

REFLEXIVE
ACTION

A novel by
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Chapter 1
Friday, August 17
Denver, Colorado

George Harris killed people for a living, and he was in Denver on business.

He halted on the sidewalk in front of the skyscraper and studied it for a full half minute, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. The building was set apart from the city's other tall buildings: the banks, the downtown lawyers' offices, the savings and loans; and stood in splendid superiority in a neighborhood of three- and four-storey structures, like an adult surrounded by a gaggle of children.

Above the paired revolving doors, the words "The Denver Cotterell Building" and the insignia of Cotterell Industries left no room for doubt about the building's owner.

Starting at ground level, Harris's eyes followed the lines of the building, up, past the dark glass and silvery steel until, his head craned back, he was looking at the thirtieth floor and, beyond that, at the cloudless sky of the Colorado summer day. The temperature was already uncomfortably warm despite the early hour, the forecast for another day in the nineties.

Harris wore a well cut, lightweight business suit. In his right hand he carried a leather attaché case; his left hand gently stroked his chin. Around him scurried lawyers and bureaucrats, receptionists and businessmen, middle managers and accountants, the small people who were the life blood of the city.

Somewhere up there, on the thirtieth floor, was Vincent Cotterell, one of the richest men in America and the reason Harris was in Denver. Momentarily oblivious to the crowd around him, Harris's mind skipped forward to their meeting, wondering how it would end.

Someone jostled him.

"Sorry," a heavyset man apologized over his shoulder as he hurried toward the revolving door and disappeared into the building.

His train of thought interrupted, Harris walked forward, blending with the crowd, one more businessman about to start the last workday

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of the week. As he entered the building he glanced at his wristwatch. 8:26. The appointment was for 8:30.

A crowd of workers stood in the elevator bay, waiting for the next car. Harris attached himself unobtrusively to them. Around him the talk was of the Denver Broncos and their chances in the upcoming season. No one paid him any attention.

An elevator car arrived, the doors opened, and the crowd heaved forward. He was swept inside, the last person in. He stood facing the rear of the car, unable to turn around in the squeeze of bodies. Buttons were pressed, and the elevator began to rise fitfully up the building, disgorging its passengers in ones and twos.

The highest number on the buttons was 29. Harris waited until the last remaining person in the car, a petite blonde who ignored him with studied unconcern, got out with a coy smile at the 25th floor. As the doors closed, he pressed the button for the 29th floor.

Stepping out of the elevator, he found himself in a boxy, blocked-off corridor, about thirty feet by ten. A window ran the entire width of the corridor at one end, flooding it with daylight. At the opposite end there was nothing but a blank wall. Along the third wall, behind him, were arrayed the five elevators that serviced the building. The middle set of doors, out of which he had just stepped, were already closing. In the fourth wall, immediately in front of him, was a single pair of double doors and, to their right, a button marked "CALL." From a corner of the ceiling near the window, a video camera looked down on the corridor.

A speaker next to the camera squawked, "State your name and business." The voice was male and authoritative, used to giving orders.

"George Harris. Here to see Mr. Cotterell."

There was a moment's pause, then the voice commanded, "Call the elevator and come up, Mr. Harris."

He pressed the button, and the elevator doors opened.

This car was luxuriously carpeted on floor and walls. A limited edition print hung on one wall. The light from a panel in the ceiling was pearly and diffuse. From one corner of the car, in the angle between walls and ceiling, the lens of a video camera looked down. Beside the elevator doors was a single button, marked "29/30." He pressed it, the doors soundlessly closed, and the elevator rose smoothly to the highest floor in the building. The time was 8:29.

The doors opened, and Harris stepped out.

There were three burly men in security uniforms: two stood in front of him, blocking his way, the third sat at a table nearby. In the last man's hand was a gun, pointing directly at Harris.

"Your attaché case, please, Mr. Harris," one of them said.

Harris wordlessly handed over the case.

"And if you would lean against the wall and spread your legs."

Harris shrugged, then did as he had been told.

Hands rested heavily against his shoulders, then moved quickly down his body. The search, for all the importance that was placed on it, was perfunctory. The men would have found a gun, had Harris been carrying one, but the garrote wrapped around his right ankle under his sock went undetected. The men might be big, but they weren't very smart.

The hands retreated and he was free to turn around.

He was standing in a small hallway similar to the one on the floor below, except that here the window was smaller and there was no wall blocking off the corridor.

Harris held out his hand for his case.

"Open it," said the guard who was holding it. "Slowly."

Harris looked at the man, evaluating him. He lowered his hand without taking the case.

"No."

"Then the case stays here. Nothing gets taken into Mr. Cotterell's presence unless we've made sure it's safe."

"Fine. Keep it until I come out." He glanced at his wrist. "Now, I have an appointment, and you've made me late. I suggest you take me to Mr. Cotterell without delay."

The guard with the gun holstered the weapon and smiled not-too-convincingly.

"Sorry about that, sir. I hope you understand it's nothing personal. Mr. Cotterell is concerned about his security." Hardly waiting for Harris's non-committal grunt, he continued, "If you'll follow me, sir, I'll take you to Mr. Cotterell now."

The guard led the way down the corridor with Harris following close behind.

They walked quickly down a wide, luxuriously carpeted corridor, passing several offices, many of whose doors were open, permitting

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Harris brief glimpses inside. They were spacious and opulent, more like living rooms than offices, with deep piled carpets on the floor and what looked like original oil paintings on the walls. All had occupants, most with a telephone at their ear. The latest estimates put Vincent Cotterell's personal wealth at well over a billion dollars, and the people in these offices were hard at work trying to increase it even further.

They halted at the end of a corridor, in front of an unmarked, closed door. A large reception desk stood at their right, almost filling a wide bay. A youngish woman, less than thirty, and sporting a tan that left Harris with the impression that she must have recently returned from the Caribbean, looked up from the desk.

"Mr. Harris to see Mr. Cotterell," said the guard.

The woman flashed them a white, perfect smile and said, "Go ahead," before returning her attention to the paperwork on her desk.

The guard knocked quietly on the door and a muffled voice invited them to enter. The guard opened the door.

"Mr. Harris, sir."

Harris walked through the open doorway and, despite himself, was momentarily awed at the sight that met his eyes.

It was not the room itself, nor even its occupant, that demanded immediate attention, although in another setting either would have given justifiable pause. It was, rather, the view behind the figure rising from the desk.

For a moment, all that Harris registered was a long line of white-capped, jaggedly profiled mountains over which hung a sky of unsullied blue. The grandeur, the sheer majesty of the sight, took his breath away and it was several moments before he could wrench his attention from the vast window that comprised the entirety of the far wall and concentrate instead on his immediate vicinity, on the man now standing and offering his hand over the enormous mahogany desk.

As Harris moved forward to greet Vincent Cotterell, he heard the door close quietly behind him as the guard left the room. George Harris, professional assassin, was alone with one of the wealthiest men in America.

Vincent Cotterell was unnervingly like his photographs: fiftyish, dignified, a full head of gray hair, his face broken by a wide smile of greeting; he looked disarmingly like an actor chosen to portray a successful businessman in a Hollywood movie.

Cotterell's greeting was cordial, with no indication that the man he was welcoming was anything other than a successful business colleague.

"Mr. Harris, good of you to come. I have been looking forward to this meeting for some time."

Cotterell leaned across the desk, grasped Harris's hand, and pumped it vigorously.

So this was Vincent Cotterell. He did not look remarkable; but maybe that was the most remarkable thing about him. The gray hair, the firm eyes, the expensive suit, all bespoke the successful American business man at the height of his powers, but none gave any real intimation of the dizzying success that this particular specimen of that breed had attained.

Why would such a man want to engage the services of George Harris? It was a puzzle, and Harris was no nearer knowing the answer than he had been nearly six months earlier, when the first electronic message from Cotterell had appeared in his computer mailbox. But the answer would surely not be long in coming now.

"Good morning, Mr. Cotterell. I'm pleased to meet you at last. And I hope we'll be able to do business together."

"Not much doubt of that, I think. You come highly recommended by a mutual acquaintance."

Harris smiled politely. Behind the smile, he wondered from whom the reference had come. Apparently, Vincent Cotterell, for all his wealth, had friends in low places.

Cotterell gestured towards a chair, and Harris sat. Harris felt the comfortable, familiar constriction of the garotte, and the thought crossed his mind that Cotterell was fortunate that he was in Denver simply to talk to him, not to kill him.

"Before we get started, would you like a coffee or something?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble. With caffeine if possible. It's still a little early."

"Certainly. No problem. Stay here and I'll get it myself. Feel free to look around." Cotterell swept his arm around to encompass the room, and then moved towards the door by which Harris had entered. He turned and added, "Leave the desk and the folder alone."

Leaving no time for a response, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

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Harris sat motionless for several seconds. His gaze wandered over the room, looking for the cameras. He found them, four in all, one in each corner, nestled in the orthogonal shadowed crooks between walls and ceiling. He stood and began casually to stroll around the room, his hands in his pockets, his eyes moving every few seconds to Cotterell's desk, in the center of which was a closed manila folder.

He craned his neck to try to read the handwritten label on the tab of the folder. "Catherine Kent," he read. That was all. He wondered who Ms. Kent was, and whether he would shortly be taking a professional interest in her.

He refrained from touching the folder. A man in Cotterell's position did not personally fetch another man's coffee for no reason; Harris had little doubt that at this moment Cotterell was standing in front of a bank of television monitors, watching his every move.

As he turned away from the desk, he had to will himself to concentrate on the room instead of the view. He noticed that the desk was so placed that anyone using it would have his back to the distraction represented by the enormous window that ran along the western side of the room.

He moved around the room slowly, acquiring mental pictures for later transcription into the notebook that was locked inside his attaché case. The carpet had a luxurious deep beige pile that yielded softly beneath the weight of his feet. The decorations seemed Spartan at first, but then he realized that the sheer size of the office would make them seem so whatever furnishings were present.

One third of the office was cozy and almost intimate, made over in a passable imitation of a comfortable suburban living room, with a pair of coffee tables, easy chairs and a couch, even a mock fireplace that seemed both incongruous because of the heat of the day outside and pointless because of the controlled climate of the building. In the wall at the end of the office there was a door, which led, presumably, to a private bathroom and possibly to other rooms beyond.

The remaining two thirds of the office was almost bare. Apart from the massive mahogany desk, which had one chair behind it and two in front, there was only a single large table in one corner. On the table was a personal photocopier, a small fax machine and a personal computer.

The walls held four small paintings that looked as if they might be the work of Picasso in one of his more accessible periods. The room had no windows except for the one vast expanse of glass facing the mountains. The remainder of the walls were finished in light oak panels that, along with the beige carpet and wide open window to the west, gave the room a feeling of even greater spaciousness than it might otherwise have had.

Satisfying himself that there was nothing further to hold his interest except the forbidden desk and folder, Harris turned, finally, to look out the window.

The western horizon was formed by the jagged, fractal pattern of the mountains of the continental divide. Harris's view was uninterrupted for perhaps forty miles to the north and ten miles to the south, where mesas hid the more distant mountains. Even though it was August and the temperature in the city would exceed ninety degrees today, there was snow on many of the peaks. Harris found it oddly disconcerting that such extremes of temperature could occur in such proximity.

He found his thoughts wandering as he looked at the mountains, wondering how the early settlers could possibly have found paths through the immense physical barrier as they made their pilgrimages to the promised land of California.

His reverie was broken by the sound of the door opening behind him. Harris turned as Cotterell re-entered the room bearing a tray that supported two elegant china cups and saucers and a coffee pot.

Cotterell apologized: "Sorry to keep you, Mr. Harris. Nice view, isn't it?"

"Magnificent."

Cotterell placed the tray on the desk and poured himself a cup of steaming black coffee. "Help yourself," he said, lifting his cup and saucer and walking around behind the desk, "and have a seat."

Both men settled themselves. As soon as Harris had poured himself a cup of coffee, Cotterell spoke again. "So, to business?"

Harris nodded.

Cotterell looked at Harris for several seconds, apparently weighing what he saw with interest. "So you're a professional killer," he eventually said.

"Not if this is on tape."

Cotterell laughed — a loud, honest laugh of genuine pleasure.

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“Quite so. But if we aren’t going to trust one another, we aren’t going to get very far, are we?”

Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “But of course you’re quite right. A tape is being made of this conversation. But you have my word that its contents will be at least as incriminating to me as they will be to you, and its purpose is simply to serve as an internal record of any agreement we might reach.

“Let me put it bluntly: I propose, Mr. Harris, to engage your professional services. By that I mean that I will offer you a sum of money, a substantial sum of money, in return for the deaths of two people whose lives I would very much like to see ended. So, Mr. Harris, how much do you usually charge for your services?”

Harris answered with a question of his own. “You’re a very wealthy man, Mr. Cotterell, and you have many men working for you. Why exactly do you need me to perform this service? I’m sure there are many perfectly competent men on your own staff.”

Cotterell smiled broadly. “Yes, perhaps so. But then, if anything were to go wrong, there would be an obvious connection between myself and my employee. Besides which, as you will shortly discover, there is — how shall I put it? — a rather delicate aspect to my request. I doubt it will offend your sensibilities. You are, after all, a professional. But I’m afraid that men in my employ might object to the job that I have in mind.”

Harris pondered this, wondering what Cotterell had in mind. He returned Cotterell’s gaze evenly.

“And so, your charges?” Cotterell repeated. “To save time, I will tell you now that I’ll pay anything within reason. I understand that you are worth whatever you cost.”

Harris arched his eyebrow at Cotterell’s offer of a blank check.

“My terms depend on the nature of the contract,” he replied, dropping his eyes to the bright caustic on the surface of his coffee. “After all, I could hardly charge the same for some hobo on the street down there” — he gestured vaguely down towards the street three hundred feet below — “as for the president of the United States, could I?”

He looked up and knew that he had made his point: if he was sufficiently well paid, he was willing to consider any target, no matter how visible or well protected — even the president.

Harris continued, maintaining eye contact with Cotterell as he spoke.

“Typically, my fee would be about one and a half million dollars, but it varies widely depending on circumstances. The fee for any particular job includes my estimated expenses. I don’t charge extra if my costs are greater than anticipated. As for my terms, they are very simple: all up front, in cash.”

There were several seconds of studied silence. Harris’s eyes slipped away from Cotterell’s face and he sipped his coffee in silence, then refilled his cup from the pot.

“That’s asking a lot, isn’t it? It’s not the fee, you understand, but what am I supposed to do if you don’t fulfill your part of the agreement? I didn’t get where I am by making bad investments, you know.”

“My terms are non-negotiable, Mr. Cotterell. You may take them or leave them, but they won’t change. If you want easier terms, you’re talking to the wrong man.”

Cotterell laughed and held up his hand. “No, no. I didn’t get where I am by accepting second best either. I’m reliably informed that since Kelton retired you have adequately filled his shoes. I have no doubt you’re the best man on the planet for the job I have in mind. So, no more quibbling.”

He pushed the folder across the desk towards Harris. “There she is, and her daughter too. I think five million should be more than adequate for the two of them, don’t you?”

Harris nearly dropped his coffee. His mind began to race, trying to fathom a possible reason for the ridiculous sum Cotterell was offering. Five million dollars would have bought Cotterell the British prime minister or the American vice president. What could possibly justify Cotterell’s willingness to part with such a sum in return for the death of two unknowns?

Recovering himself as best he could, although he was aware that his surprise must have been all too visible, he picked up the folder. It was thinner than he would have liked, little more than quarter of an inch thick. He flicked through the papers quickly, more interested in trying to understand why Ms. Kent’s demise might be worth so much to Cotterell than in trying to learn very much about the intended target.

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There were a couple of photographs clipped to the first sheet of paper. They showed the same smiling face, separated by a period of perhaps a few years. It was not an unattractive face, especially in its more youthful configuration.

The first photograph was black and white, posed, the kind of picture that might accompany a passport application. There was a date penciled on the reverse: March, eight years ago. The second picture was a snapshot, the face slightly blurred, as if the picture had been overenlarged from the negative. It was in color, and taken from the left side. From her expression and the angle of her eyes, the subject evidently did not realize that the photograph was being taken. There was a date on the back of this one too: January, this year.

The woman in the photographs looked pleasant enough, her hair strawberry blonde, her face unblemished, her nose perhaps a little crooked, her teeth not quite straight. She looked guileless. Nice, but nothing special.

Harris skimmed the papers. The first two sheets were filled with biographical data. The only facts that struck Harris on this first, superficial reading were that Mrs. Kent lived in England, she was married to a Mr. Paul Kent, whose name signified no more to Harris than did his wife's, and the daughter that Cotterell had mentioned, Elizabeth Mary Kent by name, was now a few months past her fourth birthday.

There was a photograph of Elizabeth attached to the second page. It was also dated January of the current year, and showed a blurred, nondescript female child. The only other items in the file were a series of about five pages of typescript that provided an assortment of facts about Mrs. Kent, her likes and dislikes, regular movements and suchlike, that Harris did not bother to study on this first reading.

"It's the daughter that's the delicate matter," volunteered Cotterell. "You have to guarantee that both of them will be killed, daughter as well as mother."

"And you thought you might not be able to persuade one of your employees to...." Harris let his voice trail off, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid.

"Exactly. She is four years old, and has done nothing to deserve her death other than to make a poor choice of parents. Can you accept the contract knowing that?"

Harris closed the file and placed it on the desk. He looked Cotterell directly in the eye.

“Mr. Cotterell, I am neither judge nor jury. I am simply the executioner. I can accept the contract.”

He paused for a moment, then asked, “Who is Mrs. Kent? I’ve never heard of her.” He felt like adding, “And why are you willing to pay so much?” but left that question unasked. One thing at a time.

Cotterell replied, “You said yourself that a typical target would cost about a million and a half. So for these two targets, that is, Mrs. Kent and her daughter, maybe two or two and a quarter would be a fair price. The remainder of the money is to buy a couple of other items.

“Firstly, you should understand that the information in that folder is all you’re going to get. You are not to go snooping into Mrs. Kent’s background. Who she is and why I want the two of them dead are my concerns, not yours.

“I can tell you a little about her, but not much. Mrs. Kent and I were, how shall I say it? ...involved several years ago, not long before she was married, and she has extorted a considerable amount of money from me since then. I am willing to put up with a little blackmail for the sake of a peaceful life, Mr. Harris, but recently the woman has begun to push her luck a little too far, and I’m afraid I can no longer tolerate her threats. You need know no more than that.

“The second reason I’m willing to pay such a high price is that I’m going to dictate, in a small way, the manner in which you will accomplish your assignment.” He paused and thought for a moment before continuing. “But before we go into any of that, I must know that you can accept the assignment with these conditions attached.”

Harris considered the proposal before him.

He had an uncomfortable, nagging feeling at the back of his mind that he had somehow become engaged in the early stages of an unlooked-for chess game; an instinct was warning him that perhaps it would be a good idea to resign right now rather than risk deeper entanglement.

He submerged the thought as mere fancy and straightened himself in his chair. “Basically, it sounds fine. But before I can give you a definite answer, I need to know *all* the conditions. After all, *I* didn’t get where *I* am by having my methods dictated to me.”

Cotterell nodded. “OK. That seems fair enough. I don’t think you’ll find the restrictions I have in mind are too burdensome.

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“My first condition is that Mrs. Kent’s husband, Paul Kent, is not to be harmed in any way. The second is that the demise of his family members is to appear to everybody, including and especially Mr. Kent, to be accidental. That’s all. Apart from those conditions, you’re free to go about fulfilling the contract however you wish.”

“Then I have some questions.”

“Go ahead. If I can answer them, I will.”

Harris gathered his thoughts. “The fact that you don’t want her husband to be hurt in any way suggests that maybe he’s in on this somehow. Is that correct?”

It was an obvious inference, but Harris knew immediately that it was wrong. Cotterell’s face flushed and he leaned forward and barked vehemently, “No! No, Kent knows nothing and is to know nothing about any of this. That is one thing you absolutely must understand. You are not to contact Kent. He is to be kept completely in the dark. Understand?”

Harris guessed that he had momentarily glimpsed the real man behind the mask of the successful businessman. He inclined his head and said, “OK. Sounds fine to me. Another question: when you say that Mrs. Kent and her daughter are to meet with an accident, do you mean a natural accident, or merely that their deaths are not to be suspicious in any way?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“Let me give you an example. Suppose they were to be killed in a traffic accident. That would ordinarily be taken to be a fairly natural death, and wouldn’t warrant detailed investigation by the police or other authorities. But if someone was of a suspicious nature, they might start digging and discover that the accident was not as accidental, so to speak, as it had appeared. So such an arranged mishap has a small but not inconsequential degree of associated risk.

“On the other hand, if, for example, Mrs. Kent and her daughter were to die while shopping in London’s West End, by being unfortunately close to an IRA or ILF bomb when it happened to explode, well, that would be quite a different matter. The authorities would vigorously pursue the putative bombers, but no one would think much about the bad luck of the people who happened to have been killed in the blast.”

Cotterell nodded thoughtfully as Harris continued.

“You see, the ultimate misdirection in arranged killings is often to ensure that nobody realizes who the intended victim is; and the best way to hide that is to hide one death among several.”

Cotterell nodded again. “Yes, I see what you mean.”

Harris watched him carefully. It was plain that Cotterell was unmoved by the possibility that other, innocent, parties might be killed along with the intended targets. Harris found himself revising his opinion of Cotterell yet again.

Cotterell continued nodding, his eyes far away, a trace of a smile on his face. “Yes, something along the lines of a bomb would be good, very good indeed.”

He refocused on Harris. “That kind of misdirection would be perfect if it could be managed. If there’s even a hint that Catherine and Elizabeth Kent met their death by a premeditated act, then things might get very messy indeed.”

Harris wondered for whom things might get messy. There were too many gaps and unanswered questions for him to feel comfortable about the job that was on offer. If it weren’t for the prospect of five million easy dollars, he would have told Vincent Cotterell exactly what he could do with his contract. Perhaps there would be some clues in the folder; but even if there weren’t, with five million dollars in cash up front he could afford to throw some money around trying to dig to the bottom of all this if he had to, Cotterell’s warning not to snoop notwithstanding.

“And the final questions,” Harris said. “You said that Mrs. Kent has been blackmailing you for some time. Does she have any idea that you’re no longer willing to pay? And if so, have you told her what’s likely to happen to her now that she’s gone too far?”

Harris watched Cotterell closely, trying to catch him out in a lie. When Cotterell’s reply came, it was delivered smoothly. The question had obviously been anticipated and the answer, whether a lie or otherwise, slid easily from his lips.

“No. I’m still paying her off, and I’ll continue doing so until she has been eliminated.”

“OK,” Harris nodded, “I understand. Well, perhaps ‘understand’ is too strong, but I think I know enough, along with what’s in this folder, to carry out the job. If you are agreeable, then so am I.”

He extended his hand across the desk.

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Cotterell accepted with what appeared to be a genuine smile, a grin almost, of delight. They closed the deal with a handshake.

“Fine. Glad to have done business.” Cotterell started to rise.

Harris remained seated. There were still some matters to attend to. “A couple of minor logistical details before I leave,” he said. “A pen and paper?”

Cotterell supplied them and Harris tore the paper in half across its width. On one half he wrote a thirteen digit number. He passed both halves and the pen across the desk to Cotterell. “That’s my account number at the *Banque de Genève*. I will notify them to expect a transfer of five million US dollars into my account within the next seven days.”

“OK. Fine.”

“And that other piece of paper is for you to write a phone number on. It doesn’t have to reach you personally, but I want to know that if I dial that number at any time, day or night, I will be speaking to you in person within sixty minutes.”

Cotterell frowned, unsettled at the thought of linking himself so closely to Harris. “That’s a little unusual, you know,” he temporized. “I’m a man who values his privacy.”

“You needn’t worry about your privacy. I’ve never yet had to call a client. But if something unforeseen happens, I may need to contact you quickly.”

“I suppose you’re right, something might come up. I’ll set up a number and get it to you in the next few days; but you can be sure the connection will be dissolved as soon as you’ve done your job.”

“That’s fine. I won’t need it then. Just send the number to my computer mailbox. Oh, and one last thing: what sort of time frame are we talking about for the job?”

Cotterell thought for a moment. “Let’s see, it’s mid August now. Let’s say by the end of the year. Is that reasonable?”

“Sure, fine by me.” Harris smiled. He had been half afraid that an impossible timetable was going to be forced on him. On the contrary, four and a half months was almost an eternity.

Both men stood. On an impulse, Harris asked, “Do you have a rest room around here somewhere? Too much coffee, I’m afraid.”

“Certainly, be my guest. Through that door there.” Cotterell indicated the door Harris had noted earlier.

“Back in a moment.”

Closing the door behind him, Harris found himself in a bathroom suite worthy of a luxury mansion.

A vague fragrance of expensive air freshener hung in the air; the floor was carpeted thickly, the fittings marble and gold; the room contained an oversized combination bath and shower, a toilet and a large sink, above which was affixed an oak medicine cabinet. He opened the cabinet, exposing a meager selection of common pharmaceuticals: NyQuil, a small bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol, Pepto-Bismol, Preparation H. All but the last were unopened. He silently closed the cabinet.

There was a door in the far wall. Opening it, he poked his head into the room beyond. Yet another luxurious room, this time a bedroom. Canvases hung on the walls, oil paintings of warm scenes: a forest; a couple of European landscapes; a lonely beach on a desert island. The faint odor of freshener hung in the air here, too.

A large table hugged the wall to his left, its surface empty. An unmade double bed to his right indicated that only one person had slept here last night, presumably Vincent Cotterell himself. A glass, half filled with what looked like orange juice, stood on the bedside table, along with a lamp and a paperback book, the title on the spine too small to be read.

The room had one other obvious feature, an incongruity: a metal door in the far left corner of the opposite wall. The door had a push-bar at waist height, from which Harris inferred that the door led to the fire escape. Harris retreated back into the bathroom, walked over to the toilet bowl, and flushed it. After washing and drying his hands, he made his way back into Vincent Cotterell's office.

Cotterell handed Harris the folder, and together they walked in silence to the elevator.

The three guards were still there, all seated now, but at the sight of Cotterell they rose hurriedly to their feet, looking suitably subservient.

One of the guards handed Harris his case. Cotterell and Harris shook hands one last time, then Cotterell turned and strode away while a guard called the elevator for Harris.

A minute later on the twenty ninth floor, Harris slipped the Kent folder into his attaché case while he waited for one of the main building elevators to arrive. He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock. Five million

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dollars in half an hour. Not a bad start to the day. Now, where might he be able to dig up something about Mrs. Kent?

Arriving on the first floor, he stopped at the information desk to ask directions to the public library. Perhaps Mrs. Kent had once made the papers.

Saturday, August 18

Harris settled into the plush comfort of the plane's first class seat. The business suit of the day before was gone. In its place he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, jeans and inexpensive sneakers. His attire had earned him disapproving frowns from several of the businessmen who shared the first class compartment. He studiously ignored them. He was worth a lot more than they would ever be.

"Newspaper, sir?"

Harris accepted a copy of the day's *Washington Post*, and unfolded it to look at the front page. The twin headlines were inconsequential foreign stories, but in the lower right corner of the page was a small box headlined: *Cotterell makes bid for PlanetAir*. While Harris had been wasting yesterday at the library, Vincent Cotterell had been making overtures to expand his empire in a new direction.

The thought of the wasted day caused his brow to wrinkle in annoyance. After skimming the article about Cotterell, he put the paper down and extracted from his attaché case the Catherine Kent folder, a pencil, and a writing pad.

He had spent yesterday in the library, reading articles and columns about Vincent Cotterell and his dead brother, Carl.

It was Carl who had originated the empire that had become Cotterell Industries. But whereas no one seemed to doubt that Vincent Cotterell was an entirely legitimate businessman, the name of his older brother had been linked countless times to dealings that were at best suspect and at worse illegal. Twice, Carl Cotterell had been arrested and tried before a jury for racketeering. Twice, Carl Cotterell had walked away a free man. But he had not been able to walk away from the bullet that had ended his life five years ago, thrusting his younger brother into control of the empire he had created.

All of which was interesting background on his client, but was not what Harris had been looking for. After five hours of fruitless searching, Harris had given up. The name of Catherine Warner (as she was before she became Mrs. Kent, according to the file) had never appeared in association with either of the Cotterell brothers.

Neither had either of them ever visited England, where Catherine Kent had lived her entire life.

He jotted in the notebook in an angular, vertical script: "Find out about VC and Kent. *Who is Kent?*" He glanced up at the ceiling for a moment, then added a third note: "WSJ — VC — PlanetAir" to remind him to pick up a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday to see what that paper had to say about Cotterell's attempted acquisition.

As he placed the notebook on the empty seat beside him, he closed his eyes in thought and pondered for some time the enigma that was Vincent Cotterell. Once he had been little more than a playboy. Now he was one of the most successful businessmen in America. And all because of an assassin's bullet.

The plane taxied to the end of the runway while Harris was thinking. Now the motors roared and the plane raced down the runway and took off. Harris opened his eyes and looked vacantly at the distant mountainous horizon.

After a while, he picked up the folder and opened it. Placing his pencil in his mouth, he furrowed his brow, and began to read yet again what the file had to say about Mrs. Catherine Kent.