One-Shot

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The FBI man turned the tiny calculator over in his hands, still marveling, as the prisoner said, “It took me this long to get up my nerve—sixteen months, is it? I’d meant to confess right away, but I couldn’t, I was scared. But it’s been eating at me. I had to show someone. I had to tell someone the truth.”

The agent put the calculator down on the old green blotter, next to the yellowed newspaper clipping, and looked up. “All right,” he said, “maybe you did come here from some alternate future. Maybe it’s all true, crazy as it sounds. But it’s still murder.”

“I know,” the prisoner said miserably. “But I had to. I couldn’t let President Kennedy die.”

The FBI man nodded. He glanced at the calculator, and tapped the clipping with a finger. “Yeah,” he said, “I can see that. The lab says this paper and ink are really, genuinely thirty or forty years old, not just artificially aged, but the date’s just last year—so if this is a hoax, you’ve been setting it up for a long, long time.” He read the headline.

JFK Shot.

He shook his head.

“Damn,” he said, “I don’t know if we should give you the chair or a medal. I mean, so far, it’s been hushed up, everyone’s bought the suicide story, but sooner or later it’s bound to leak, you know?”

The prisoner nodded miserably.

The FBI man stared at the clipping. “President Kennedy shot,” he said. “And you prevented it. Still, did you have to kill? Couldn’t you have stopped it any other way?”

The prisoner shrugged. “I had to be sure,” he said. “When you’re dealing with someone that unbalanced, stopping one attempt might not be enough.”

The agent shut his eyes and rubbed at his forehead, trying to stall off another headache.

“Excuse me...” the prisoner said.

The agent opened his eyes. “What?”

“I was just wondering... Has anyone talked to President Kennedy about it?”

The agent shook his head. “No. I’ve passed the word up to headquarters, and they’re considering it. Maybe when the president gets back from Dallas next week.” He grimaced. “He’ll probably want you shot—they say he had a real thing for Marilyn.”