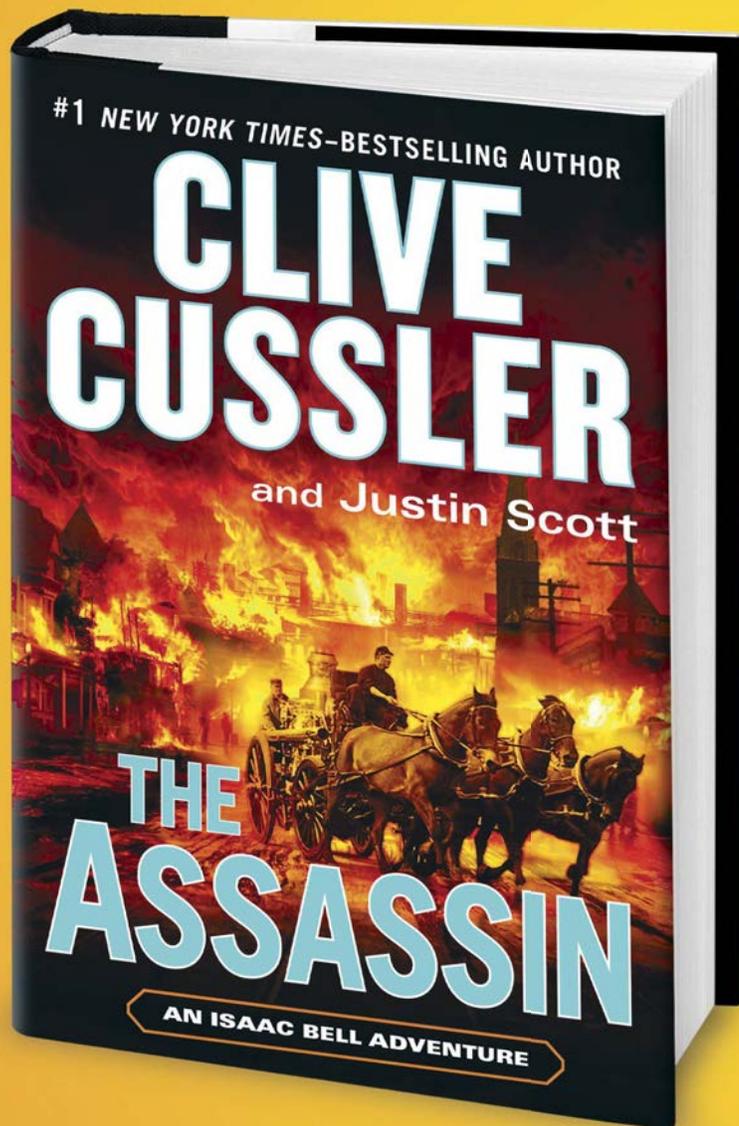


CLIVE CUSSLER

THE ASSASSIN



ON SALE
MARCH 3, 2015

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• 1 •

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.

• 2 •

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 spouters 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 a 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 I 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 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 crossties 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.”

“I bumped into Straub only yesterday in Kansas City.”

The older man shrugged, as if monumentally unconcerned.

“Standard Oil has no monopoly on private cops and strikebreakers. You’ll find Big Pete’s bulldozing union labor in coal mines, railroads, and steel mills. For all you know, he’s on his way to Colorado to bust up the miners union. Heck, Rockefeller owns half the mines out there.”

“He’s not in Colorado. He’s in Kansas. Last time Straub visited Kansas, independent refiners bucking the Standard turned up dead in Fort Scott and

Coffeyville.”

“Accidents,” Spike Hopewell scoffed. “Reed Riggs fell under a locomotive—drunk, if he held to pattern—and poor Albert Hill was repairing an agitator when he tumbled into a tank.”

Hopewell shot Bell a challenging look. “You know what an agitator is, Mr. Detective?”

“The agitator treats crude gasoline distillate with sulfuric acid, washes away the acid with water, neutralizes it with caustic soda, and separates the water.”

Hopewell nodded. “You’ve done your homework. In that case, you know that the fumes’ll make you light-headed if you’re not careful. Albert tended not to be.”

“I’m not one hundred percent sure both were accidents.”

“I’m sure,” Hopewell fired back.

Bell turned on him suddenly. “If you’re not afraid, why won’t you testify?”

Hopewell folded his ample arms across his chest. “Tattling goes against my grain.”

“Tattling? Come on, Spike, we’re not schoolboys. Your work’s at grave risk, everything you built, and maybe even your life.”

“It’ll take your commission years, if ever, to change a damned thing,” Spike retorted. “But folks in Kansas are itching for a fight right now. We’ll

beat the Standard in the State House—outlaw rebates and guarantee equal shipping rates for all. And if the Standard don't like it, Kansas will build its own refinery—or, better yet," he added with a loud laugh, "buy this one from me so I can focus my thoughts on my pipe line."

Isaac Bell heard a false note in that laugh. Spike Hopewell was not as sure of himself as he boasted.

Could you snipe a man in the neck at seven hundred yards?

Ask the winner of the gold medal for the President's Match of 1902.

Could you even see him a third of a mile away?

Read the commendatory letter signed by Theodore Roosevelt in which TR, the hero of San Juan Hill, saluted the sharpshooter who won the President's Match for the Military Rifle Championship of the United States.

Doubt me?

Read about bull's-eyes riddled at a thousand yards.

Did President Roosevelt shout Bully! the assassin smiled, when the champion took "French leave"?

But who'd have had the nerve to tell Teddy that the deadliest sniper in the Army deserted his regiment?

"Mr. Hopewell," said Isaac Bell, "if I can't persuade you to do the right thing by your fellow independents, would you at least answer some questions about

one of your former partners?”

“Bill Matters.”

“How did you know I meant Matters? You’ve had many partners, wildcat drilling partners, pipe line partners, refinery partners.”

Bell named three.

Hopewell answered slowly and deliberately as if addressing a backward child. “The commission that hired your detective agency is investigating Standard Oil. Bill took up with the Standard. He sits to lunch with their executive committee in New York. Lunch—Mr. Anti-Trust Corporations Commission Detective—is where they hatch their schemes.”

Bell nodded, encouraging Hopewell to keep talking now that he had gotten him wound up. His investigation so far had been a study in how the giant corporation fired imaginations and spawned fantasies. Standard Oil had been at the top of the heap since before most people were born. It seemed natural that the trust would possess mystical powers.

“Were you surprised?”

“Not when I thought about it. The Standard spots value. Oil, land, machinery, men. They pay for the best. Bill Matters was the best.”

“I meant were you surprised when Bill Matters changed sides?”

Spike Hopewell raised his eyes to look Bell straight in the face. Then he surprised the detective by speaking softly, with emotion.

“You spouted the names of a few of my partners. But Bill and I were

different. We started together. We fought men, shoulder to shoulder, and we beat 'em. Teamsters that made grizzlies look gentle. We beat them. We thought so alike, we knew ahead of time what the other was thinking. So when you ask was I surprised Bill went with the Standard, my answer is, I was until I thought it over. You see, Bill was never the same after he lost his boy."

"I don't understand," said Bell. "What boy? I'm told he has daughters."

"The poor little squirt ran off. Bill never heard from him again."

"Why did you say 'poor little squirt.' An unhappy child?"

"No, no, no. Smiley, laughy little fellow I never thought was unhappy. But all of a sudden—poof—he was gone. Bill never got over it."

"When did he leave?"

"Must be seven or eight years ago."

"Before Bill joined the Standard?"

"Long before. Looking back, I realize that the boy running off broke him. He was never the same. Harder. Hard as adamantine—not that either of us was choirboys. Choirboys don't last in the oil business. But somewhere along the line, Bill got his moral trolley wires crossed and—"

Hopewell stopped abruptly. He stared past Bell at the gasoline storage tank. His jaw worked. He seemed, Bell thought, to be reconsidering.

"But if you want to understand the oil business, Mr. Detective, you better understand that Bill Matters was not the first to give in to Standard Oil. Half the men in their New York office were destroyed by Rockefeller before

he hired them. John D. Rockefeller, he's the devil you should be after."

"What if I told you I suspect that one of those newer men like Bill Matters can lead me to him?"

"I'd tell you that no man in his right mind would bite the hand feeding him like he's feeding Bill."

"Would you have switched sides if the Standard asked?"

The oil man drew himself erect and glared at Isaac Bell.

"They did ask. Asked me the same time they asked Bill."

"Obviously you declined. Did you consider it?"

"I told them to go to blazes."

Bell asked, "Can't you see that I'm offering you an opportunity to help send them there?"

He pointed down at the orderly rows of tanks and the belching furnaces, then across the forest of derricks looming over the roofs of what must have been a peaceful town. A gust of wind swept the smoke aside. Suddenly he could see clear to the farthest of the wooden towers.

"You built your refinery to serve independents. That's where your heart lies. Wouldn't you agree, sir, that you owe it to all independent oil men to testify?"

Hopewell shook his head.

Bell had one card left. He bet the ranch on it. "How much did the Standard pay for a barrel of crude when you drilled two years ago?"

“A dollar thirty-five a barrel.”

“How much are they paying now? Provided you could deliver it.”

“Seventy cents a barrel.”

“They raised the price artificially high, nearly doubled it, to encourage you to drill. You and your fellow wildcatters did the Standard’s exploratory work for them, at your own expense. Thanks to your drilling, they know the extent of the Kansas fields and how they stack up against the Indian Territory and Oklahoma fields. They suckered you, Mr. Hopewell.”

“More homework, Mr. Bell?” said Spike Hopewell. “Is that the Van Dorn Detective motto: ‘Do your homework?’”

“The Van Dorn motto is ‘We never give up! Never!’”

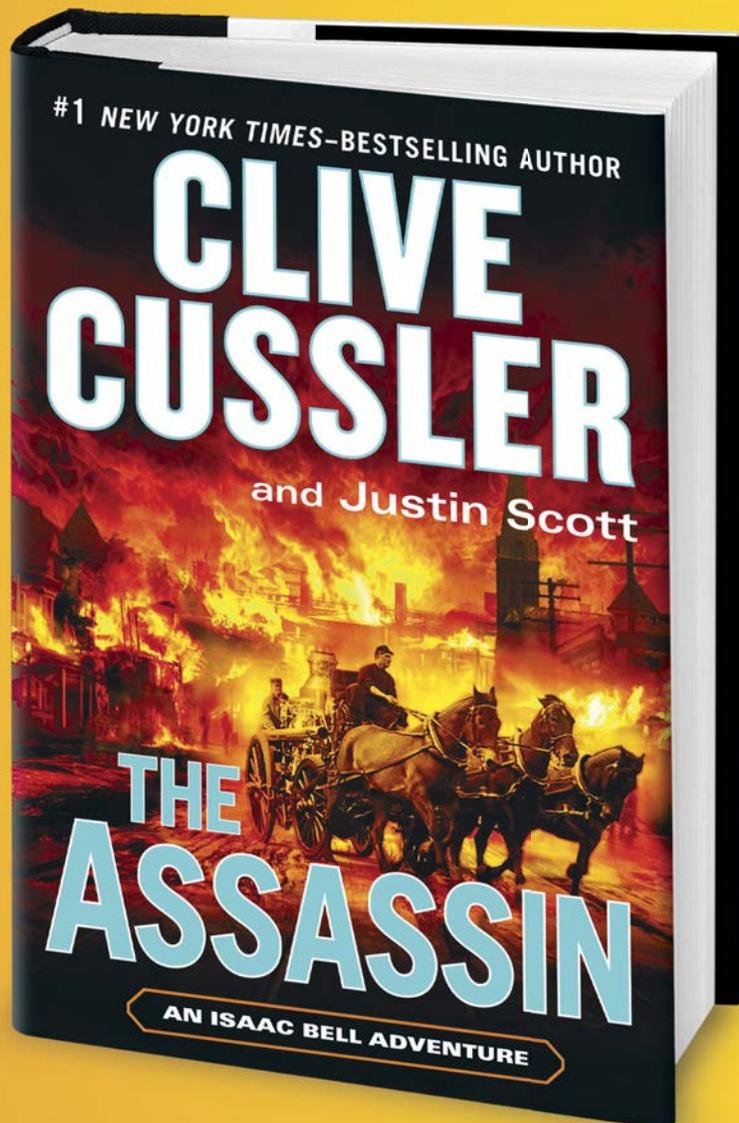
Hopewell grinned. “That’s my motto, too . . . Well, it’s hard to say no to a man who’s done his homework. And damned-near impossible to a man who won’t give up . . . O.K., put ’er there!”

Spike Hopewell thrust a powerful hand into Bell’s. “What do you want to know first?”

Bell stepped closer to take it, saying, “I’m mighty curious about those tricks up your sleeve.”

Hopewell stumbled backward, clutching his throat.

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