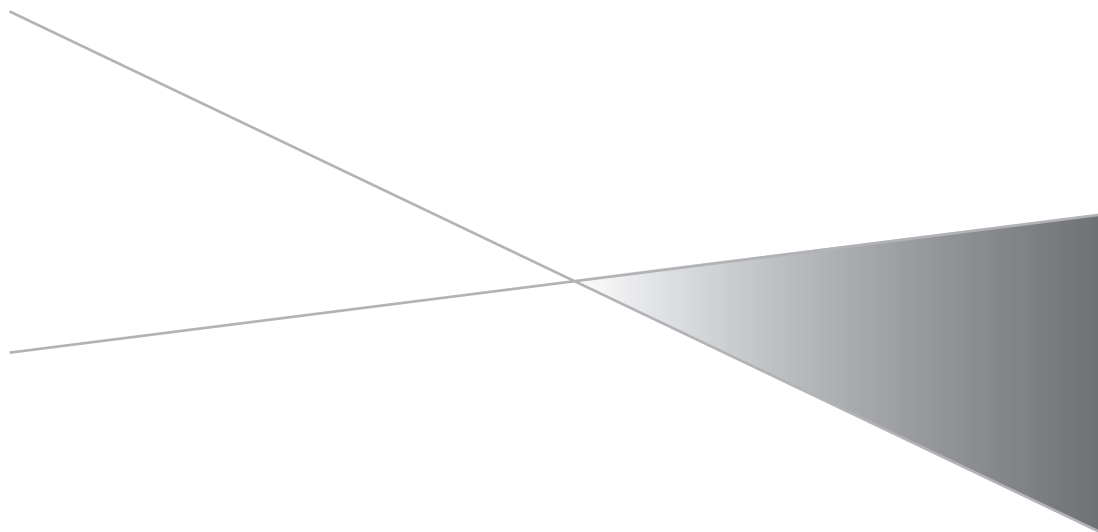


DEAN KOONTZ



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THE
SILENT
CORNER

A Novel of Suspense

The Silent Corner is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

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To Gerda. You rock me.

*The major advances in civilization . . .
all but wreck the societies in which they occur.*

— ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

*I look down into all that wasp-nest or bee-hive
. . . and witness their wax-laying and honey-making,
and poison-brewing, and choking by sulphur.*

— THOMAS CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus*

The Silent Corner: *Those who are truly off the grid and cannot be tracked by any technology, yet are able to move about freely and use the Internet, are said to be in the silent corner.*



1

Jane Hawk woke in the cool dark and for a moment could not remember where she had gone to sleep, only that as always she was in a queen-- or king--size bed and that her pistol lay under the pillow on which the head of a companion would have rested had she not been traveling alone. Diesel growl and friction drone of eighteen tires on asphalt reminded her that she was in a motel, near the interstate, and it was . . . Monday.

With a soft--green numerical glow, the bedside clock reported the bad but not uncommon news that it was 4:15 in the morning, too early for her to have gotten eight hours of sack time, too late to imagine that she might fall back to sleep.

She lay for a while, thinking about what had been lost. She had promised herself to stop dwelling on the bitter past. She spent less time on it now than before, which would have counted as progress if recently she hadn't turned to thoughts of what was yet to be lost.

She took a change of clothes and the pistol into the bathroom. She shut the door and braced it with a straight--backed chair that she had moved from the

bedroom upon checking in the previous night.

Such was the maid service that in the corner above the sink, the radials and spirals of a spider's architecture extended across an area larger than her hand. When she had gone to bed at eleven o'clock, the only provision hanging in the web had been a struggling moth. During the night, the moth had become but the husk of a moth, the hollow body translucent, the wings shorn of their velvet dust, brittle and fractured. The plump spider now watched over a pair of captured silverfish, leaner fare, though another morsel would soon find its way into the gossamer abattoir.

Outside, the light from a security lamp gilded the frosted glass in the small crank-out bathroom window, which was not large enough to allow even a child to gain entrance. Its dimensions would also preclude her from escaping through it in a crisis.

Jane put the pistol on the closed lid of the toilet and left the vinyl curtain open while she took a shower. The water was hotter than she expected from a two-star operation, melting accumulated soreness out of muscle and bone, but she didn't linger in the spray as long as she would have liked.

2

Her shoulder rig featured a holster with swivel connectors, a spare--magazine carrier, and a suede harness. The weapon hung just behind her left arm, a deep position that allowed unparalleled concealment beneath her specially tailored sport coats.

In addition to the spare magazine clipped to the rig, she kept two others in the pockets of the jacket, a total of forty rounds, counting those in the pistol.

The day might come when forty was not enough. She had no backup anymore, no team in a van around the corner if everything went to shit. Those days were over for the time being, if not forever. She couldn't arm herself for infinite combat. In any situation, if forty rounds proved not enough, neither would eighty or eight hundred. She did not delude herself regarding her skills or endurance.

She carried her two suitcases out to the Ford Escape, raised the tailgate, loaded the bags, and locked the vehicle.

The sun that had not yet risen must have been producing a solar flare or two. The bright silver moon declining in the west reflected so much light that the shadows of its craters had blurred away. It looked not like a solid object but instead like a hole in the night

sky, pure and dangerous light shining through from another universe.

In the motel office, she returned the room key. Behind the front desk, a guy with a shaved head and a chin beard asked if everything had been to her satisfaction, almost as if he genuinely cared. She nearly said, *With all the bugs, I imagine a lot of your guests are entomologists.* But she didn't want to leave him with a more memorable image of her than the one he got from picturing her naked. She said, "Yeah, fine," and walked out of there.

At check-in, she had paid cash in advance and used one of her counterfeit driver's licenses to provide the required ID, according to which Lucy Aimes of Sacramento had just left the building.

Early-spring flying beetles of some kind clicked in the metal cones of the lamps mounted to the ceiling of the covered walkway, and their exaggerated spriggy-legged shadows jiggled on the spotlit concrete underfoot.

As she walked to the diner next door, which was part of the motel operation, she was aware of the security cameras but didn't look directly at any of them. Surveillance had become inescapable.

The only cameras that could undo her, however, were those in airports, train stations, and other key facilities that were linked to computers running real-time state-of-the-art facial-recognition software. Her flying days were over. She went everywhere by car.

When all this started, she'd been a natural blonde with long hair. Now she was a brunette with a shorter cut. Changes of that kind could not foil facial recognition if you were being hunted. Short of spackling herself with an obvious disguise that would also draw unwanted attention, she could not have done much to change the shape of her face or the many unique details of her features to escape this mechanized detection.

3

A three--egg cheese omelet, a double rasher of bacon, sausage, extra butter for the toast, hold the home fries, coffee instead of orange juice: She thrived on protein, but too many carbs made her feel sluggish and slow--witted. She didn't worry about fat, because she'd have to live another two decades to develop arteriosclerosis.

The waitress brought refill coffee. She was thirtyish, pretty in a faded--flower way, too pale and too thin, as if life whittled and bleached her day by day. "You hear about Philadelphia?"

"What now?"

"Some crazies crashed this private jet plane straight into four lanes of bumper--to--bumper morning traf-

fic. TV says there must've been a full load of fuel. Almost a mile of highway on fire, this bridge collapsed totally, cars and trucks blowing up, those poor people trapped in it. Horrible. We got a TV in the kitchen. It's too awful to look. Makes you sick to watch it. They say they do it for God, but it's the devil in them. What are we ever gonna do?"

"I don't know," Jane said.

"I don't think anybody knows."

"I don't think so, either."

The waitress returned to the kitchen, and Jane finished eating breakfast. If you let the news spoil your appetite, there wouldn't be a day you could eat.

4

The black Ford Escape appeared to be Detroit-lite, but this one had secrets under the hood and the power to outrun anything with the words TO SERVE AND PROTECT on its front doors.

Two weeks earlier, Jane had paid cash for the Ford in Nogales, Arizona, which was directly across the international border from Nogales, Mexico. The car had been stolen in the United States, given new engine--block numbers and more horsepower in Mexico, and returned to the States for sale. The dealer's showrooms were a series of barns on a former horse ranch; he

never advertised his inventory, never issued a receipt or paid taxes. Upon request, he provided Canadian license plates and a guaranteed--legitimate registration card from the Department of Motor Vehicles for the province of British Columbia.

When dawn came, she was still in Arizona, racing westward on Interstate 8. The night paled. As the sun slowly cleared the horizon in her wake, the high feathery cirrus clouds ahead of her pinked before darkening to coralline, and the sky waxed through shades of increasingly intense blue.

Sometimes on long drives, she wanted music. Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Chopin, Liszt. This morning she preferred silence. In her current mood, even the best of music would sound discordant.

Forty miles past sunrise, she crossed the state line into southernmost California. During the following hour, the high white fleecy clouds lowered and congested and grayed into woolpack. After another hour, the sky had grown darker, swollen, malign.

Near the western periphery of the Cleveland National Forest, she exited the interstate at the town of Alpine, where General Gordon Lambert had lived with his wife. The previous evening, Jane had consulted one of her old but useful Thomas Guides, a spiral-bound book of maps. She was sure she knew how to find the house.

In addition to other modifications made to the Ford Escape in Mexico, the entire GPS had been removed, including the transponder that allowed its position to

be tracked continuously by satellite and other means. There was no point in being off the grid if the vehicle you drove was Wi--Fied to it with every turn of the wheels.

Although rain was as natural as sunshine, although Nature functioned without intentions, Jane saw malice in the coming storm. Lately, her love of the natural world had at times been tested by a perception, perhaps irrational but deeply felt, that Nature was colluding with humanity in enterprises wicked and destructive.

5

Fourteen thousand souls lived in Alpine, a percentage of them sure to believe in fate. Fewer than three hundred were from the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians, who operated the Viejas Casino. Jane had no interest in games of chance. Minute by minute, life was a continuous rolling of the dice, and that was as much gambling as she could handle.

Graced with pines and live oaks, the central business district was frontier--town quaint. Certain buildings actually dated to the Old West, but others of more recent construction aped that style with varying degrees of success. The number of antiques stores, galleries, gift shops, and restaurants suggested year--round tourism

that predated the casino.

San Diego, the sixth largest city in the country, was less than thirty miles and eighteen hundred feet of elevation away. Wherever at least a million people lived in close proximity to one another, a significant portion needed, on any given day, to flee the hive for a place of less busy buzzing.

The white--clapboard black--shuttered Lambert residence stood on the farther outskirts of Alpine, on approximately half an acre of land, the front yard picket--fenced, the porch furnished with wicker chairs. The flag was at full mast on a pole at the northeast corner of the house, the red--and--white fly billowing gently in the breeze, the fifty--star canton pulled taut in full display against the curdled, brooding sky.

The twenty-five--mile--per--hour speed limit allowed Jane to cruise past slowly without appearing to be canvassing the place. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. But if they suspected that she might come here because of the bond she shared with Gwyneth Lambert, they would be circumspect almost to the point of invisibility.

She passed four other houses before the street came to a dead end. There, she turned and parked the Escape on the shoulder of the lane, facing back the way she had come.

These homes stood on the brow of a hill with a view of El Capitan Lake. Jane followed a dirt path down through an open woods and then along a treeless

slope green with maiden grass that would be as gold as wheat by midsummer. At the shore, she walked south, surveying the lake, which looked both placid and disarranged because the ruffled--laundry clouds were reflected in the serene mirrored surface. She gave equal attention to the houses on her left, gazing up as if admiring each.

Fences indicated that the properties occupied only the scalped--flat lots at the top of the hill. The white pickets at the front of the Lambert house were repeated all the way around.

She walked behind two more residences before returning to the Lambert place and climbing the slope. The back gate featured a simple gravity latch.

Closing the gate behind her, she considered the windows, from which the draperies had been drawn aside and the blinds raised to admit as much of the day's dreary light as possible. She could see no one gazing out at the lake--or on the watch for her.

Committed now, she followed the pickets around the side of the house. As the clouds lowered and the flag rustled in a breeze that smelled faintly of either the rain to come or the waters of the lake, she climbed the porch steps and rang the bell.

A moment later, a slim, attractive, fiftyish woman opened the door. She wore jeans, a sweater, and a knee--length apron decorated with needlepoint strawberries.

"Mrs. Lambert?" Jane asked.

"Yes?"

“We have a bond that I hope I can call upon.”

Gwyneth Lambert raised a half smile and her eyebrows.

Jane said, “We both married Marines.”

“That’s a bond, all right. How can I help you?”

“We’re also both widows. And I believe we have the same people to blame for that.”

6

The kitchen smelled of oranges. Gwyn Lambert was baking mandarin--chocolate muffins in such quantity and with such industry that it was impossible not to suppose that she was busying herself as a defense against the sharper edges of her grief.

On the counters were nine plates, each holding half a dozen fully cooled muffins already covered in plastic wrap, destined for her neighbors and friends. A tenth plate of still--warm treats stood on the dinette table, and another batch was rising to perfection in the oven.

Gwyn was one of those impressive kitchen masters who produced culinary wonders with no apparent aftermath. No dirty mixing bowls or dishes in the sink. No flour dusting the counters. No crumbs or other debris on the floor.

Having declined a muffin, Jane accepted a mug of strong black coffee. She and her hostess sat across the

table from each other, fragrant steam rising languidly off the rich brew.

“Did you say your Nick was a lieutenant colonel?” Gwyn asked.

Jane had used her real name. The bond between her and Gwyn required this visit be kept secret. Under these circumstances, if she couldn't trust a Marine wife, she couldn't trust anyone.

“Full colonel,” Jane corrected. “He wore the silver eagle.”

“At only thirty--two? A boy with that kind of pep in his step would've gotten stars in time.”

Gwyn's husband, Gordon, had been a lieutenant general, three stars, one rank below the highest officers in the corps.

Jane said, “Nick was awarded the Navy Cross and a DDS plus an entire chest full of other stuff.” The Navy Cross was one step below the Medal of Honor. Inately modest, Nick had never spoken of his medals and commendations, but sometimes Jane felt the need to brag about him, to confirm that he had existed and that his existence had made the world a better place. “I lost him four months ago. We were married six years.”

“Honey,” said Gwyn, “you must have been a true child bride.”

“Far from it. Twenty--one. The wedding was the week after I graduated Quantico and made the Bureau.”

Gwyn looked surprised. “You're FBI?”

“If I ever go back. I’m on a leave of absence now. We met when Nick was on assignment to the Corps Combat Development Command at Quantico. He didn’t come on to me. I had to come on to him. He was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, and I’m mule--stubborn about getting what I want.” She surprised herself when her heart clutched and her voice broke. “These four months sometimes feel like four years . . . then like just four hours.” Her thoughtlessness at once dismayed her. “Damn, I’m sorry. Your loss is fresher than mine.”

Waving off the apology, unshed tears in her eyes, Gwyn said, “A year after we were married—’83 it was—Gordie was in Beirut when terrorists blew up the Marine barracks, killed two hundred twenty. He was so often somewhere bad, I imagined him dead a thousand times. I thought all that imagining would prepare me to handle it if one day someone in dress blues knocked on the door with a KIA notice. But I wasn’t prepared for . . . for the way it happened.”

According to news stories, on a Saturday little more than two weeks earlier, when his wife had been at the supermarket, Gordon let himself out the back gate in the picket fence and walked down the hill to the lake shore. He carried a short--barrel pistol--grip pump--action shotgun. He sat near the water, his back against a grassy bank. Because of the short barrel, he was able to reach the trigger. Boaters on the lake sat witness as he shot himself in the mouth. When Gwyn came home

from shopping, she found the street filled with sheriff's cruisers, her front door standing open, and her life forever changed.

Jane said, "Do you mind my asking . . ."

"I'm hurting bad, but I'm not broken. Ask."

"Any chance he went to the lake in the company of someone?"

"No, none. The woman next door saw him going down there alone, carrying something, but she didn't realize it was a gun."

"The boaters who witnessed it—have they all been cleared?"

Gwyn looked puzzled. "Cleared of what?"

"Maybe your husband was to meet someone. Maybe he took the shotgun for protection."

"And maybe it was murder? Couldn't have been. There were four boats in the area. At least half a dozen people witnessed it."

Jane didn't want to ask the next question because it could seem to be an accusation that the Lamberts' marriage had been in trouble. "Was your husband . . . was Gordon at all depressed?"

"Not ever. Some people throw hope away. Gordie was chained to it all his life, an optimist's optimist."

"Sounds like Nick," Jane said. "Every problem that came his way was just a challenge, and he loved challenges."

"How did it happen, honey? How did you lose him?"

"I was making dinner. He went to the john. When he didn't come back, I found him fully clothed, sitting in

the bathtub. He'd used his combat knife, the Ka-Bar, to cut his neck so deeply that he severed his left carotid artery."

7

This had been a wet El Niño winter, the second in the past half decade, with normal rain in the intervening years, a climate anomaly that had ended the state's drought. Now the morning light at the windows dimmed as though dusk must be descending. Once glass-smooth, the lake below lay stippled with white, a breeze scaling it as if it were a great serpent slumbering in the shadow of the pending storm.

While Gwyn took the finished muffins out of the oven and put the pan on the drainboard to cool, the ticking of the wall clock seemed to grow louder. During the past month, timepieces of all kinds had periodically tormented Jane. Now and then she thought she could hear her wristwatch ticking faintly; it became so aggravating that she took it off and put it away in the car's glove box or, if she was in a motel, carried it across the room to bury it under the cushion of an armchair until she needed it. If time was running out for her, she didn't want to be insistently reminded of that fact.

As Gwyn poured fresh coffee for the two of them,

Jane wondered, "Did Gordon leave a note?"

"Not a note, not a text message, not a voice mail. I don't know whether I wish he had or should be glad he didn't." She returned the pot to the coffeemaker and settled in her chair once more.

Jane tried to ignore the clock, the louder ticking no doubt imaginary. "I keep a notepad and pen in my bedroom vanity drawer. Nick used them to write a final good-bye, if you can bend your mind to think of it that way." The eeriness of those four sentences frosted the chambers of her heart every time she considered them. She quoted, " 'Something is wrong with me. I need. I very much need. I very much need to be dead.' "

Gwyn had picked up her coffee cup. She put it down without drinking from it. "That's damn strange, isn't it?"

"I thought so. The police and medical examiner seemed to think so, too. The first sentence was in his tight, meticulous cursive, but the quality of the others steadily deteriorated, as if he had to struggle to control his hand."

They stared out at the darkening day, sharing a silence, and then Gwyn said, "How awful for you—to be the one to find him."

That observation didn't need a reply.

Staring into her coffee cup as though her future might be read in the patterns of reflected light made by the ceiling fixture, Jane said, "The U.S. suicide rate

dropped to about ten and a half per hundred thousand people late in the last century. But the last two decades, it's returned to the historic norm of twelve and a half. Until last April, when it began to climb. By the end of the year, the annual tally was fourteen per hundred thousand. At the normal rate, that's over thirty--eight thousand cases. The higher rate is more than *another* forty--five hundred suicides. And from what I'm able to tell, the first three months of this year, it's running at fifteen and a half, which by December thirty--first will be almost eighty--four hundred cases above the historic norm."

As she recited the numbers for Gwyn, she puzzled over them yet again, but she still had no idea what to make of them or why they seemed germane to Nick's death. When she looked up, she saw Gwyn regarding her with rather more intensity than before.

"Honey, are you telling me you're doing research? Damn right you are. So there's more to this than you've said. Isn't there?"

There was a great deal more, but Jane wouldn't share too much and possibly put the widow Lambert in jeopardy.

Gwyn pressed her. "Don't tell me we're back in some cold war with all its dirty tricks. Are there a lot of military men in those extra eighty--four hundred suicides?"

"Quite a few, but not a disproportionate share. It's equally distributed across professions. Doctors, law-

yers, teachers, police, journalists . . . But they're unusual suicides. Successful and well-adjusted people with no history of depression or emotional problems or financial crisis. They don't fit any of the standard profiles of those with suicidal tendencies."

A gust of wind pummeled the house, rattling the back door as if someone insistently tried the knob to see if the lock was engaged.

Hope pinked the woman's face and brought a liveliness to her eyes that Jane had not seen before. "Are you saying maybe Gordie was—what?—drugged or something? He didn't know what he was doing when he took the shotgun down there? Is there a possibility . . . ?"

"I don't know, Gwyn. I've found the littlest bits of things to piece together, and I can't see what they mean yet, if they mean anything at all." She tried the coffee but had drunk enough of it. "Was there any time in the past year when Gordon wasn't feeling well?"

"Maybe a cold once. An abscessed tooth and a root canal."

"Spells of vertigo? Mental confusion? Headaches?"

"Gordie wasn't a man for headaches. Or for anything that slowed him down."

"This would've been memorable, a real hardcore migraine, with the characteristic twinkling lights that mess with your vision." She saw this resonated with the widow Lambert. "When was it, Gwyn?"

"At the WIC, the What If Conference, last September

in Vegas.”

“What’s the What If?”

“The Gernsback Institute brings together a panel of futurists and science--fiction writers for four days. It challenges them to think outside the box about national defense. What threats are we not concentrating on that might turn out to be bigger than we think a year from now, ten years, twenty years?”

She put one hand to her mouth, and her brow furrowed.

“Something wrong?” Jane asked.

Gwyn shrugged. “No. Just for a second, I wondered if I should be talking about it. But it’s not a big secret or anything. It’s gotten a lot of press attention over the years. See, the institute invites four hundred of the most forward--thinking people—military officers from every branch of service, key scientists, and engineers from major defense contractors—to listen to the panels and ask questions. It’s quite a thing. Spouses are welcome. We women attend the dinners and social events, but not the sessions. And it’s not any kind of bribe, by the way.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“The institute is an apolitical nonprofit. It doesn’t have any ties to defense contractors. And when you receive an invitation, you have to pay your own travel and lodging. Gordie took me with him to three conferences. He just loved them.”

“But last year he had a bad migraine at the event?”

“His only one ever. The third day, in the morning, for

almost six hours he was flat in bed. I kept after him to call the front desk and find a doctor. But Gordie figured anything less than a bullet wound was best dealt with by letting it work itself out. You know how men are always having to prove things to themselves.”

Jane warmed to a memory. “Nick was woodworking, gouged his hand when a chisel slipped. It probably needed four or five stitches. But he cleaned the wound himself, packed it full of Neosporin, and bound it tight with duct tape. I thought he’d die of blood poisoning or lose his hand, and he thought my concern was so cute. *Cute!* I wanted so bad to smack him. In fact, I *did* smack him.”

Gwyn smiled. “Good for you. Anyway, the migraine went away by lunchtime, and Gordie missed only one session. When I wasn’t able to persuade him to see a doctor, I went to the spa and spent a bundle for a massage. But how did you know about the migraine?”

“One of the other people I’ve interviewed, this widower in Chicago, his wife had her first and last migraine two months before she hung herself in their garage.”

“Was she at the What If Conference?”

“No. I only wish it was that simple. I can’t find links like that between a significant number of them. Just fragile threads, tenuous connections. That woman was the CEO of a nonprofit serving people with disabilities. By all accounts she was happy, productive, and beloved by virtually everyone.”

“Did your Nick have a one--and--only migraine?”

“Not that he mentioned. The suspicious suicides that interest me . . . in the months before they died, some complained of a few brief spells of vertigo. Or strange, intense dreams. Or essential tremors of the mouth and the left hand that resolved after just a week or two. Some experienced a bitter taste that came and went. Different things and mostly minor. But Nick didn’t have any unusual symptoms. Zero, zip, nada.”

“You’ve interviewed these people’s loved ones.”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Twenty--two so far, including you.” Reading Gwyn’s expression, Jane said, “Yeah, I know, it’s an obsession. Maybe it’s a fool’s errand.”

“You’re nobody’s fool, honey. Sometimes it’s just . . . hard to move on. Where will you go from here?”

“There’s someone near San Diego I’d like to talk to.” She leaned back in her chair. “But this What If event in Vegas still intrigues me. Do you have anything from the conference, a brochure, especially a program for those four days?”

“There’s probably something in Gordon’s study upstairs. I’ll go look. More coffee?”

“No, thanks. I had a lot with breakfast. What I *do* need is a bathroom.”

“There’s a half bath off the hall. Come along, I’ll show you.”

A couple of minutes later, in the spiderless, spotless powder bath, as Jane washed her hands at the sink,

she met her reflection eye--to--eye. Not for the first time, she wondered if by setting out on this crusade two months earlier, she'd done the very worst of wrong things.

She had so much to lose, and not just her life. Least of all her life.

From the roof, by way of the bathroom--vent duct, the growing wind spoke down through the second floor to the first, like some troll that had moved from under his traditional bridge to a home with a view.

As she stepped out of the bathroom, a gunshot barked upstairs.

8

Jane drew her pistol, held it in both hands, muzzle pointed to her right, at the floor. It was not her FBI gun. She wasn't allowed that weapon while on leave. She liked this one as much, maybe even better: a Heckler & Koch Combat Competition Mark 23, chambered for .45 ACP.

The noise had been a gunshot. Unmistakable. No scream before it, no scream after it, no footsteps.

She knew she hadn't been followed from Arizona. If somebody had already been waiting here for her, he would have taken her when she was sitting at the kitchen table, widow to widow, her defenses down.

Maybe the guy was holding Gwyn captive and fired one round to draw Jane to the second floor. That didn't make sense, but then most bad guys were emotion--driven, short on logic and reason.

She thought of another possibility, but she didn't want to go there yet.

If the house had back stairs, they would likely be in the kitchen. She hadn't noticed them. There had been two closed doors. A pantry, of course. The other was most likely the door to the garage. Or to a laundry room. Okay, the front stairs were the only stairs.

She didn't like the stairs. Nowhere to dodge left or right. No possibility of retreat, because she'd be turning her back on the shooter. Once she committed, she could go only up, each of the two narrow flights like a close--range shooting gallery.

At the landing between flights, she stayed low, slipped fast around the newel post. Nobody at the top. Heart knocking like a parade drum. Bite on the fear. She knew what to do. She'd done it before. One of her instructors had said it was ballet without tights and tutus, you just needed to know the moves, exactly where to make them, and at the end of the performance, they would throw flowers at your feet, metaphorically speaking.

The last flight. This was where a professional should try to take her. Aiming down, his gun would be just below eye level; aiming up, hers would be in her line of sight, giving him the surer shot.

Top of the stairs and still alive.

Stay crouched and close to the wall. Both hands on the pistol. Arms extended. Stop and listen. No one in the upstairs hall.

Now it was all about clearing doorways, which sucked nearly as much as the stairs. Crossing a threshold, she could be hosed, right here at the end of it.

Gwyn Lambert occupied an armchair in the master bedroom, head rolled to the left. Her right arm had fallen into her lap, the gun still loosely held. The bullet had entered her right temple, tunneled her brain, and broken out the left temple, spattering the carpet with chunks of bone and twists of hair and worse.

9

The scene didn't appear to have been staged. It was a true suicide. No scream before the gunshot, no footsteps or other sound afterward. Only the motion and the act, and terror or relief or regret in the instant between them. A nightstand drawer hung open, where the home--defense weapon might have been kept.

Although Jane hadn't known Gwyneth long enough to be wrenched with grief, dull but awful sadness and sharp anger afflicted her, the latter because this was no ordinary suicide, no consequence of anguish or depression. For a woman only two weeks from the loss

of her husband, Gwyn had been coping as well as anyone might. Baking muffins, soon to take them to family and friends who had supported her in the current darkness, looking to the future. Besides, of the little she had learned about this military wife, one thing she knew beyond doubt was that Gwyn would not have tormented another grieving widow by putting her in the position of having to be the first to discover yet another suicide.

A sudden beeping caused her to pivot from the dead woman and bring her pistol up. No one. The sound issued from an adjacent room. She approached the open doorway with caution until she recognized the tone as the AT&T signal alerting its customer that a phone had been left off the hook.

She crossed the threshold into Gordon Lambert's study. On the walls were photographs of him as a younger man in combat gear with brother Marines in exotic places. Gordon in dress blues, tall and handsome, pictured posing with a president. A framed flag that had flown in battle.

Trailing on its coiled cord, the handset of the desk phone lay on the carpet. From a jacket pocket, she fished a cotton handkerchief that she carried for no purpose other than fingerprint avoidance, and she cradled the handset, wondering with whom Gwyn might have spoken before making her mortal decision. She lifted the phone and entered the automatic call-back code but got nothing.

Gwyn had ostensibly come upstairs to find a brochure or program from the What If Conference. Jane went to the desk, opened a drawer.

The phone rang. She was not surprised. There was no caller ID.

She picked up the receiver but said nothing. Her discretion was matched by the person on the farther end of the line. It was neither a phantom call initiated by a system glitch nor a wrong number. She heard music in the background, an old song by America, recorded before she'd been born: "A Horse with No Name."

She hung up first. Considering the large properties in this neighborhood, it was unlikely the single shot had been heard. But she had urgent work to do.