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CLIVE CUSSLER

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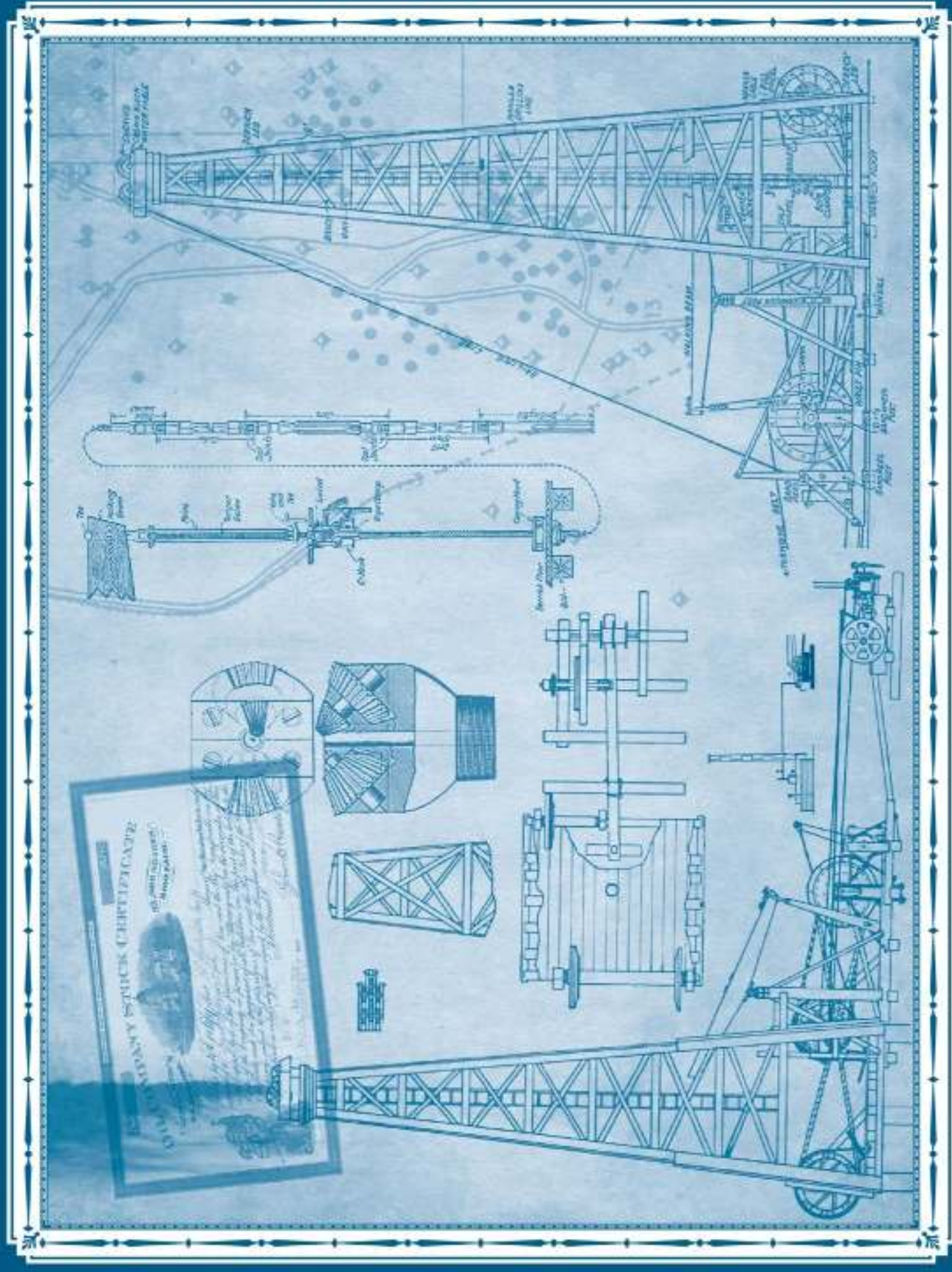
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⇒ THE ⇐
ASSASSIN

CLIVE CUSSLER

★ AND JUSTIN SCOTT ★

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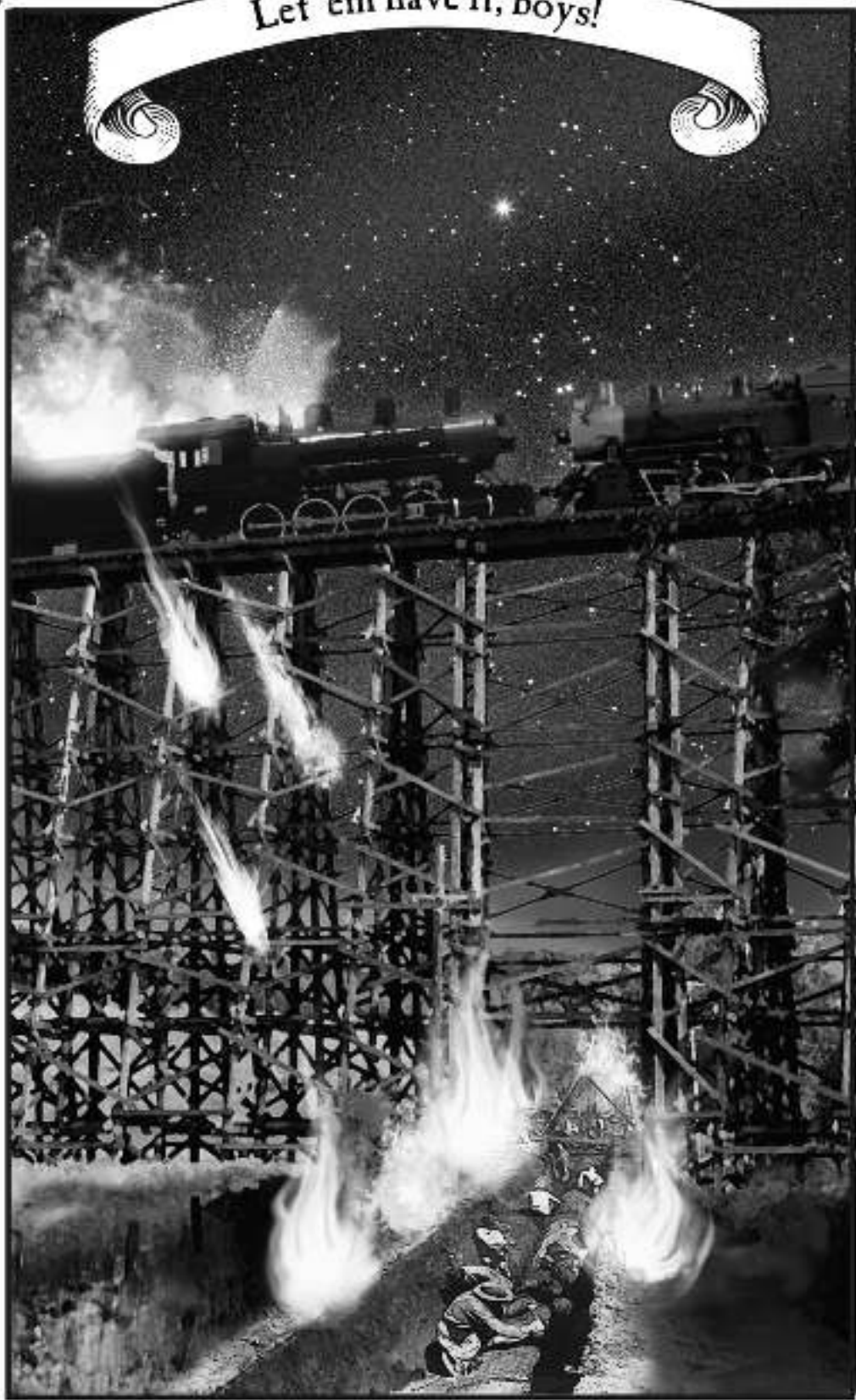
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PROLOGUE

Let 'em have it, boys!



1899

PENNSYLVANIA

“Do I hear a train?” asked Spike Hopewell.

“Two trains,” said Bill Matters. The heavy, wet *Huff!* of the Pennsylvania Railroad’s 2-8-0 freight locomotives carried for miles in the still night air. “They’re on the main line, not here.”

Spike was nervous. It made him talkative. “You know what I keep thinking? John D. Rockefeller locked up the oil business before most people were born.”

“To hell with Rockefeller. To hell with Standard Oil.”

Bill Matters had found their Achilles’ heel. After thirty years fighting the “Standard,” thirty years of getting driven into the mud, he was finally going to break their pipe line monopoly.

Tonight. Under a sky white with stars, in a low-lying hayfield in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains. Wooded slopes ringed the field. Pennsylvania Railroad tracks crossed it, bridging the dip in the hills on a tall timber trestle.

Spike Hopewell was going along with the scheme, against his better judgment. Bill had always been susceptible to raging brainstorms that verged on delirium, and they were getting worse. Besides when it came to driving independents out of business, John D. Rockefeller had personally invented every trick in the book.

“*Now!*” Bill drew his big old Remington six-cylinder and fired a shot in the air.

Whips cracked. Mules heaved in their harness. Freight wagons full of men and material rumbled across the field and under the train trestle—a framework of braced timbers that carried the elevated tracks above the low ground.

Pipe lines that Matters and Hopewell had already laid stopped just inside the woods at either edge of the field. The west trunk stretched two hundred miles over the Allegheny Mountains to Pennsylvania’s oil fields. The east continued one hundred eighty miles to their seaboard refinery in Constable Hook, New Jersey, where oceangoing tank steamers could load their kerosene. Pumps and breakout tanks were installed every thirty miles, and all that remained to join the two halves was this final connection on land they had purchased, under the railroad.

Spike would not shut up. “You know what the president of the Penney said? He said, ‘Imagine the expense I would save on locomotives, Pullman cars, and complaints if only I could melt my passengers and pump them liquefied through pipes like you pump oil.’”

“I was there,” said Matters. In Philadelphia, at Pennsylvania Railroad headquarters high above the Broad Street Station, asking, hat in hand, to lease a right-of-way. The president, high-toned owner of Main Line estate, had looked down his Paris-educated nose at the oil field rowdies.

“I envy you gentlemen. I would love to own a pipe line.”

~~Who wouldn't? Just ask Rockefeller.~~ Shipping crude direct from the well to the refinery beat a train hands down. Instead of laboriously loading and unloading barrels, barges, and tank cars, you simply opened a valve. And that was just the beginning. A pipe line was also a storehouse; you could stockpile crude in your pipes and tanks until supply dropped and the price rose. You could lend money like a bank and charge interest on credit backed by the same oil in your pipes that the producer was paying you to deliver. Best of all—or worst of all, depending on your morals—when you owned a pipe line, you set the shipping rate to favor your friends and gouge your enemies. You could even refuse to deliver at any price, a Rockefeller specialty to bust independent refineries; Matters and Hopewell's Constable Hook refinery was sitting idle, dry as a bone, because the Standard declined to pipe them crude.

Spike laughed. “Remember what I told him? ‘We'll melt your passengers in our refinery, but it's your job to make 'em solid again.’”

The president of the railroad had granted Spike's joke a thin smile and their lease a death blow: “You can't pay me enough to let your pipe cross my tracks.”

“Why not?”

“Orders straight from the Eleventh Floor.”

In the year 1899, there was only one “Eleventh Floor” in the United States of America—Rockefeller's office at Standard Oil's Number 26 Broadway headquarters in New York—and it packed more punch than the White House and Congress combined.

Tonight, Bill Matters was punching back.

Sixty men piled out of the wagons with picks and shovels and tongs and pipe jacks. Working by starlight, they dug a shallow trench across the field and under the trestle. Tong hands wrestled thirty-foot-long eight-inch steel pipes off the wagons, propped them on jacks over the trench, and screwed the lengths together.

The distant train sounds they had heard earlier suddenly grew loud.

Matters saw a glow in the trees and realized, too late, he had misjudged their distance. They were indeed on this branch line, not far away, but steaming slowly, quietly, one from the north, one from the south.

Ditchdiggers and tong men looked up.

Headlamps blazed. The monster H6 Baldwin 2-8-0 locomotives burst from the wooded hills and rumbled onto the trestles.

“Keep working!” shouted Bill Matters. “We own this land. We got every right! Keep working.”

The ninety-ton engines thundered overhead and stopped on the trestle, nose to nose, cowcatchers touching, directly above Matters and Hopewell's just-laid pipe. One was hauling a flatcar crammed with railroad cops, the other a wreck train with a hundred-ton crane. The railroad cops shoved the locomotive firemen from their furnaces, threw open the fire doors, and snaked hoses from the locomotive boilers.

A giant mounted the front of the wreck train. The glaring headlamps lit a hard, hot-tempered face and a mammoth chest and belly. Matters recognized Big Pete Straub, a towering Standard Oil strikebreaker, with a company cop star pinned to his vest, a gun on his hip, and a pick handle in his fist.

“Drop your tools!” Straub shouted down at the men in the field.

“Stand your ground!” yelled Matters. “Back to work.”

“Run!” roared Straub.

“Law’s on our side. We got every right!”

“*Let ’em have it, boys!*”

The railroad cops scooped burning coals from the furnaces and whirled opened steam valves. Fire and boiling water rained down on Matters’ workmen.

“Stand your ground!”

Burned and scalded, they fled.

Matters intercepted the stampede and waded in with both fists, knocking men down as they tried to get away.

Spike grabbed his arm. “Ease off, Bill. Let ’em go. They’re outgunned.”

Matters smashed a ditchdigger’s ribs and knocked another man cold with a single blow.

“Cowards!”

A burning coal sailed down from the starry sky trailing sparks.

It set Matters’ coat sleeve on fire. Hot coals fanned his cheek. The stink of singed hair seared his nostrils. He jerked his Remington from his coat, ran straight at the trestle, and climbed the pier.

Spike charged back into the battle zone and grabbed his boot. “Are you nuts? Where you going?”

“Kill Straub.”

“He’s got twenty years on you and fifty armed men. Run!”

Spike Hopewell outweighed Bill Matters. He dragged him off the trestle.

Fire and steam drove them out of range. Bill Matters aimed his horse pistol at Straub. Spike knocked it out of his hand, snatched it from the mud, and tucked it in his coat.

Matters watched with helpless fury. The hundred-ton crane lowered an excavator bucket. Its jutting spike teeth bit into the freshly dug soil like the jaws of *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Steam hissed. The jaws crushed shut. The crane clawed pipes out of the ground and dropped them in a welter of bent and broken metal.

A pair of dim lights bounced slowly across the starlit field. The county sheriff pulled up in a Pittsburgh gasoline runabout. A scared-looking deputy was seated beside him.

Bill Matters and Spike Hopewell demanded protection for their workmen. Matters shouted that they had a legal right to route an independent pipe line under the railroad’s right-of-way because they had bought this low-lying farm where the elevated tracks crossed on tall trestles.

“The railroad can’t block us! We own this land free and clear.”

Here was their deed.

Matters shook the parchment in the dim glow of the runabout’s headlamp.

The sheriff glanced down from his steering tiller. He answered too quickly, like a man who had been ordered to read a copy days ago. “Says on your deed that the Pennsylvania Railroad leased their right-of-way across this farm.”

“Only for track and trestles.”

“Lease says you mustn’t damage their roadbed.”

“We’re not hurting their road. We’re trenching *between* the trestle piers.”

Matters shoved more paper into the light. See their engineer’s report! See their attorney’s brief asserting their case! See this court case precedent!

“I’m no lawyer,” said the sheriff, “but everybody knows that Mr. Rockefeller has a mighty big say in how they run the Pennsylvania Railroad.”

“But we own—”

The sheriff laughed. “What made you think you can fight Standard Oil?”

A coal-black Pittsburgh sky mirrored Bill Matters' despair.

"Business is business," his banker was droning. Mortgaged to the hilt to build a pipe line they could not finish, they had to sell for pennies on the dollar to Standard Oil. "No one else will make an offer. My advice is to accept theirs and walk away clean."

"They tricked us into building it for them," Matters whispered.

"What about the Hook?" asked Spike.

"Constable Hook?" asked the banker. "Part of the package."

"It is the most modern refinery in the world," said Matters.

"There's no deal without the refinery. I believe Standard Oil intends to expand it."

"It's made to grow. We bought the entire hill and every foot of waterfront."

"The Standard wants it."

"At least we won't owe much," said Spike.

"We planted," said Matters. "They'll reap."

The banker's voice tube whistled. He put it by his ear. He jumped to his feet. "Mr. Comstock is here."

The door flew open. In strode white-haired Averell Comstock, one of John D. Rockefeller's first partners from back in their Cleveland refinery days. Comstock was a member of the trust's innermost circle, the privileged few that the newspapers called the Standard Oil Gang.

"Excuse us," he said to the banker.

Without a word, the man scuttled from his office.

"Mr. Rockefeller has asked me to invite you gentlemen to join the company."

"What?" said Spike Hopewell. He looked incredulously at Matters.

Comstock said, "It is Mr. Rockefeller's wish that you start as co-directors of the Pipe Line Committee."

Matters turned pale with anger. His hands trembled. He clenched them into fists and still they shook. "Managing the pipe line monopoly we tried to beat? Bankrupting wildcatter drillers? Busting independent refiners out of business?"

The tall, vigorous Comstock returned a steely gaze. "Standard Oil wastes *nothing*. We make full use of every resource, including—especially including—smart, ambitious, hard-driving oil men. Are you with us?"

"I'd join Satan first," said Spike Hopewell.

He jammed his hat on his head and barreled out the door. "Let's go, Bill. We'll start fresh in Kansas. Wildcat the new fields before the octopus wraps its arms around them, too."

Bill Matters went home to Oil City, Pennsylvania.

His modest three-story mansion stood on a tree-lined street cheek by jowl with similar stuccoed and shingled houses built by independents like him who had prospered in the early "oil fever" years before the Standard clamped down. The rolltop desk he used for an office shared the back parlor with his daughters' books and toy theaters.

The paper models of London and New York stage sets that the girls had preferred to dollhouses occupied every flat surface. Rendered in brightly colored miniature, Juliet loved Romeo from her balcony. Hamlet walked the parapet with his father's ghost. Richard III handed the death warrant to

murderers.

Nellie and Edna found him there with tears in his eyes. He was cradling the Remington he had bought from a Civil War vet. The “faithful friend” had won shoot-outs with teamsters who had gathered in mobs at night to smash his first pipe line—a four-miler to Oil Creek—that put their wagons out of business.

The two young women acted as one.

Nellie threw her arms around him and planted a kiss on his cheek. Edna wrested the gun from his hands. He did not resist. He would die himself before he let harm come to either of them. Edna, his adopted stepdaughter, a cub reporter for the *Oil City Derrick* who had just graduated from Allegheny College, was the quiet one. The younger, outgoing Nellie usually did the talking. She did now, cloaking urgency with good-humored teasing.

“Whom do you intend to shoot, Father?” she joshed in a strong voice. “Do burglars lurk?”

“I came so close,” he muttered. “So close.”

“You’ll do better next time.”

Matters lifted his head from his hands and raised his gaze to the clear-eyed, slender young women. The half sisters looked nearly alike, having inherited their mother’s silky chestnut hair and strong, regular features, but there the similarity ended. One was an open book. One a vault of secrets.

“Do you know what Rockefeller did?” he asked.

“If he drowned in the river, they’d find his body upstream,” said Edna. “JDR is the master of the unexpected.”

“I wish he would drown in the river,” said Nellie.

“So do I,” said Matters. “More than ever.” He told them about Rockefeller’s invitation to join Standard Oil. “Head of the Pipe Line Committee, no less.”

Nellie and Edna looked at the pistol that Edna was still holding, then locked eyes. They were terrified he would kill himself. But would giving up his lifelong fight for independence kill him, too? Only more slowly.

“Maybe you should take it,” said Nellie.

“Father is better than that,” said Edna.

His glistening eyes flickered from their faces to the toy theaters and settled on the gun. Edna drew it closer to her body. A queer smile crossed Matters’ grim face. “Maybe I could be better than that.”

“You are,” they chorused. “You are.”

Their helpless expressions tore him to pieces. “Go,” he said. “Leave me. Keep the gun. Ease your silly minds.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“Give me until morning to get used to getting beat.”

He ushered them out and closed the door. Wild thoughts were racing through his mind. He could not sit still. *Father is better than that?*

He prowled his office. Now and then he paused to peer into the toy theaters. Twice a year he would take the girls on the train to plays in New York. And after the Oil City skating rink was converted to an opera house, they attended every touring company that performed. Shakespeare was their favorite. Romeo loving Juliet. Hamlet promising his father’s ghost revenge. Richard III instructing his henchmen. Secret promises. Secret revenge. Secret plots.

Could he bow his head and accept Rockefeller’s invitation to join the trust?

Or could he *pretend* to bow his head?

What do you say, Hamlet? Make up your mind. Do you want revenge? Or do you want more? A

tenth of Standard Oil's colossal profits would make him one of the richest men in America. So what? How many meals could a man eat? In how many beds could he sleep?

A tenth of the Standard's *power* would crown a king.

What do you say, Richard? How many plots have you laid? What secret mischief?

Even Richard was surprised how blind his enemies were.

Matters calculated the odds by listing his enemy's weaknesses.

The all-powerful monopoly was like a crack team of strong horses. But seen through Bill Matters' clear and bitter eye, those horses were blinkered, hobbled, and hunted: hobbled by fear of change; hunted by government prosecutors and Progressive reformers determined to break their monopoly; blinded by Standard Oil's obsession with secrecy.

Could they be done in like Romeo and Juliet by the confusion of secrets?

The Standard's systemized secrecy, the secret trusts and hidden subsidiaries that shielded the corporation from public scrutiny, bred intrigue. On the occasions he'd been summoned to the Standard's offices, he had never been allowed to see another visitor. Who knew what private deals were struck in the next room?

Richard was the man to beat the Standard, the plotter of "secret mischiefs."

But where were his henchmen? Who would help him? Who could he count on? Spike wouldn't be worth a damn. His old partner was a two-fisted brawler, but no conspirator, and too sunny a soul to kill when killing entered the plot. He needed henchmen with hearts of ice.



BOOK ONE

BULLETS

**SIX YEARS LATER
KANSAS**



No caress was gentler than the assassin's finger on the trigger



A tall man in a white suit, with a handsome head of golden hair, an abundant mustache, and fierce blue eyes, stepped off an extra-fare limited at Union Depot and hurried forward to collect his Locomobile from the express car. He traded jokes with the railroad freight handlers easing the big red auto down the ramp, lamented Kansas City's loss of first baseman Grady to the St. Louis Cardinals, and tipped generously when the job was done.

Could they recommend a fast route to Standard Oil's Sugar Creek refinery?

Following their directions, he drove out of the rundown, saloon-lined station district, when two wagons suddenly boxed him into a narrow street. The men who jumped off were dressed more like prizefighters than teamsters. A broad-shouldered giant swaggered up, and he recognized Big Pete Straub, whom he had seen board the train at St. Louis.

Straub flashed a badge.

"Standard Oil Refinery Police. You Isaac Bell?"

Bell stood down from his auto. He was as tall as Straub, well over six feet, but lean as wire rope on a one-hundred-seventy-five-pound frame. A head held high and a self-contained gaze signified life at full tide.

Straub guessed his age at around thirty. "Go back where you came from."

"Why?" Bell asked nonchalantly.

"There's nothing for you in Kansas. We'll fire any man who talks to you, and they know it."

Bell said, "Move your wagon."

A haymaker punch flew at his face.

He slipped it over his shoulder, stepped in to sink left and right fists deep, and stepped back as quickly. The company cop doubled over.

"*Get him!*" Straub's men charged.

An automatic pistol with a cavernous muzzle filled Bell's hand, sudden as a thunderbolt. "Move your wagon."



They sold gasoline in the freight yards. A hardware store supplied spare tubes and tires, a towrope, cans for water, motor oil, and extra gasoline, a bedroll, and a lever-action Winchester repeating rifle in a scabbard, which Bell buckled to the empty seat beside him.

He stopped at a butcher to buy a beefsteak to grill on an open fire when he camped for the night, and a slab of ham, coffee beans, and bread for breakfast in the morning. Downtown Kansas City was jammed with trolleys, wagons, and carriages and fleets of brand-new steam, electric, and gasoline autos. Finally clearing the traffic at the edge of the suburbs, he headed south and west, crossed the

state line into Kansas, opened the Locomobile's throttle and exhaust pipe cutouts, and thundered onto the prairie.

No caress was gentler, no kiss softer, than the assassin's finger on the trigger. Machined by a master gunsmith to silken balance, the Savage 99 lever-action rifle would reward such a delicate union of flesh and steel with deadly precision. Pressure as light as a shallow breath would fire the custom-loaded, high-velocity smokeless powder round that waited in the chamber. The telescope sight was the finest Warner & Swasey instrument that money could buy. Spike Hopewell appeared near and large.

Spike was pacing the cornice atop an eighty-foot oil derrick that stood on the edge of a crowd of a hundred rigs operated by independent wildcat drillers. They towered over the remnants of a small hamlet at a remote Kansas crossroads forty miles north of Indian Territory. Since he had struck oil, a horde of newcomers seeking their fortunes had renamed the place Hopewell Field.

Houses, stables, picket fences, and headstones in the churchyard were stained brown from spouter that had flung oil to the winds. Crude storage tanks, iron-sided, wood-topped affairs eighty feet wide and twenty high, were filled to the brim. Pipes linked the tanks to a modern refinery where two-hundred-barrel stills sat on brick furnaces in thickets of condensing pipe. Their chimneys lofted columns of smoke into the sky.

A boomtown of shacks and shanties had sprung up next door to feed and entertain the oil workers, who nicknamed it Hope-Hell. They slept in a "rag town" of tents. Saloons defied the Kansas prohibition laws just as in Wichita and Kansas City. Housed in old boxcars, they were not as likely to be attacked by Carrie Nation swinging her hatchet. Behind the saloons, red brakeman's lanterns advertised brothels.

Railroad tracks skirted the bustling complex. But the nearest town with a passenger station was ten miles away. Investors were selling stock to build an electric trolley.

The refinery reeked of gasoline.

The assassin could smell it seven hundred yards away.

A red Locomobile blazed across the Kansas plain, bright as fire and pluming dust.

Spike Hopewell saw it coming and broke into a broad smile despite his troubles. The auto and the speed fiend driving like a whirlwind were vivid proof that gasoline—once a notorious refining impurity that exploded kerosene lamps in people's faces—was the fuel of the future.

His brand-new refinery was making oceans of the stuff, boiling sixteen gallons of gasoline off every barrel of Kansas crude. Fifty thousand gallons and just getting started. If only he could ship it to market.

The assassin waited for a breath of wind to clear the smoke.

You could not ignore wind at long range. You had to calculate exactly how much it would deflect bullet and you had to refine your calculations as impetus slowed and gravity took its toll. But you couldn't shoot what you couldn't see. The old oil man was a murky presence in the telescope sight, obscured by the smoke that rose thick and black from a hundred engine boilers and refinery furnaces.

Hopewell stopped pacing, planted his hands on the railing, and stared intently.

A breeze stirred. The smoke thinned.

His head crystallized in the powerful glass.

Schooled in anatomy, the assassin pictured bone and connecting fibers of tendon and muscle and nerve under his target's skin. The brain stem was an inch wide. To sever it was to drop a man instantly.

Spike Hopewell moved abruptly. He turned toward the ladder that rose from the derrick floor. The assassin switched to binoculars to inspect the intruder in their wider field of vision.

A man in a white suit cleared the top rung and bounded onto the cornice. The assassin recognized the lithe, supple-yet-contained fluid grace that could only belong to another predator—a deadly peer—and every nerve jumped to high alert.

Instinct, logic, and horse sense were in perfect agreement. *Shoot the threat first.*

Reckless pride revolted. *No one—no one!—interferes with my kill. I shoot who I want, when I want.*

Isaac Bell vaulted from the ladder, landed lightly on the derrick cornice, and introduced himself to Spike Hopewell with an engaging smile and a powerful hand.

“Bell. Van Dorn Detective Agency.”

Spike grinned. “Detecting incognito in a red Locomobile? Thought you were the fire department.”

Isaac Bell took an instant liking to the vigorous independent, by all reports a man as openhearted as he was combative. With a knowing glance at the source of Spike's troubles—a mammoth gasoline storage tank on the far side of the refinery, eighty feet wide and twenty high—Bell answered with a straight face.

“Having ‘detected’ that you're awash in gasoline, I traded my horse for an auto.”

Hopewell laughed. “You got me there. Biggest glut since the auto was invented . . . Whatcha doing here, son? What do you want?”

Bell said, “The government's Corporations Commission is investigating Standard Oil for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.”

“Do tell,” said Hopewell, his manner cooling.

“The commission hired the Van Dorn Agency to gather evidence of the Standard busting up rivals' businesses.”

“What's that got to do with me?”

“Fifty thousand gallons of gasoline you can't ship to market is the sort of evidence I'm looking for.”

“It's sitting there in that tank. Look all you want.”

“Can you tell me how your glut filled it?”

“Nope. And I won't testify either.”

Isaac Bell had expected resistance. Hopewell had a reputation for being tough as a gamecock and

scrappy as a one-eyed tom. But the success of the Van Dorn investigation hinged on persuading the independent to talk, both in confidence and in public testimony. Few oil men alive had more experience fighting the monopoly.

Age hadn't slowed him a bit. Instead of cashing in and retiring when he struck enormous oil finds in Kansas, Spike Hopewell had built a modern refinery next to the fields to process crude oil for his fellow independent drillers. Now he was in the fight of his life, laying a tidewater pipe line to ship their gasoline and kerosene to tank steamers at Port Arthur, Texas.

Standard Oil was fighting just as hard to stop him.

"Won't testify? The Standard flooded the courts with lawyers to block your line to the Gulf of Mexico."

Spike was no slouch in the influence department. "I'm fighting 'em in the State House. The lawmakers in Topeka know darned well that Kansas producers and Kansas refineries are dead unless can ship their product to European markets that Standard Oil don't control."

"Is that why the railroad untied your siding?"

There were no tank cars on the refinery siding. A forlorn-looking 0-6-0 switch engine had steam up, but it had nowhere to go and nothing to do except shuttle material around the refinery. A quarter mile of grass and sagebrush separated Hopewell's tracks from the main line to Kansas City. The roadbed was graded, and gravel ballast laid, and telegraph wire strung. But the connecting spur for the carloads of material to build the refinery had been uprooted. Switches, rails, and cross-ties were scattered on the ground as if angry giants had kicked it to pieces.

Hopewell said, "My lawyers just got an injunction ordering the railroad to hook me up again."

"You won a hollow victory. Standard Oil tied up every railroad tank car in the region. The commission wants to know how."

"Tell 'em to take it up with the railroad."

A wintery light grayed the detective's eyes. His smile grew cool. Pussyfooting was getting him nowhere. "Other Van Dorn operatives are working on the railroad. My particular interest is how the Standard is blocking your tidewater pipe line."

"I told you, son, I ain't testifying."

"With no pipe line," Bell shot back, "and no railroad to transport your products to market, your wells and refinery are worthless. Everything you built here will be forced to the wall."

"I've been bankrupt before—before you were born, sonny—but this time, I just might have another trick up my sleeve."

"If you're afraid," Bell said, "the Van Dorn Agency will protect you."

Spike's manner softened slightly. "I appreciate that, Mr. Bell. And I don't doubt you can give an account of yourself." He nodded down at the Locomobile eighty feet below. "That you think to pack a towrope to cross open country tells me you're a capable hand."

"And enough extra parts to build a new one to pull the old one out of a ditch," Bell smiled back, thinking they were getting somewhere at last.

"But you underestimate Standard Oil. They don't murder the competition."

"You underestimate the danger."

"They don't have to kill us. You yourself just said it. They've got lobbyists to trip us up in the legislature and lawyers to crush us in court."

"Do you know Big Pete Straub?" Bell asked, watching for Hopewell's reaction.

"Pete Straub is employed by Standard Oil's industrial service firm. That's their fancy name for refinery cops, strikebreakers, and labor spies. He smashed my pipe line back in Pennsylvania."

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