

DEAN KOONTZ



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# THE WHISPERING ROOM

*A Jane Hawk Novel*

BY DEAN KOONTZ

*Ashley Bell • The City • Innocence • 77 Shadow Street*  
*What the Night Knows • Breathless • Relentless*  
*Your Heart Belongs to Me • The Darkest Evening of the Year*  
*The Good Guy • The Husband • Velocity • Life Expectancy*  
*The Taking • The Face • By the Light of the Moon*  
*One Door Away From Heaven • From the Corner of His Eye*  
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JANE HAWK

*The Silent Corner • The Whispering Room*

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*Odd Thomas • Forever Odd • Brother Odd • Odd Hours*  
*Odd Interlude • Odd Apocalypse • Deeply Odd • Saint Odd*

FRANKENSTEIN

*Prodigal Son • City of Night • Dead and Alive*  
*Lost Souls • The Dead Town*

*A Big Little Life: A Memoir of a Joyful Dog Named Trixie*

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First Edition

*Book design by Virginia Norey*

*This book is dedicated to Richard Heller: a rock in turbulent times,  
for almost thirty years my friend, attorney, and wise counsel,  
who knows that the most valuable gold comes on four feet.*



*They don't seem to have any rules in particular;  
at least, if there are, nobody attends to them.*

— LEWIS CARROLL, *Alice in Wonderland*

*[In the hive] bees will not work except in darkness;  
thought will not work except in silence; neither will  
virtue work except in secrecy.*

— THOMAS CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus*



THE  
WHISPERING ROOM



PART ONE

HAWK'S WAY





Cora Gundersun walked through seething fire without being burned, nor did her white dress burst into flames. She was not afraid, but instead exhilarated, and the many admiring people witnessing this spectacle gaped in amazement, their expressions of astonishment flickering with reflections of the flames. They called out to her not in alarm, but in wonder, with a note of veneration in their voices, so that Cora felt equally thrilled and humbled that she had been made invulnerable.

Dixie, a long-haired dappled gold dachshund, woke Cora by licking her hand. The dog had no respect for dreams, not even for this one that her mistress had enjoyed three nights in a row and about which she had told Dixie in vivid detail. Dawn had come, time for breakfast and morning toilet, which were more important to Dixie than any dream.

Cora was forty years old, birdlike and spry. As the short dog toddled down the set of portable steps that allowed her to climb in and out of bed, Cora sprang up to meet the day. She slipped into fur-lined ankle-high boots that served as her wintertime slippers, and in her pajamas she followed the waddling dachshund through the house.

Just before she stepped into the kitchen, she was struck by the notion that a strange man would be sitting at the dinette table and that something terrible would happen.

Of course no man awaited her. She'd never been a fearful woman. She chastised herself for being spooked by nothing, nothing at all.

As she put out fresh water and kibble for her companion, the dog's feathery golden tail swept the floor in anticipation.

By the time Cora had prepared the coffeemaker and switched it on, Dixie had finished eating. Now standing at the back door, the dog barked politely, just once.

Cora snared a coat from a wall peg and shrugged into it. "Let's see if you can empty yourself as quick as you filled up. It's colder than the cellar of Hades out there, sweet thing, so don't dawdle."

As she left the warmth of the house for the porch, her breath smoked from her as if a covey of ghosts, long in possession of her body, were being exorcised. She stood at the head of the steps to watch over precious Dixie Belle, just in case there might be a nasty-tempered raccoon lingering from its night of foraging.

More than a foot of late-winter snow had fallen the previous morning. In the absence of wind, the pine trees still wore ermine stoles on every bough. Cora had shoveled a clearing in the backyard so that Dixie wouldn't have to plow through deep powder.

Dachshunds had keen noses. Ignoring her mistress's plea not to dawdle, Dixie Belle wandered back and forth in the clearing, nose to the ground, curious about what animals had visited in the night.

Wednesday. A school day.

Although Cora had been off work for two weeks, she still felt as if she should hurry to prepare for school. Two years earlier, she had been named Minnesota's Teacher of the Year. She dearly loved—and missed—the children in her sixth-grade class.

Sudden-onset migraines, five and six hours long, sometimes accompanied by foul odors that only she could detect, had disabled her. The headaches seemed to be slowly responding to medications—

zolmitriptan and a muscle relaxant called Soma. Cora had never been a sickly person, and staying home bored her.

Dixie Belle finally peed and left two small logs, which Cora would pick up with a plastic bag later, after they froze solid.

When she followed the dachshund into the house, a strange man was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee that he had boldly poured for himself. He wore a knitted cap. He had unzipped his fleece-lined jacket. His face was long, his features sharp, his cold, blue stare direct.

Before Cora could cry out or turn to flee, the intruder said, "Play Manchurian with me."

"Yes, all right," she said, because he no longer seemed to be a threat. She knew him, after all. He was a nice man. He had visited her at least twice in the past week. He was a very nice man.

"Take off your coat and hang it up."

She did as he asked.

"Come here, Cora. Sit down."

She pulled out a chair and sat at the table.

Although a friend of everyone, Dixie retreated to a corner and settled there to watch warily with one light-blue eye and one brown.

"Did you dream last night?" the nice man asked.

"Yes."

"Was it the dream of fire?"

"Yes."

"Was it a good dream, Cora?"

She smiled and nodded. "It was lovely, a lovely walk through soothing fire, no fear at all."

"You'll have the same dream again tonight," he said.

She smiled and clapped her hands twice. "Oh, good. It's such a delightful dream. Sort of like one I sometimes had as a girl—that dream of flying like a bird. Flying with no fear of falling."

"Tomorrow is the big day, Cora."

"Is it? What's happening?"

"You'll know when you get up in the morning. I won't be back again. Even as important as this is, you need no hands-on guidance."

He finished his coffee and slid the mug in front of her and got to his feet and pushed his chair under the table. "*Auf Wiedersehen*, you stupid, skinny bitch."

"Good-bye," she said.

A twinkling, zigzagging chain of tiny lights floated into sight, an aura preceding a migraine. She closed her eyes, dreading the pain to come. But the aura passed. The headache did not occur.

When she opened her eyes, her empty mug stood on the table before her, a residue of coffee in the bottom. She got up to pour another serving for herself.

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## 2

On a Sunday afternoon in March, in self-defense and with great anguish, Jane Hawk had killed a dear friend and mentor.

Three days later, on a Wednesday, when the evening was diamonded with stars that even the great upwash of lights in the San Gabriel Valley, northeast of Los Angeles, could not entirely rinse from the sky, she came on foot to a house that she had scouted earlier by car. She carried a large tote bag with incriminating contents. In a shoulder rig under her sport coat hung a stolen Colt .45 ACP pistol rebuilt by one of the country's finest custom-handgun shops.

The residential neighborhood was calm in this age of chaos, quiet in a time characterized by clamor. California pepper trees whispered and palm fronds softly rustled in a breeze fragrant with jas-

mine. The breeze was also threaded through with the malodor of decomposition that issued from one gutter drain and then another, perhaps from the bodies of poisoned tree rats that earlier had fled the sunlight to die in the dark.

A for-sale sign in the front yard of the target house, grass in need of mowing, a Realtor's key safe fixed to the front-door handle, and closed draperies suggested that the place must be vacant. The security system most likely wasn't operational, because nothing remained in the residence to steal and because an alarm would have complicated the task of showing the property to prospective buyers.

Behind the house, the patio lacked furniture. Breathing out the faint scent of chlorine, black water rippled in the swimming pool, a mirror to the waning moon.

A stuccoed property wall and Indian laurels screened the back of the house from the neighbors. Even in daylight, she would not have been seen.

With a black-market LockAid lock-release gun legally sold only to law-enforcement agencies, Jane defeated the deadbolt on the back door. She returned the device to the tote and opened the door and stood listening to the lightless kitchen, to the rooms beyond.

Convinced that her assessment of the house must be correct, she crossed the threshold, closed the door behind her, and re-engaged the deadbolt. From the tote, she fished out an LED flashlight with two settings, clicked it to the dimmest beam, and surveyed a stylish kitchen with glossy white cabinets, black granite countertops, and stainless-steel appliances. No cooking utensils were in sight. No designer china waited to be admired on the shelves of those few upper cabinets that featured display windows.

She passed through spacious rooms as dark as closed caskets and devoid of furniture. Although draperies were drawn over the windows, she kept the flashlight on low beam, directing it only at the floor.

She stayed close to the wall, where the stair treads were less likely to creak, but they still announced her as she ascended.

Although she wanted the front of the house, she toured the entire second floor to be certain she was alone. This was an upper-middle-class home in a desirable neighborhood, each bedroom with its private bath, though the chill in its vacant chambers gave rise in Jane to a presentiment of suburban decline and societal decay.

Or perhaps the dark, cold rooms were not what fostered this apprehension. In fact, a persistent foreboding had been with her for nearly a week, since she had learned what some of the most powerful people in this new world of technological wonders were planning for their fellow citizens.

She put her tote bag down by a window in a front bedroom and clicked off the flashlight and parted the draperies. She studied not the house directly across the street but the one next door to it, a fine example of Craftsman architecture.

Lawrence Hannafin lived at that address, a widower since the previous March. He and his late wife never had children. Though only forty-eight—twenty-one years older than Jane—Hannafin was likely to be alone.

She didn't know if he might be an ally in waiting. More likely, he would be a coward with no convictions, who would shrink from the challenge she intended to put before him. Cowardice was the default position of the times.

She hoped that Hannafin wouldn't become an enemy.

For seven years, she had been an FBI agent with the Critical Incident Response Group, most often assigned to cases involving Behavioral Analysis Units 3 and 4, which dealt with mass murders and serial killings, among other crimes. In that capacity, she'd killed only twice, in a desperate situation on an isolated farm. In the past week, on leave from the Bureau, she'd killed three men in self-defense. She was now a rogue agent, and she'd had enough of killing.

If Lawrence Hannafin didn't have the courage and integrity that his reputation suggested, Jane hoped that at least he would turn her away without attempting to bring her to justice. There would be no justice for her. No defense attorney. No jury trial. Considering what she knew about certain powerful people, the best she could hope for was a bullet in the head. They had the means by which to do much worse to her, the ability to break her, to scrub her mind of memories, rob her of free will, and reduce her to docile slavery.

## 3

Jane took off her sport coat and shoulder rig and slept—not well—on the floor, with the pistol near to hand. For a pillow, she used a cushion from the window seat at the end of the second-floor hall, but she had nothing to serve as a blanket.

The world of her dreams was a realm of shifting shadows and silver-blue half-light without a source, through which she fled malevolent mannequins who had once been people like her, but were now as tireless as robots programmed for a hunt, their eyes vacant of all feeling.

The wristwatch alarm woke her an hour before dawn.

Her limited toiletries included toothpaste and a brush. In the bathroom, with the dimmed flashlight in a corner on the floor, her face a hollow-eyed haunt in the dark mirror, she scrubbed away the taste of dream fear.

At the bedroom window, she parted the draperies a few inches and watched the Hannafin house through a small pair of high-powered binoculars, her peppermint breath briefly steaming the window glass.

According to his Facebook page, Lawrence Hannafin took a one-hour run every morning at dawn. A second-floor room brightened, and a few minutes later, soft light bloomed in the foyer downstairs. In headband, shorts, and running shoes, he exited the front door as the eastern sky blushed with the first rose-tinted light of day.

Through the binoculars, Jane watched him key the lock, after which he safety-pinned the key in a pocket of his shorts.

The previous day, she had observed him from her car. He had run three blocks south, then turned east into a neighborhood of horse properties, following riding trails into the undeveloped hills of brush and wild grass. He had been gone sixty-seven minutes. Jane required only a fraction of that time to do what needed to be done.



**A**nother Minnesota morning. A slab of hard gray sky like dirty ice. Scattered snowflakes in the still air, as if escaping through the clenched teeth of a reluctant storm.

In her pajamas and fur-lined ankle boots, Cora Gundersun cooked a breakfast of buttered white toast dusted with Parmesan, scrambled eggs, and Nueske's bacon, the best bacon in the world, which fried up thin and crisp and flavorful.

At the table, she read the newspaper while she ate. From time to time she broke off a little piece from a slice of bacon to feed to Dixie Belle, who waited patiently beside her chair and received each treat with whimpers of delight and gratitude.

Cora had dreamed again of walking unscathed through a fierce fire while onlookers marveled at her invulnerability. The dream



lifted her heart, and she felt purified, as if the flames had been the loving fire of God.

She hadn't suffered a migraine in more than forty-eight hours, which was the longest reprieve from pain that she'd enjoyed since the headaches had begun. She dared to hope that her inexplicable affliction had come to an end.

With hours to fill before she needed to shower and dress and drive into town to do what needed to be done, still at the kitchen table, she opened the journal that she had been keeping for some weeks. Her handwriting was almost as neat as that produced by a machine, and the lines of cursive flowed without interruption.

After an hour, she put down the pen and closed the journal and fried more Nueske's bacon, just in case this was the last chance she would have to eat it. That was a peculiar thought. Nueske's had been producing fine bacon for decades, and Cora had no reason to suppose they would go out of business. The economy was bad, yes, and many businesses had folded, but Nueske's was forever. Nevertheless, she ate the bacon with sliced tomatoes and more buttered toast, and again she shared with Dixie Belle.

---

## 5

Jane did not cross the street directly from the vacant house to the Hannafin place. Carrying her tote bag, she walked to the end of the block, then half a block farther, before crossing the street and approaching the residence from the north, considerably reducing the chance that anyone would be looking out a window long enough to see both from where she had come and where she had gone.

At the Craftsman-style house, cut-stone steps bordered with bricks led to a deep porch, at both ends of which crimson wisteria in early bloom cascaded from panels of lattice, providing privacy to commit illegal entry.

She rang the bell three times. No response.

She inserted the thin, flexible pick of the LockAid into the keyway of the deadbolt and pulled the trigger four times before all the pin tumblers were cast to the shear line.

Inside, before she locked the door behind her, she called into the stillness, "Hello? Anyone home?"

When only silence answered her, she committed.

The furnishings and architecture were elegantly coordinated. Slate fireplaces with inset ceramic tiles. Stickley-style furniture with printed cotton fabrics in earth tones. Arts-and-Crafts lighting fixtures. Persian rugs.

The desirable neighborhood, the large house, and the interior design argued against her hope that Hannafin might be an uncorrupted journalist. He was a newspaper guy, and in these days, when most newspapers were as thin as anorexic teenagers and steadily dying out, print reporters, even those with a major Los Angeles daily, didn't command huge salaries. The really big money went to TV-news journalists, most of whom were no more journalists than they were astronauts.

Hannafin, however, had written half a dozen nonfiction books, three of which had spent several weeks each on the bottom third of the bestseller list. They had been serious works, well done. He might have chosen to pour his royalties into his home.

The previous day, using one of several patron computers at a library in Pasadena, Jane easily cracked Hannafin's telecom provider and discovered that he relied on not just a cellphone but also a landline, which made what she was now about to do easier. She had been able to access the phone-company system because she knew of a back door created by a supergeek at the Bureau, Vikram Rang-

nekar. Vikram was sweet and funny—and he cut legal corners when he was ordered to do so either by the director or by a higher power at the Department of Justice. Before Jane had gone on leave, Vikram had an innocent crush on her, even though at the time she'd been married and so far off the playing field that it might as well have been on the moon. As a by-the-book agent, she had never resorted to illegal methods, but she'd been curious about what the corrupt inner circle at Justice might be doing, and she had allowed Vikram to show off his magic every time he wanted to impress her.

In retrospect, it seemed as if she had intuited that her good life would turn sour, that she would be desperate and on the run, and that she would need every trick that Vikram could show her.

According to phone-company records, in addition to a wall-mounted unit in the kitchen, there were three desk models in the Hannafin house: one in the master bedroom, one in the living room, one in the study. She started in the kitchen and finished in the master bedroom, removing the bottom of each phone casing with a small Phillips screwdriver. She wired in a two-function chip that could be remotely triggered to serve as an infinity transmitter or a standard line tap, installed a hook-switch defeat, and closed the casing. She needed only nineteen minutes to complete that work.

If the big walk-in closet in the master bedroom had not suited her plan, she would have found another closet. But it was all right. One hinged door, not a slider. Although currently unlocked, the door featured a keyed deadbolt, perhaps because a small wall safe was concealed in there or maybe because the late Mrs. Hannafin had owned a collection of valuable jewelry. It was a blind lock from within the closet, with no operable thumbturn on that side. A step-stool allowed the higher shelves to be reached with ease.

Hannafin had a lot of clothes with stylish labels: Brunello Cucinelli suits, a collection of Charvet ties, drawers filled with St. Croix sweaters. Jane hid a hammer among some sweaters and a screwdriver in an interior coat pocket of a blue pinstriped suit.

She spent another ten minutes opening drawers in various rooms, not looking for anything specific, just backgrounding the man.

If she departed the house by the front door, the latch bolt would click into place, but the deadbolt wouldn't. When Hannafin returned and found the deadbolt wasn't engaged, he would know that someone had been here in his absence.

She exited instead by a laundry-room door that connected the house and garage, leaving that deadbolt disengaged, which he was more likely to think he had failed to lock.

The side door of the garage had no deadbolt. The simple latch secured it when she stepped outside and pulled it shut behind her.



Once more in the deserted for-sale house, now that morning sun provided cover, Jane switched on the lights in the master bathroom.

As sometimes happened these days, the face in the mirror was not what she expected. After all that she had been through in the past four months, she felt weathered and worn by fear, by grief, by worry. Although her hair was shorter and dyed auburn, she looked much as she had before this began: a youthful twenty-seven, fresh, clear-eyed. It seemed wrong that her husband should be dead, her only child in jeopardy and in hiding, and yet no testament of loss and anxiety could be read in her face or eyes.

Among other things, the large tote bag contained a long blond wig. She fitted it to her head, secured it, brushed it, and used a blue Scünci to hold it in a ponytail. She pulled on a baseball cap that

wasn't emblazoned with any logo or slogan. In jeans, a sweater, and a sport coat cut to conceal the shoulder rig and pistol, she looked anonymous, except that during the past few days, the news media had ensured that her face was nearly as familiar to the public as that of any TV star.

She could have taken steps to disguise herself better, but she wanted Lawrence Hannafin to have no doubt as to her identity.

In the master bedroom, she waited at the window. According to her watch, the runner returned sixty-two minutes after setting out on his morning constitutional.

Because of his name recognition from the bestselling books and the audience he drew for the newspaper, he was free to work at home from time to time. Nevertheless, hot and sweaty, he would probably opt to shower sooner rather than later. Jane waited ten minutes before setting out to pay him a visit.

## 7

Hannafin has been a widower for a year, but he still has not fully adjusted to being alone. Often when he comes home, as now, by habit he calls out to Sakura. In the answering silence, he stands quite still, stricken by her absence.

Irrationally, he sometimes wonders if she is in fact dead. He'd been out of state on an assignment when her medical crisis occurred. Unable to bear the sight of her in death, he allowed cremation. As a consequence, he occasionally turns with the sudden conviction that she is behind him, alive and smiling.

Sakura. In Japanese, the name means *cherry blossom*. It suited her delicate beauty, if not her forceful personality. . . .

He had been a different man before she came into his life. She was so intelligent, so tender. Her gentle but steady encouragement gave him the confidence to write the books that previously he only talked about writing. For a journalist, he was oddly withdrawn, but she extracted him from what she called his “unhappy-turtle shell” and opened him to new experiences. Before her, he was as indifferent to clothes as to fine wine; but she taught him style and refined his taste, until he wanted to be handsome and urbane, to make her proud to be seen with him.

After her death, he put away all the photographs of the two of them together that she had framed in silver and lovingly arranged here and there about the house. The pictures had haunted him, as she still haunts his dreams more nights than not.

“Sakura, Sakura, Sakura,” he whispers to the quiet house, and then goes upstairs to shower.

She was a runner, and she insisted that he run to stay as fit as she was, that they might remain healthy and grow old together. Running without Sakura at first seemed impossible, memories like ghosts waiting around every turn of every route they had taken. But then to stop running felt like a betrayal, as if she were indeed out there on the trails, unable to return to this house of the living, waiting for him that she might see him and know that he was well and vital and staying true to the regimen that she had established for them.

If ever Hannafin dares to speak such thoughts to people at the newspaper, they will call him sentimental to his face—maudlin and mawkish and worse behind his back—because there is no room in most contemporary journalists’ hearts for schmaltz unless it is twined with politics. Nevertheless . . .

In the master bath, he cranks the shower as hot as he can tolerate. Because of Sakura, he does not use ordinary soap, which stresses the skin, but he lathers up with You Are Amazing body wash. His egg-and-cognac shampoo is from Hair Recipes, and he uses an

argan-oil conditioner. All this seemed embarrassingly girly to him when Sakura was alive. But now it is his routine. He recalls times when they showered together, and in his mind's ear, he can hear the girlish giggle with which she engaged in that domestic intimacy.

The bathroom mirror is clouded with steam when he steps out of the shower and towels dry. His reflection is blurred and for some reason disturbing, as if the nebulous form that parallels his every move, if fully revealed, might not be him, but instead some less-than-human denizen of a world within the glass. If he wipes the mirror, it will streak. He leaves the steam to evaporate and walks naked into the bedroom.

A most amazing-looking woman sits in one of the two armchairs. Although she's dressed in scuffed Rockports and jeans and a nothing sweater and an off-brand sport coat, she looks as if she stepped out of the pages of *Vogue*. She's as stunning as the model in the Black Opium perfume ads, except that she's a blonde instead of a brunette.

He stands dumbstruck for a moment, half sure that something has gone wrong with his brain, that he's hallucinating.

She points to a robe that she has taken from his closet and laid out on the bed. "Put that on and sit down. We have to talk."



When she finished the last slice of bacon, Cora Gunderson was surprised to realize that she had eaten an entire pound, minus the couple slices she had fed to the dog. She felt as though she should be embarrassed by this gluttony, if not

also physically ill, but she was neither. Indeed, the indulgence seemed justified to her, though for what reason she could not say.

Usually, when finished eating, she at once washed the dishes and utensils and dried them and put them away. In this instance, however, she felt that cleaning up would be a waste of precious time. She left her plate and dirty flatware on the table, and she ignored the grease-coated frying pan on the stove.

As she licked her fingers, her attention fell on the journal in which she had earlier been writing so industriously. For the life of her, she could not remember what her latest entry had concerned. Puzzled, she slid her plate aside and replaced it with the journal—but hesitated to open the volume.

When she'd graduated college nearly twenty years earlier, she had hoped to become a successful writer, a serious novelist of some importance. In retrospect, that grand intention was only a childish fantasy. Sometimes life seemed to be a machine designed to crush dreams as effectively as a junkyard hydraulic press crumpled cars into compact cubes. She needed to earn a living, and once she began teaching, the desire to publish grew weaker year by year.

Now, although she could not recall what she had so recently written in her journal, the lapse of memory did not worry her, did not stir fears of the early onset of Alzheimer's. Instead, she was inclined to listen to a still, small voice that suggested she would be depressed by the quality of what she had written, that this blank spot in her memory was nothing more than the work of the clear-eyed critic Cora Gundersun sparing the writer Cora Gundersun from the distress of acknowledging that her writing lacked polish and spirit.

She pushed the journal aside without perusing its contents.

She looked down at Dixie Belle, who sat beside the dinette chair. The dachshund gazed up at her mistress with those beautiful if mismatched eyes, pale-blue and dark-brown ovals in a gentle golden face.



Dogs in general, not just good Dixie, sometimes regarded their humans with an expression of loving concern colored with tender pity, as if they knew not merely people's most private fears and hopes, but also the very truth of life and the fate of all things, as though they wished that they could speak in order to give comfort by sharing what they knew.

Such was the expression with which Dixie regarded Cora, and it deeply affected the woman. Sorrow without apparent cause overcame her, as did an existential dread that she knew too well. She reached down to stroke the dog's head. When Dixie licked her hand, Cora's vision blurred with tears.

She said, "What's wrong with me, sweet girl? There's something wrong with me."

The still, small voice within told her to be calm, to worry not, to prepare herself for the eventful day ahead.

Her tears dried.

The digital clock on the oven glowed with the time—10:31 A.M.

She had an hour and a half before she must drive into town. The prospect of so much time to fill made her unaccountably nervous, as if she must keep busy in order to avoid thinking about . . . About what?

Her hands trembled as she opened the journal to a fresh page and picked up the pen, but the tremors passed when she began to write. As if in a trance, Cora rapidly scribed line after line of neatly formed prose, never looking back at the most recent word that she had set down, giving no thought as to what she would write next, filling time to steady her nerves.

Standing on her hind feet, forepaws on the seat of Cora's chair, Dixie whimpered for attention.

"Be calm," Cora told the dog. "Be calm. Don't worry. Don't worry. Prepare yourself for the eventful day ahead."

Lawrence Hannafin's shock turned to blushing embarrassment as, naked, he snatched up the bathrobe. Wrapping it around himself and cinching the belt, he regained enough composure to be apprehensive. "Who the hell are you?"

Jane's voice was strong but without threat. "Be cool. Sit down."

He was accustomed to asserting himself, and his confidence quickly returned. "How did you get in here? This is breaking and entering."

"Criminal trespass," she corrected. She pulled back her sport coat to reveal the shoulder rig and the gun. "Sit down, Hannafin."

After a hesitation, he warily took a step toward a second armchair that was angled to face hers.

"On the bed," she instructed, for she didn't want him close.

She glimpsed cold calculation in his jade-green eyes, but if he considered rushing her, he thought better of the impulse. He sat on the edge of the bed. "There's no money in the house."

"Do I look like a burglar?"

"I don't know what you are."

"But you know *who* I am."

He frowned. "We've never met."

She took off the baseball cap and waited.

After a moment, his eyes widened. "You're FBI. Or were. The rogue agent everyone's hunting. Jane Hawk."

"What do you think of all that?" she asked.

"All what?"

"All that shit about me on TV, in the papers."

Even in these circumstances, he fell quickly into the familiar role of inquisitive reporter. "What do you want me to think of it?"

"Do you believe it?"

"If I believed everything I see in the news, I wouldn't be a journalist, I'd be an idiot."

"You think I really killed two men last week? That sleazy Dark Web entrepreneur and the hotshot Beverly Hills attorney?"

"If you say you didn't, maybe you didn't. Convince me."

"No, I killed them both," she said. "To put him out of his misery, I also killed a man named Nathan Silverman, my section chief at the Bureau, a good friend and mentor, but you haven't heard that. They don't want that reported."

"Who doesn't?"

"Certain people in the Bureau. In the Department of Justice. I have a story for you. A big one."

His eyes were as unreadable as those of a jade Buddha. After a meditative silence, he said, "I'll get a pen and a notepad, and you'll tell me."

"Stay put. We'll talk awhile. Then maybe a pen and notepad."

He hadn't fully towel-dried his hair. Beads of water trickled down his brow, his temples. Water or sweat.

He met her stare and after another silence said, "Why me?"

"I don't trust many journalists. The few I might have trusted in the new generation—they're all suddenly dead. You're not."

"My only qualification is that I'm alive?"

"You wrote a profile of David James Michael."

"The Silicon Valley billionaire."

David Michael had inherited billions, none made in Silicon Valley. He subsequently made billions more from data-mining, from biotech, from just about everything in which he invested.

She said, "Your profile was fair."

"I always try to be."

"But there was a measure of acid in it."

He shrugged. "He's a philanthropist, a progressive, a down-to-earth guy, bright and charming. But I didn't like him. I couldn't get

anything on him. There was no reason to suspect he wasn't what he seemed to be. But a good reporter has . . . intuition."

She said, "David Michael invested in a Menlo Park research facility, Shenneck Technology. Then he and Bertold Shenneck became partners in a biotech startup called Far Horizons."

Hannafin waited for her to continue, and when she didn't, he said, "Shenneck and his wife, Inga, died in a house fire at their Napa Valley getaway ranch on Sunday."

"No. They were shot to death. The fire is a cover story."

Regardless of how self-possessed he might be, every man had fear tells, like poker tells, that revealed the emotional truth of him when he was sufficiently anxious: a tic in one eye, a sudden pulse visible in the temple, a repeated licking of the lips, one thing or another. Hannafin had no tell that she could detect.

He said, "Did you kill them, too?"

"No. But they deserved to die."

"So you're judge and jury?"

"I can't be bought like a judge or fooled like a jury. Anyway, Bertold Shenneck and his wife were killed because Far Horizons—meaning the bright and charming David Michael—had no further use for them."

For a beat, he searched her eyes, as if he could read truth in the diameter of her pupils, in the blue striations of her irises. Suddenly he stood up. "Damn it, woman, I need a pen and paper."

Jane drew the .45 from under her sport coat. "Sit down."

He remained standing. "I can't trust all this to memory."

"And I can't trust *you*," she said. "Not yet. Sit down."

Reluctantly he sat. He didn't seem cowed by the gun. The beads of moisture tracking down his face were more likely to be water, not sweat.

"You know about my husband," she said.

"It's all over the news. He was a highly decorated Marine. He committed suicide about four months ago."

"No. They murdered him."

"Who did?"

"Bertold Shenneck, David James Michael, every sonofabitch associated with Far Horizons. Do you know what nanomachines are?"

The change of subject puzzled Hannafin. "Nanotechnology? Microscopic machines made of only a few molecules. Some real-world applications. Mostly science fiction."

"Science fact," she corrected. "Bertold Shenneck developed nanomachines that are injected into the bloodstream in a serum, several thousand incredibly tiny constructs that are brain-tropic. They self-assemble into a larger network once they pass through capillary walls into the brain tissue."

"Larger network?" Skepticism creased his brow, pleated the skin at the corners of his eyes. "What larger network?"

"A control mechanism."

## 10

If Lawrence Hannafin thought Jane was a paranoid of the tinfoil-hat variety, he gave no indication of it. He sat on the edge of the bed, managing to look dignified in his plush cotton robe, barefoot, hands relaxed on his thighs. He listened intently.

She said, "The historical rate of suicide in the U.S. is twelve per hundred thousand. The past year or so, it's risen to fifteen."

"Supposing you're right and it's higher. So what? These are hard times for a lot of people. A bad economy, social turmoil."

"Except the increase involves successful men and women, most in happy marriages, with no history of depression. Military . . . like Nick, my husband. Journalists, scientists, doctors, lawyers, police,

teachers, economists. These fanatics are eliminating people their computer model says will push civilization in the wrong direction."

"Whose computer model?"

"Shenneck's. David Michael's. Far Horizons's. Whatever bastards in the government are in league with them. *Their* computer model."

"Eliminating them how?"

"Are you listening to me?" she asked, her FBI cool melting a little. "Nanomachine control mechanisms. Self-assembling brain implants. They inject them—"

He interrupted. "Why would anyone submit to such an injection?"

Agitated, Jane rose from the armchair, stepped farther away from Hannafin, stood staring at him, the pistol casually aimed at the floor near his feet. "Of course they don't know they've been injected. One way or another, they're sedated first. Then they're injected in their sleep. At conferences they attend. When they're traveling, away from home, alone and vulnerable. The control mechanism assembles in the brain within a few hours of injection, and after that, they forget it ever happened."

No less inscrutable than a wall of hieroglyphics in a pharaoh's tomb, Hannafin stared at her either as if she were a prophetess predicting the very fate of humanity that he had long expected or as if she were insane and mistaking fever dreams for fact; she could not tell which. Maybe he was processing what she said, getting his mind around it. Or maybe he was thinking about the revolver in the nearby nightstand drawer, which she had found on her first visit to the house.

At last he said, "And then these people, these injected people . . . they're controlled?" He couldn't repress a note of incredulity in his voice. "You mean like robots? Like zombies?"

"It's not that obvious," Jane said impatiently. "They don't know they're controlled. But weeks later, maybe months, they receive the

command to kill themselves, and they can't resist. I can provide piles of research. Weird suicide notes. Evidence that the attorneys general of at least two states are conspiring to cover this up. I've spoken with a medical examiner who saw the nanomachine web across all four lobes of a brain during an autopsy."

She had so much information to convey, and she wanted to win Hannafin's confidence. But when she talked too fast, she was less convincing. She sounded to herself as though she was on the edge of babbling. She almost holstered the gun to reassure him, but rejected that idea. He was a big man in good physical shape. She could handle him, if it came to that, but there was no reason to give him an opening if there was a one-in-a-thousand chance he would take it.

She drew a deep breath, spoke calmly. "Their computer model identifies a critical number of Americans in each generation who supposedly could steer the culture in the wrong direction, push civilization to the brink with dangerous ideas."

"A computer model can be designed to give any result you want."

"No shit. But a computer model gives them self-justification. This critical number of theirs is two hundred ten thousand. They say a generation is twenty-five years. So the computer says eliminate the right eighty-four hundred each year and you'll make a perfect world, all peace and harmony."

"That's freaking crazy."

"Haven't you noticed, insanity is the new normal?"

"Wrong ideas? What wrong ideas?"

"They aren't specific about that. They just know them when they see them."

"They're going to kill people to save the world?"

"They *have* killed people. A lot of them. Killing to save the world—why is that hard to believe? It's as old as history."

Maybe he needed to be moving around to absorb a big new idea,

to cope with a shock to the system. He got to his feet again, not with obvious aggressive intent, making no move for the nightstand drawer that contained the revolver. Jane eased closer to the hallway door as he moved away from her and toward the nearer of two windows. He stood staring down at the suburban street, pulling at the lower half of his face with one hand, as though he had just awakened and felt a residue of sleep still clinging like a mask.

He said, "You're a hot item on the National Crime Information Center website. Photos. A federal warrant for your arrest. They say you're a major national-security threat, stealing defense secrets."

"They're liars. You want the story of the century or not?"

"Every law-enforcement agency in the country uses the NCIC."

"You don't have to tell me I'm in a tight spot."

"Nobody evades the FBI for long. Or Homeland Security. Not these days, not with cameras everywhere and drones and every car transmitting its location with a GPS."

"I know how all that works—and how it doesn't."

He turned from the window to look at her. "You against the world, all to avenge your husband."

"It's not vengeance. It's about clearing his name."

"Would you know the difference? And there's a child in this. Your son. Travis, is it? What is he—five? I'm not going to be twisted up in anything that puts a little kid at risk."

"He's at risk *now*, Hannafin. When I wouldn't stop investigating Nick's death and these suicides, the creeps threatened to kill Travis. *Rape him* and kill him. So I went on the run with him."

"He's safe?"

"He's safe for now. He's in good hands. But to make him safe forever, I've got to break this conspiracy wide open. I have the evidence. Thumb drives of Shenneck's files, every iteration of his design for the brain implants, the control mechanisms. Records of his experiments. Ampules containing mechanisms ready for injection. But I don't know who to trust in the Bureau, the police, anywhere. I



need you to break the story. I have *proof*. But I don't dare share it with people who might take it away from me and destroy it."

"You're a fugitive from justice. If I work with you instead of turning you in, I'm an accessory."

"You've got a journalistic exemption."

"Not if they won't grant it to me and not if all this you're telling me is a lie. Not if you aren't real."

Exasperation brought heat to her face and a new roughness to her voice. "They don't just use the nanoimplants to cull the population of people they don't like. They have other uses that'll sicken you when I lay it all out. Terrify and sicken. This is about freedom, Hannafin, yours as much as mine. It's about a future of hope or slavery."

He shifted his attention from her to the street beyond the window and stood in silence.

She said, "I thought I saw a pair of balls when you stepped out of the shower. Maybe they're just decoration."

His hands were fisted at his sides, which might have indicated that he was repressing his anger and wanted to strike her—or that he was frustrated with his inability to be the fearless journalist that he had been in his youth.

From a sleeve on her shoulder holster, she extracted a sound suppressor and screwed it onto the pistol. "Get away from the window." When he didn't move, she said, "*Now*," and took the Colt in a two-hand grip.

Her stance and the silencer persuaded him to move.

"Get in the closet," she said.

His flushed face paled. "What do you mean?"

"Relax. I'm just going to give you time to think."

"You're going to kill me."

"Don't be stupid. I'll lock you in the closet and let you think about what I've said."

Before he had showered, he had left his wallet and house keys on

the nightstand. Now the key, on a kinky red-plastic coil, was in the closet lock.

Hannafin hesitated to cross that threshold.

"There's really no choice," she said. "Go to the back of the closet and sit on the floor."

"How long will you keep me in there?"

"Find the hammer and screwdriver I hid earlier. Use them to get the pivot pins out of the hinge barrels, pry the door open. You'll be free in maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. I'm not about to let you watch me leave the house and see what car I'm driving."

Relieved that the closet wouldn't be his coffin, Hannafin stepped inside, sat on the floor. "There's really a hammer and screwdriver?"

"Really. I'm sorry I had to come at you this way. But I'm running on a tightrope these days, and damn if anyone's going to knock me off. It's a quarter till nine. I'll call you at noon. I hope you'll decide to help me. But if you're not ready to break a story that'll bring the demon legions down on you, tell me so and stay out of it. I don't want to tie myself to someone who can't go the distance."

She gave him no chance to respond, closed the door, locked it, and left the key in the keyway.

Immediately, she could hear him rummaging through the closet in search of the hammer and screwdriver.

She holstered the pistol and the silencer separately. She picked up her tote bag and hurried downstairs. On her way out, she slammed the front door so that he would be sure to hear it.

After the glittering starfield of the previous night and the pellucid sky of dawn, the blue vault over the San Gabriel Valley was surrendering to an armada of towering thunderheads sailing in from the northwest, on course for Los Angeles. Among the densely leafed branches of nearby Indian laurels, song sparrows were already sheltering, issuing sweet trills and clear notes to reassure one another, but the crows were still chasing down the sky, raucous heralds of the storm.

Over sixteen hundred air miles from Los Angeles, in Minnesota, the digital clock on Cora Gundersun's oven read 11:02 when she closed her journal. She was no less mystified by this most recent session of furious writing than she had been by the one that had preceded it. She didn't know what words she had set down on those pages or why she had felt compelled to write them, or why after the fact she dared not read them.

The still, small voice within her counseled serenity. All would be well. More than two days without a migraine. By this time next week, she would most likely return to her sixth-grade classroom and the children whom she loved nearly as much as if they had been her own offspring.

The time had come for Dixie Belle's late-morning treat and second toileting of the day. In consideration of the bacon granted to her earlier, the dog received just two small coin-shaped cookies instead of the usual four. She seemed to understand the rightness of the ration, for she neither begged for more nor grumbled, but padded across the kitchen to the back door, nails clicking on the linoleum.

Shrugging into her coat, Cora said, "Good heavens, Dixie, look at me, still in my pajamas with the morning nearly gone. If I don't get back to teaching soon, I'll become a hopeless layabout."

The day had not warmed much since dawn. The frozen sky hung low and constipated, providing no evidence of the predicted storm except a bare minimum of white flakes slowly spiraling down through the becalmed air.

After Dixie peed, she didn't scamper back to the house, but stood staring at Cora on the porch. Dachshunds didn't need much exercise, and Dixie in particular was averse to long walks and to more

than an occasional experience of the outdoors. Except for her first visit to the yard in the morning, she always hurried inside after completing her business. On this occasion, she required coaxing, and she returned hesitantly, almost as though she wasn't sure that her mistress was her mistress, as if both Cora and the house suddenly seemed strange to her.

Minutes later, after Cora showered, she vigorously towed her hair. There was no point in using a blow-dryer and a styling brush. Her curly tresses resisted shaping. She entertained no illusions about her appearance and long ago made peace with the fact that she would never turn heads. She looked pleasant and presentable, which was more than could be said for some less fortunate people.

Although it was not suitable to the season, she put on a white rayon-crepe dress with three-quarter sleeves, a semifitted bodice with a high, round neckline, and a skirt with knife pleats stitched down to hip level. Of all the dresses she had ever owned, this one came the closest to making her feel pretty. Because high heels did nothing for her, she wore white sneakers.

Only after she had put on the shoes did she realize that this outfit was what she wore in the fire-walking dream, which she'd had the previous night again, for the fifth night in a row. In addition to feeling almost pretty, she now channeled at least a measure of the sense of invulnerability that made the dream so delightful.

Although Dixie Belle usually lay on the bed to watch her mistress dress, on this occasion she was *under* the bed, only her head and long ears poking out from beneath the quilted spread.

Cora said, "You're a funny dog, Miss Dixie. Sometimes you can be so silly."