of the first rifle, sounding like a distant firecracker against the crowd's noisy glee. It came from high in the School Book Depository building directly to his left, but if the shot hit its mark he couldn't see it.

The second shot rang out, high and from behind the motorcade, and that was definitely a hit. The target raised both hands to his throat in a hopeless defensive gesture. He slumped a little towards his wife riding in the back seat next to him. The man could just see her hands come up to attend to him in the rifle's sight. Taking careful aim and allowing the proper lead, he exhaled and squeezed the trigger. Bullseye. The target's head convulsed backwards, and a spray of blood and brain matter followed. I pretty much took the top of his head off, he thought.

Everything was now chaos. People running aimlessly here, falling to the ground there. Simply put, a panic. He expertly disassembled the rifle, placing it back in the bag like lightning behind the cover of the wall. He picked up the shell casing, putting it in the tote as well. The motorcade sped away, presumably to the nearest hospital. Might as well not bother. He didn't miss. Ever.

No one noticed a tramp heading for the freight trains directly behind them. Plenty of people were now searching the grassy hill,

sure they had seen or heard gunfire from there. But he wasn't there now. Too quick. The stunned Dallas police were just beginning to react, and they'd have a convenient assassin spoon fed to them soon enough. The Southern Central was already beginning to roll gently out of the yard, Oklahoma bound. He carefully grabbed a boxcar rail, and pulled himself up and into the car that held his change of clothes.

A different man might have been overwhelmed by the enormity of what he had just done. Might regret it later, or want to brag about it or confess it to some stranger in a bar after too many drinks. Not him. There was nothing so worthless to him as the opinions of strangers. He had successfully eliminated a target earmarked for termination. Didn't matter if it was a famous politician or some unknown. There was a job to do, and he had done it.

A hundred miles or so on this railroad track, and he'd throw this rifle's six pieces where they'd never be found. Another hundred or so and he'd hop off this freight, collect his money and get ready for his next assignment.

Like clockwork.