

A Grave Talent

Laurie R. King

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Prologue

The first small body was found by Tommy Chesler one cold and drizzling afternoon two weeks before Christmas.

Before dawn that morning Tommy had left his cabin with his venerable and marginally accurate deer rifle under his arm and a handful of shells in his pocket, his heart set on a supply of illicit venison. He had no license, it was not the season, and hunting was absolutely forbidden where he planned on going, but that did not worry Tommy. Not much, at any rate. However, he did exercise a fair degree of caution, lest a ranger from the park happen upon him, and he stuck to areas where nobody was likely to be that time of the year, particularly in the rain.

Unfortunately, that included the deer.

At one o'clock, wet through, hungry, and in as bad a temper as he was capable of, Tommy turned for home. Two hours later he was pulling himself hand and foot up the greasy, nearly vertical path made by generations of agile hooves toward the telltale clearing in the trees that meant the Road rising atop the hill above him. He shook his head in disgust at the fresh prints and droppings and decided that he'd just have to go to the Newborns and ask for some of the pig they'd slaughtered last week. Trade some firewood, maybe, or split shakes for their addition. Truth to tell, pork was better than venison anyway. Venison you could roast or you could stew, but most of it had to be given away, and you got tired soon enough of what was left. But pork, now.

Pork you could roast and stew, and you could fry and mix with apples and eggs, and make bacon, and—.

Tommy's mouth started to water at the thought of cracklings and red-eye gravy, and when he heard a quick scuffling noise and half saw something lying twenty feet from the edge of the Road, his mind was so occupied that it took a minute for his eyes and ears to interrupt.

Tommy stopped dead, his right foot already touching the jumble of scree that the bulldozer had pushed over in the last grading, and an expression of laborious thought came into his normally blank face. Tommy was not, at the best of times, a man who found reflection easy, and now, tired and distracted, he pulled off his hat and rumbled up his hair as if to stimulate his brains. He wasn't stupid; Tyler had reassured him on that point. He was just—careful. Deliberate. Perhaps that explains why Tommy did not immediately turn to the object that had caught his eye but stood for a long moment looking up at the Road. Perhaps there was some other reason. However, turn back he did, deliberately. There was a further scuffle (weasel, Tommy thought automatically) that moved away rapidly through the low shrubs; with care Tommy walked around a tangle of dormant poison oak, and there before him was a foot, the remains of a small, cold, gray, naked foot.

His eyes focused with great concentration on the delicate, round nail of the littlest toe, so as not to have to look at what that toenail was attached to, and the thought came firmly into his mind that he really wished he'd stayed home that morning and worked on the roof instead of coming out here illegally hunting for deer, and when his thoughts marched inexorably on to the idea of ham, Tommy Chesler was suddenly very, very ill.



It took some time, but his stomach eventually stopped trying to crawl out of his throat. He rinsed his mouth with the cold water from the little flask he always carried and tried to think what to do. Tommy may have been none too bright, but he

was a gentle man, and he loved children. Without looking too closely at why, he knew he did not want to leave this spot to fetch help—from the freshness of some of the spoor (weasel, yes, and fox and—) there might be nothing to come back to. Another man would perhaps have shrugged his shoulders and gone on down the trail, unwilling to display his deer rifle to all and sundry, but not Tommy. As clearly as if she (or was it a he?) had spoken, Tommy knew that this child, what was left of her (it did have longish hair) was his responsibility. It was not often that Tommy was made responsible for another human being, and he was not about to fail this one. Even if she was dead.

A signal was needed, he decided. The nearest houses were about two miles off, so it would have to be a big signal. He stood thinking intensely, oblivious to the bite of the wind and the thick smell, until an idea came trickling up into his mind, the memory of a grainy cowboy movie seen on Tyler's ancient television set. He looked at his gun, and at the handful of ammunition from his pocket. Ten bullets, and one in the gun. They would have to do. He pointed the heavy gun vaguely upward and fired. Paused and fired again. Another pause, and once more. Two minutes later he repeated the three shots and wondered somewhat guiltily where those bullets would come to earth. After another wait he did it again; then, ever tidy, he gathered up the spent shells and wondered what to do next. Perhaps it wasn't necessary to stand quite so close, he decided. He pulled himself back up the slippery hill to the Road, and the response came: three spaced shots. He loaded one of the two remaining bullets and fired it. One shot came in answer. Happy now, he squatted against a tree where he could keep an eye on the hillside below, and waited.

The events that followed were predictable, if unprecedented. The Riddle brothers arrived, and though their reaction to Tommy's find was not as dramatic as his (for they had come expecting to find trouble and had presumably not been thinking of ham), they climbed back onto the Road considerably subdued and swallowing convulsively. Tommy and Ben Riddle set off downhill to the Dodson farm five miles away, and within

the hour a pigtailed Amy Dodson was skittering off down the road on her sure-footed little hill pony, Matilda, toward Tyler's Barn and a telephone, four miles further. It was nearly midnight before the police teams arrived at the earthly remains of Tina Merrill, having lost one four-wheel-drive vehicle and its driver (who was flown out with a broken leg) into Tyler's Creek. They did not know the name of the child at first, of course. It took a couple of days to match the dental X rays and the traces of a long-healed fracture of the right arm with the gap-toothed grinning child who looked out from hundreds of bulletin boards and telephone poles throughout the Bay Area, but the identity was certain.

It was not a good Christmas for the Merrill family.



Because Tina's body had been out on the hillside for so long, it was difficult for the pathology people to be certain, but it did not appear that she had been abused in any way before she was strangled. She had vanished in San Francisco on her way home from school, on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, and was left in the woods not too many days after that. Her murderer had apparently carried her naked body to this spot half a mile down the fire road from where it entered the state reserve, where Tommy Chesler found her ten days later. The overworked detective who was handed her case held out little hope of an immediate arrest. His name was Alonzo Hawkin.



The second child was found six weeks later, fifteen miles away as the crow flies, and in considerably fresher condition. The couple who found her had nothing in common with Tommy Chesler other than the profound wish afterwards that they had done something else on that particular day. It had been a gorgeous morning, a brilliant day following a week of rain, and they had awakened to an impulsive decision to call in sick from their jobs, throw some Brie, sourdough, and Riesling into the insulated bag,

and drive down the coast. Impulse had again called to them from the beach where Tyler's Creek met the ocean, and following their picnic they decided to look for some privacy up the creekside trail. Instead, they found Amanda Bloom.

Amanda, too, was from over the hill in the Bay Area, though her home was across the water from Tina's. There were a number of similarities in the two girls: both of them were in kindergarten, both were white girls with brown hair, both were from upper-middle-class families. And both of them had walked home from their schools.



It was the third death that set off the fireworks, even before the body was found. Samantha Donaldson disappeared from the fenced-in, manicured front garden of her parents' three-and-a-quarter-million-dollar home in the hills above Palo Alto on a sunny Monday in February. She reappeared some hours later, quite dead, on Tyler's Road. Samantha was five years old and had shiny brown hair, and with her disappearance the low-grade fear among Bay Area parents, particularly those with brown-haired, kindergarten-aged daughters, erupted into outright panic. From Napa to Salinas, parents descended on schools, sent delegations to police stations, arranged car pools, and held hundreds of tight-voiced conversations with their frightened children about the dangers of talking with strange people, conversations which brought feelings of deep, inchoate resentment on the part of the adults at this need to frighten kids in order to keep them safe.

The Donaldsons were important people on the peninsula. Mrs. Donaldson, a third-generation San Franciscan, was the moving force behind—and in front of—a number of arts programs and counted the mayor of San Francisco among her personal friends. So it was hardly surprising that within two hours of Samantha's disappearance Alonzo Hawkin's other cases were taken from him and he was put in charge of directing the investigations in all four counties. He was also given an assistant. He was not pleased when he heard the name.

“Who?” His worn features twisted as if he’d smelled something rotten, which in a way he had.

“Katarina Cecilia Martinelli, known as Casey. From her initials.”

“Christ Almighty, Ted. Some nut is out there killing little girls, I’m about to have half of Northern California come down on my head, and you assign me some Madonna in uniform who was probably writing parking tickets until last week.”

“She made inspector a year ago,” Lieutenant Patterson said patiently. “She’s new here, but she got a first-class degree from Cal, and the people in San Jose say she’s competent as hell, gave her a citation to prove it.”

“‘Competent’ means that she’s either impossible to get along with or so nervous she’ll shoot her own foot.”

“I know she’s green, Al, and we probably wouldn’t have promoted her to detective yet, but I think she’ll work out. Hell, we were all young once, and she’ll age fast working with you,” he said, trying for camaraderie, but at the lack of reaction on Hawkin’s face he sighed and retreated into authority. “Look, Al, we have to have a woman on it, and the only ones I’ve got better than her are involved, in a cast, or on maternity leave. Take her.”

“I’d rather have one of the secretaries from the pool.”

“Al, you take Martinelli or I’ll give the case to Kitagawa. Look, I want you to take this. I read the reports on the cases you handled in Los Angeles, the two kidnappings, and I like the way you worked them. But I have to have a woman’s face on this one—I’m sure you can see that—and I just don’t have anyone else free. I’d give you a more experienced woman if I could, but at the moment I don’t have one. Believe me, Al, I want this bastard caught, fast, and I wouldn’t do this to you if I thought she’d be in the way. Now, will you have her, or do I give it to Kitagawa?”

“No, I want it. I’ll take her. But you owe me.”

“I owe you. Here’s her file. I told her you’d want to see her at six.”

Book One

THE ROAD

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

—Henry David Thoreau,
Walden

“Good Heavens,” I cried. “Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?” “They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

—Arthur Conan Doyle,
“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”

Chapter One

San Francisco was still dark when the telephone erupted a foot from the ear of Katarina Cecilia Martinelli, Casey to her colleagues, Kate to her few friends. She had it off the hook before the first ring had ended.

“Yes?”

“Inspector Martinelli?”

“Yes.”

“Inspector Hawkin wants you to pick him up at the front entrance in fifteen minutes. He says to tell you they found Samantha Donaldson.”

“Not alive.”

“No.”

“Tell the inspector it’ll be closer to twenty, unless he wants me in my pajamas.” She hung up without waiting for a response, flung back the tangle of blankets, and lay for a moment looking up into the dark room. She was not wearing pajamas.

A sleep-thick voice came from the next pillow.

“Is this going to be a common occurrence from now on?”

“You married into trouble when you married me,” Kate snarled cheerfully.

“I didn’t marry you.”

“If it’s good enough for Harriet Vane, it’s good enough for you.”

“Oh, God, Lord Peter in my bed at, what is it, five o’clock? I knew this promotion was a mistake.”

“Go back to sleep.”

“I’ll make you some breakfast.”

“No time.”

“Toast, then. You go shower.”

Kate scooped clothes out of various drawers and closets, and then paused with them tucked under her left arm and looked out the window.

Of all views of the bridge that dominated this side of the city, it was this one she loved the best—still dark, but with the early commute beginning to thicken the occasional headlights that passed at what seemed like arm’s reach. The Bay Bridge was a more workmanlike structure than the more famous Golden Gate Bridge, but the more beautiful for it. Alcatraz, which lay full ahead of the house, could be seen from this side by leaning a bit. Kate leaned, checked that the defunct island prison still looked as surreal as it always did in the dark, and then stayed leaning against the frame of the window, her nose almost touching the old, undulating glass. She was hit by a brief, fierce surge of passion for the house, for the wood against her right hand—wood which that hand had stripped and sanded and varnished eighteen months before—and for the oak boards beneath her bare feet that she herself had freed of the cloying flowered carpet and filled and sanded and varnished and waxed. She was not yet thirty years old and had lived in eighteen different houses and had never before understood how anyone could feel possessive of a mere set of walls. Now she could. Perhaps you had to put sweat into a house before it was home, she speculated, watching the cars curve past her. Or perhaps it was that she’d never lived in anything but stucco before. Hard to get passionate about a house made of plywood and chicken wire.

This house was about as old as things get in San Francisco, where even the Mission is a reconstructed pretense. Its walls had smelled the fire of 1906, which had destroyed most of what the earthquake had left. The house had known six births and two deaths, had suffered the indignities of paint and of being crowded by inappropriate high-rises filled with absurdly

expensive apartments, which greedily devoured the incomparable view from Russian Hill. The house was a true San Franciscan, fussy and dignified, immensely civilized and politely oblivious of the eccentricities of neighbors. It had several balconies, a great deal of hand-worked wood, heavy beams, crooked floors, and a pocket-handkerchief lawn that was shaded by the upstarts and by a neighbor's tree. Kate hoped that the house was as content with her as she was with it.

"I ought to flick on the lights," said Lee from behind her. "Give the commuters a thrill." Kate dropped a shoe, realized with a spurt of panic that she'd been standing there mesmerized by the lights for a good two minutes, snatched up the shoe and sprinted for the bathroom.

Toast was waiting for her downstairs, and a large thermos of strong coffee and a bag of sandwiches, and Kate pulled up to the curb in twenty-one minutes. Hawkin was standing on the sidewalk in front of the Hall of Justice, a raincoat over his arm, and climbed into the seat beside her. He tossed his hat negligently over his shoulder into the back.

"You know where you're going?" he said by way of greeting.

"Tyler's Road?"

"Yes. Wake me ten minutes before we get there," and so saying he wadded his coat against the door and was limp before they reached the freeway.

Kate drove fast and sure through the empty streets to the freeway entrance, negotiated the twists, merged into the southward lane without mishap. She was grateful for the reprieve from conversation, for although her round face was calm in the gray light and her short, strong fingers lay easily on the wheel, the fingers were icy and elsewhere she was sweating.

She left Highway 280 and pointed the car west over the coastal range, and in the gray light of early morning she made a deliberate effort to relax. She arched her hands in turn, settled herself back in the seat, and reached for the attitude she tried to have before a long run. Pace yourself, Kate, she thought. There's nothing you can't handle here, it's just another small step up

the ladder; Hawkin's no ogre, you're going to learn a lot from him. Apprehension is one thing, it's only to be expected—news cameras, everyone's eye on you—but they're not going to see below the surface, nobody's interested in you.

True, it didn't help to know that she was there for a number of reasons that she wouldn't exactly have chosen and did not feel proud of. It amused her to think that she counted as a minority, advanced prematurely (but only by a degree) due to unexpected vacancies and one of those periodic departmental rumblings of concern over Image, Minorities, and the dread Women's Movement, but it was not amusing to think that she had been assigned to this specific case because she was relatively photogenic and a team player known for not making waves, that she was a political statement from the SFPD to critics from women's groups, and, worst of all, that her assignment reflected the incredibly outdated, absurd notion that women, even those without their own, were somehow "better with children." Humiliating reasons, but she was not about to cut her own throat by refusing the dubious honor. She just hoped the people she was going to work with didn't hold it against her. She wasn't sure about Al Hawkin. He had seemed pretty brusque yesterday, but...

Kate had presented herself in his office the evening before at precisely six o'clock with the same nervous symptoms that had stayed with her until this morning, the icy hands, sweating body, dry mouth. He looked up from his paper-strewn desk at her knock, a thickset, graying man in a light blue shirt, sleeves rolled up on hairy forearms, tieless, collar loosened, in need of a shave. He pulled off his glasses and looked at her with patient, detached blue-gray eyes, and she wondered if she had the right room. He hardly seemed to be the terror rumor had him.

"Lieutenant Hawkin?"

"Not any more. Just 'Inspector.' And you're...?"

"Inspector Martinelli, sir. Lieutenant Patterson told me to come here at six o'clock." She heard her voice drift up into a question mark, and kicked herself. You will not be a Miss Wishy-Washy, she ordered herself fiercely.

“Yes. Do you drive?”

“Drive?” she repeated, taken aback. “Yes, I can drive.”

“Good. I hate driving. Take an unmarked, if you like, or you can use your own car and bill the department, if you have a radio. Doesn’t matter in the least to me. All I ask is that you never let the tank get less than half full. Damned inconvenient to run out of gas twenty miles from nowhere.”

“Yes sir. I’ll use my own, then, thanks. I have a car phone. Sir.”

“The name is Al.”

“Okay, Al.”

“That stack of folders is for you to take home. I’ll expect you to have read through them by tomorrow. See you in the morning.”

With that he had put his glasses back on and taken up another file. Trying hard to keep her dignity in the face of the dismissal, she had gathered up the armload of papers and gone home to read into the early hours. First, however, she had filled the tank. And checked the oil.

A generous ten minutes before they arrived Kate spoke his name tentatively, and he immediately woke and looked around him. A few fat drops hit the windshield. She flicked on the wipers and glanced over at him.

“Looks like we’ll be needing those raincoats,” she offered. He gave no sign of having heard, and she flushed slightly. Damn, was he going to be one of those?

Actually, Alonzo Hawkin was not one of those. Alonzo Hawkin was simply the epitome of the one-track mind, and at that moment his mind was on a very different track from the weather. He missed little, reacted less, and thought incessantly about his work. His wife had found him dismal company, and had immersed herself in their two children—schools, dance lessons, soccer teams. Six months after the younger one left for the university, the presence of a continually distracted husband who worked strange hours and slept stranger ones had proven more than she could bear, and she too had gone. That was a year ago. He had stayed on at his job in Los Angeles, but when he heard

of the opening in San Francisco and thought that it might be nice to be able to breathe in the summer, he applied for it and got it. With surprisingly few regrets he had left the city where he had lived all his adult life, packed up his books and his fish tanks, and come here.

Hawkin woke, as he always did outside of his own bed, without disorientation, his thoughts continuing where they had left off. In this case they ran a close parallel with those going through Kate's mind. Hawkin strongly suspected that he, the new boy, had been thrown this very sticky case in order to save the necks of the higher-ups. He was an outsider, easily sacrificed, in the event of failure, on the altar of public opinion. If he failed, well, they would say, he was so highly recommended by his former colleagues, but I guess we were asking too much of a guy who doesn't know the area. If he succeeded, it would, he was sure, be arranged to reflect well on the judgment of those who chose him. Perhaps it wasn't entirely fair to be so suspicious of their motives—after all, the department was short-handed at the moment, and he did have a couple of very successful kidnapping cases to his credit, so he was the logical one to take this one. He knew, however, that there was a certain amount of time-buying going on, and he'd been given the prominence, in the face of a near-hysterical public and the considerable force of Mrs. Donaldson, while the department above him decided what it wanted to do. Disturbing, but he'd probably have done the same. No, he corrected himself, he probably wouldn't. Al Hawkin liked to be in the middle of things. He'd just have to make damn sure he succeeded.

He wondered if this reserved, almost pretty, alarmingly young police inspector at his side might turn out to be as competent as her record and her driving seemed to suggest. He hoped to God she was, for both their sakes. Hawkin squinted up at the heavy sky and sighed, thinking of Los Angeles.

"Looks like you're right," he said aloud, and missed her surprised look as he stretched over the back of the seat for his hat. "Is that coffee?" he asked, spotting the thermos on the back floor.

“Yes, help yourself. There’s a cup in the glove compartment.”

“No sugar?”

“Sorry.”

“Oh well, can’t be helped,” he allowed, and slurped cautiously.

“Good coffee. How’d you have time to make it?”

“I didn’t. I have a friend.”

“Must be a good friend, to make you coffee at five-thirty in the morning.”

“Mmm.”

“Well, he makes decent coffee, but next time have him throw some packets of sugar in for mine.”

Kate opened her mouth, and shut it again firmly. Time enough for that, another day. Other matters pressed.

“About the body—who found it?” she asked.

“One of the women on the Road, Terry something, Allen maybe. She’s a nurse, works the odd day in town, always weird hours. She leaves her two dogs at Tyler’s place, at the beginning of the Road, and walks home. At two in the morning, can you believe it? Anyway, a couple miles up the Road the dogs started getting jumpy at something down the hill, and at first she thought it was a skunk or a raccoon, but her flashlight caught it, and it was the girl. She woke a neighbor and sent him down to Tyler’s to phone while she stayed with the body. That’s all I know. We’ll interview her at Tyler’s later. I told Trujillo—the local man on the case?—to round up everyone on the Road and bring them down. We couldn’t possibly do a door-to-door—it’d take us a week.”

“The Road is bad? Is that why the woman has to walk home?”

“Wasn’t that in the stuff I gave you yesterday? Maybe I never bothered putting it into the case notes. Anyway, the whole area is owned by one John Tyler. Nice fellow, but a bit eccentric even by California standards—he regards himself as some kind of modern-day country squire living on a landed estate, with overtones of an ecological garden of Eden. No electrical lines into the area, no telephones, and cars allowed up the Road only

two days a week. More than seventy people up there, some of them nine miles from a telephone, along an old fire road that washes out every third year.”

“Sounds fun,” said Kate, wondering how her car was expected to tackle that.

“Doesn’t it? All the inconveniences of modern life with none of the benefits. It does limit the field considerably, though. There are locked gates at both ends of the Road—locks changed a few months ago, residents have the only keys—and the body was found about two and a half miles up.”

“Was yesterday one of the days cars were allowed?”

“Trujillo says yes, and that people who work in town tend to shop for groceries and such those days and drive up at night, so nobody pays much attention to cars on Monday nights.”

“Great. Well, if it’s a dirt road there should be tracks left, if they get to them soon.”

“Depends on what time they were put there. They had rain here after midnight. Yeah,” he said, seeing her expression, “it goes like that sometimes.”

“Maybe we’ll luck out. Do you know if this is the same Tyler who runs a big medieval weekend every year? It seems to me it’s held at a place called Tyler’s Barn, everyone in costume, archery contests, that kind of thing.”

“Sure to be. The place is bristling with lances and broadswords and God knows what. Here we are. And somebody’s tipped the press.”

Chapter Two

It was an impressive sight, despite the ominous and growing cluster of press vehicles lined up on the seaward side of the paved road, from beat-up sedans to two shiny vans whose letters proclaimed their channels and whose silver mobile transmitters jutted toward the lowering sky. Tyler's Barn sat on the edge of a twenty-acre clearing, which at this time of year was green enough to be called a meadow. Two huge, pale horses turned their rumps to the human fuss and grazed. Hills covered in redwoods rose dramatically beyond. There actually was a barn, though from here it was nearly hidden behind a big, old wooden house (lodge was the word that came to mind) and a vast, open-sided shed with a rusting, corrugated metal roof draped with leafless vines. The shed seemed to be filled with automobiles and farm machinery, but from the Road it was nearly obscured by the high wire fence, intertwined with more bare vines, that had lined the Road for the last few miles and that continued solidly around the next curve, broken only, Kate saw now, by three gates.

The first gate was a simple, sturdy metal affair wide enough for a truck, and from it the double ruts of a dirt track climbed through the meadow to disappear into the trees. The gate was mounted on a pair of what looked like telephone poles, from which was suspended a tired wooden sign, the width of the gate, which proclaimed this as TYLER'S ROAD. A heavy chain and padlock held the gate shut, and a man with a uniform and

regulation rain slickers, sitting in a police car, ensured it stayed that way.

A quarter of a mile down the Road they came to a second gate. This one was simple, low, and wooden, graced by an archway and more vines (some leaves on these—were they roses?), tastefully accompanied by another large uniform and slickers. The third gate was metal like the first, but twice as wide, and opened into the barn's yard. At Hawkin's directions Kate turned into this gate, which was standing open, and held up her ID. The guard waved them through into an acre or more of gravel, a rough triangle edged by the long shed, the house (which was even larger than it had appeared from the Road), and the sprawling barn, to which sheds and lean-tos of various shapes, sizes, and eras had been attached like barnacles to a host shell. She pulled up next to the house, and a slim young man in a beautifully cut gray suit emerged from the door of one of the barn's appendages and trotted across the gravel to greet them.

"Morning, Inspector Hawkin, and you must be Inspector Martinelli. I'm Paul, Paul Trujillo."

"Casey," she offered in return. His handshake was trim like the rest of him, his hands neat, his dark eyes friendly under black, carefully tousled hair. At the moment the wouldn't-you-like-to-run-your-fingers-through-my-hair effect was flattened somewhat by the thousands of tiny pearls of light rain, but Kate could see the intent.

"So, Trujillo, what do we have so far?" Hawkin asked, and the three of them drifted across to the isolation and shelter of the car shed for Trujillo to give his report. Kate was amused to see him actually squaring his shoulders a fraction as if Hawkin were his superior officer rather than officially his counterpart.

"I just got down from the scene about ten minutes ago myself, but Tyler seems to have things here under control. He's giving us three rooms downstairs to take statements in, and the residents are beginning to come in. He's even doing us a lunch."

"What did you find at the scene?" Hawkin demanded, waving away these housekeeping chores impatiently.

“My preliminary findings are being typed up now, you’ll have them before you leave, and I told the Crime Scene people not to move anything until you’d seen her. Basically, though, the Medical Examiner estimates the time of death between one and five yesterday afternoon. Strangled, like the others, by a strong right hand of average size. No mutilation, no signs of sexual...no signs of molestation. The Examiner had to leave, but she said she’d be available this afternoon if you want to talk to her. She’ll also try to get the autopsy speeded up for us, maybe tomorrow morning. She said to tell you not to expect any surprises.”

“Do we have someone who can test for prints on the body?”

“We did that first thing, sir. The Kromekote cards drew a blank, but the Magna brush test gave one very rough partial on the right index finger, from just under her ear.”

“More than we got from the other two. Maybe the lab’ll get lucky and find some fibers. Have the parents been notified?”

“Yes sir. They’ll be at the morgue later to make a positive ID, and they want to talk with you then, they said.”

“I’ll bet. Tell them I’m occupied up here. No, don’t say that, they’ll drive up here and we’ll have a circus on our hands. Tell Mrs. Donaldson I’ll telephone her tonight at her home.”

Trujillo pulled a maroon leather pad from his trouser pocket and a gold pen from inside his jacket and made a note.

“Deputy Harris will be at the morgue, too—” he began.

“Who?”

“Harris, the man in charge of investigations from Santa Clara County. If she died there, which the doc thought likely, there’s the question of jurisdiction.”

“God, you’d think they’d all be wanting to give it away, and instead of that we’ve got four counties fighting for it. I’m surprised the FBI hasn’t grabbed it away from us.”

“Well, sir, Agent Pickard has been—”

“Oh, Christ, Pickhead himself is in on it now, is he? Okay, let’s see.” Hawkin put his thumbs through his belt and drew in a deep breath of air that carried equal parts of salt, evergreen tree, wet rust, and fumes from the van generators across the way.

“Right. We’ll arrange a meeting with you, Martinelli, and me, and Alameda, Santa Clara, the FBI, Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all.” Trujillo made another note. “Let’s just hope we can keep Mrs. Donaldson out of it. Tell them all that I want them to bring complete reports to the meeting, so we’re not just making noise. We’ll want the postmortem results, the Crime Scene findings, and anything the lab has ready. Also the complete interviews with the families and all the neighbors of all three girls, diagrams of the kidnap sites, and psychological profiles of all three victims.”

Trujillo looked up, aghast.

“But, that’ll take days.”

“So much the better. Now, what can we give Pickhead to keep him out of our hair? Ah, VICAP. Tell him I want a list of every child dead or kidnapped across the country who fits the description of our three. Limit it to the last ten years. I also want a detailed profile of the killer. Have you ever talked to VICAP, Casey?”

“I submitted a case to them last year.”

“The Violent Criminal Apprehension Program,” he mouthed scornfully. “Submit the completed form to your local Criminal Profile Coordinator, who forwards it to the Behavioral Sciences Investigative Support Unit, who feed it into the Almighty Central Adding Machine. And do you know what the profile will read? ‘White male, middle income, above average intelligence, grew up in a dysfunctional family, juvenile record of minor crimes involving fire-setting and cruelty to animals, may or may not be married, all his neighbors find him likeable but quiet.’ End quote.”

Kate wondered if she was expected to say something along the lines of, “Remarkable, Holmes!” It was just a bit too easy to mock the FBI’s profile system, which, give it credit, occasionally pulled off a real coup of identification. Hawkin seemed to realize this, because he shook himself and subsided, and cleared his throat.

“As I was saying. A meeting of all and sundry when we have the paperwork together. Use the word ‘brainstorming,’ Trujillo,” he directed. “They’ll like that. Press conference so we can all prove to the taxpayers how busy we are. Find out how long it’s

going to take them to assemble their reports, and I'll work it in. Thursday or Friday, the early afternoon."

"Great," said Trujillo, and snapped his notepad shut. "Did you want to see Tyler now, or go straight up to the scene?"

"I'd better see him first, it'll only take a minute."

"He's in his workshop, around back of the barn."

"I know where it is," said Hawkin, and walked off across the gravel.

Kate and Trujillo followed him through the door into the little building, where two men looked up from their contemplation of the object on the workbench in front of them. For a wild instant Kate thought it was a dismembered arm, until her eyes took in the metallic gleam and she recognized it as the detached arm of the suit of armor that stood in the corner. The Japanese man remained seated, but the other, older man stood up and, wiping his hands on a white cloth, came around to meet them. He was a small man, barely taller than Kate, about forty years old, and he moved with a heavy, twisting limp. His shoulder length hair, brown streaked with gray, was gathered into a ponytail, and his beard was trimmed low on his jaw. He wore a loose homespun shirt, more nearly a blouse, tucked into faded but ironed blue jeans, and soft leather boot-moccasins on his small feet.

"Hello, Inspector Hawkin," he said. "I cannot say I am exactly glad to see you again, considering the reason you're here, but you are welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Tyler. This is my assistant, Inspector Casey Martinelli. I appreciate your allowing us to bring half the county to your house."

Tyler waved it aside. "The house is used to it. Some of the residents are setting up the tables Paul asked for. I left it to them; hauling furniture around isn't my specialty, and I had to come out here and get Toshiro started." He looked embarrassed. "I would have asked him to come some other time, but I made the arrangements months ago for him to be here, and I couldn't reach him this morning to cancel them. I hope it doesn't—" He

broke off, though Kate could finish the sentence in her head: “—seem callous.”

Hawkin spoke calmly. “No, of course not, no reason for everything to come to a halt. You go on with it. I have to go up the Road now, but I’ll need to talk with you later.”

Tyler looked relieved at this forgiving attitude, and Kate wondered if Hawkin was trying to soften him up. They left the two men and went back into the half-drizzle, and before they were out the door Tyler had resumed his conversation with Toshiro the armorer.

“It’s the vambrace, you see, that binds when I raise my sword....”

Hawkin took no notice but spoke unceremoniously to Trujillo.

“What have you got to take us up in?”

Kate was relieved that it was not to be her car that tackled the dirt track and stood with him as he looked past the obviously inadequate cars near the house and toward the shed, with its row upon row of bumpers fronting a mind-boggling collection of rust and dents—two, four, and six wheels, round bodies and square, old school buses, campers, pickups, Volkswagen vans and bugs—and half a dozen shapes covered tightly with dusty canvas shrouds.

“The county cars are all pretty busy but Tyler’s lending us his wagon. It’ll go anywhere.”

He pointed to an object so large, so old, and so apparently immobile that Kate had assumed it was a display, useful for entertaining children, like the hulls of planes and trains that occasionally grace playgrounds. It looked thoroughly rooted to the ground, resting on cracked tires as high as Kate’s waist, doors sagging, windows cloudy with the abrasions of the decades. It had once been red.

“That?” Hawkin stared in disbelief.

“Yes, it’s great,” said Trujillo with enthusiasm. “It used to be a fire wagon in the thirties, and Tyler keeps it up something great. Of course, parts are hard to get, and it won’t go more than

forty without the doors flying open, but for getting up the hill there's nothing like it."

Hawkin turned his attention from the vehicle to the man.

"I didn't realize you knew him so well."

"Tyler? Known him for years."

"Maybe they should've put somebody else on this case, then."

Trujillo smiled gently. "Inspector, you'd be hard put to find a cop in the county who doesn't know Tyler and consider him a friend. It's a small place."

"I see. Okay, let's get on with it. Are you going to drive this thing?"

"Good God, no. Tyler wouldn't trust me with his baby. Mark Detweiler's the only one who's allowed to touch it. He'll be driving. Mark?" He went to the door and stuck his head inside. "Mark! Anybody seen Mark?"

After a few minutes of confusion a slow mountain of a man, gray braids reaching to the waist of his ancient jeans, plaid shirt hidden by a beard nearly as long, emerged to plant his heavy boots on the plank steps and survey the yard through a pair of smudged horn-rimmed glasses held together by a twist of wire and dirty duct tape. One gold earring glinted through the foliage.

"I'm coming," he rumbled. "Just hold your horses. Just wanted to use the john. Kinda fun to be able to flush." He grinned merrily at them, revealing a missing front tooth amidst the gray fringe, and climbed up into the driver's seat. Hawkin watched, openmouthed, as the man methodically tied the door shut with a hunk of frayed rope, jerked the window up with a pair of pliers and inserted a wedge to hold it almost shut, and fished around in the mends of his jeans for a pocket, from which he pulled a key.

"What's the matter, Al," murmured Kate as she climbed past him. "Didn't have such classy chauffeurs in Los Angeles?" He shook his head, once, and followed her into the back, Trujillo in front. With a roar and a massive cloud of blue exhaust the starter caught, and they rumbled out onto the Road, a leviathan among the minnows.

The reporters would get some fine footage for their pain of turning out so early, thought Kate, and saw a scramble to record the parade of wagon, high-axled coroner's van, and the handful of lesser vehicles that brought up the rear.

Trujillo turned as they went through the gate and saw the expression on Hawkin's face.

"We do have the four-wheel drives, but they're both already up the Road. I didn't think you'd mind this thing, and we needed the others to get the teams up there and to go up notifying people. I hope you don't mind," he repeated, hesitantly.

"Oh, no, it lends the proceedings an air of dignified purpose, evoking the ponderous wheels of justice turning. Don't let me forget to use that for the news cameras, Casey, in case they missed the symbolism. It's quite all right, Trujillo, it serves to remind me of the unswerving support given us by our superiors. So encouraging."

Trujillo did not seem entirely encouraged by this response, thought Kate, straight-faced, but any answer was cut short as the wagon turned a hard corner and juddered to an abrupt halt that had all but the driver off their seats.

"Brakes work fine," was Detweiler's phlegmatic comment. The car face-to-face with their very bumper, filled with white-faced passengers, reversed into a wide spot a hundred yards up the road. It was the county's shiny new four-wheel-drive car, and it contained three women, two men, and a gaggle of excited children, all of whom watched the procession in wonder. The uniform of the man behind the wheel did not look entirely fresh, Kate noticed, and she had a sinking feeling that her own khaki trousers would soon look the same.

"That'll be the second bunch, coming down," said Trujillo. "Like I told you on the phone, I don't know how many of them we'll persuade to come down to Tyler's, but we'll get as many as we can. This third body will shake them, especially the ones with kids, and they'll cooperate more than they might otherwise. Some of them, though, you'll have to just go see. There's six or eight who are real hermits. You'd need a court order to pry them

out, and even then they might just walk into the woods for a couple of weeks.”

“A nice, straightforward investigation, I can see now.”

“It is a bit different from San Francisco. Sir.”

“It’s a bit different from anywhere.”

“That was Tyler’s original idea.”

“Well, it succeeded.”

Chapter Three

Samantha Donaldson was small for her age, forty-two pounds at her last checkup, but she looked even smaller now, her thin body huddled into the rotten log that had stopped her from rolling down into the creek that ran, at this point, about fifty feet below Tyler's Road. Kate's hands wanted to reach out and brush the leaves from the tumbled hair, wipe the dirt from the surprised little mouth, close the puzzled eyes, but instead she took out her notebook to record Hawkin's remarks and allowed her eyes to avoid the child's neck.

A couple of hours later they stood watching as the lifeless object that had been Samantha Donaldson, hands wrapped in bags against any evidence her nails might be hiding, covered in dirt and leaves, having been prodded, examined, and photographed in ways it never would have been in life, was folded into the anonymity of a body bag. The men moving the tiny burden onto the stretcher were well used to death, but there was none of the customary easy black humor here.

"You okay?" asked Hawkin as the disturbingly small parcel was carried past them.

"I'm not about to faint, Al," she snapped. "I've seen dead bodies before."

"Yes," he said, responding not at all to her tone. "But a dead child is a terrible thing."

"Yes." And because his voice was honest and his own loathing lay openly on his face, she answered in kind.

“Yes, it’s pretty awful. I probably would feel sick if it didn’t make me so angry.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. The first dead child I had, I couldn’t keep anything down for two days. Better to stay angry. Now, tell me where you think the murderer stood to throw her down there.”

They found one vague ridge of mud that might or might not have been from the side of a shoe, braced to hurl forty pounds into the air. It was so beaten down by rain that it was impossible to define and could easily have been pushed up by a horse’s hoof some days before. Other than that, there was a depressing similarity to the sites where the other two bodies had been found, and by the time the wet, aching team had finished their back-breaking examination of the hillside, they had accumulated a number of rusty tin cans; one broken Coke bottle, old; two buttons, one very old; a handful of odd bits of machinery; a half-buried car tire; a short length of ancient chain with a stub of leather dog collar attached; one cheap ballpoint pen, almost new; and an assortment of paper scraps, including a soggy matchbook from a bar in San Jose.

All that was much later, though. The doors slammed shut on the ill-filled bag that contained what had once been a little girl, the stoic team started down the hillside with their own, smaller, evidence bags, and Kate and Hawkin ducked under the yellow tapes and climbed back into the wagon.

“Back to home base?” inquired Detweiler.

“No, not much point in it yet.” A couple with baby, child and dog trudged by, all in bright nylon ponchos. The woman smiled shyly, the child stared from the man’s back. “They’ll be drifting in for another hour or more. I want to see the Road again, up to the top, if this thing’ll make it.”

“No question about that,” said the driver, sounding hurt. “She may be slow, but she’s sure.”

“Slow she is. Casey, do you have that map? I want you to make a note of the houses as we pass. It’ll make things easier when we get back to Tyler’s. Now, whose house is that?” Hawkin

pointed past the driver's nose to a shack near the Road, and Kate prepared to mark it on the map with her pen.

"That ain't a house, that's Jenny Cadena's goat shed." Kate wrote in the name. "Only now Harry Gustavson's using it to store the window glass for his house." She crossed out the first name, wrote in the second. "Come to think of it, though, Bob Riddle was staying in it for a while after his brother Ben threw him out. I wonder if he's still there?" He peered incuriously at the blank walls as they passed.

Kate looked at the map and sighed. "Anybody have a pencil?"



Slowly they rumbled up the narrow, muddy road, stopping twice to let carloads of residents slip by and once to help change a county car's flat tire. Slowly they reached the upper end of the Road, guarded and heavily gated, and slowly they turned back. Just below the Road's summit Hawkin leaned forward and touched Detweiler's shoulder.

"Stop here for a minute, would you? Come with me, Casey."

The two detectives walked thirty yards back up the Road, rocks prodding the soles of their city shoes, and stood looking down at a tumble of rock and brush.

"That's where Tina Merrill was found. Her father had a heart attack last month, did you know that? Her mother's lost twenty pounds and eats tranquilizers, and her honor-roll brother is failing his last year of high school. The murderer dropped her here on the Road like a sack of garbage, and after a few days something dragged her off down the hill."

The hillside was nearly silent, with only a few birds, the click of the engine, their breathing. The sun came out and Kate began to feel warm, but Hawkin didn't move.

"What is he after?" he muttered, staring hard up the dirt track. He looked as if he were straining to look back three months, to see that day in late fall when a figure had carried its macabre burden down the road. "What is he doing?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

“Neither do I. Neither do I.” He suddenly looked at her, as if he had just noticed her presence, and began dutifully to explain.

“The bodies are unmolested; he’s not the more obvious kind of pedophile. It isn’t money; there’s no ransom. He just picks them up, so carefully that so far he’s been invisible, and strangles them. After that he removes their clothing and leaves them on or near Tyler’s Road. Why here, a hundred miles from where he’s picked them up? Why is he doing this?”

He cocked one eyebrow at her and turned back to the waiting behemoth, and though she knew he wasn’t expecting an answer, she wished she could give him one. All that came to mind was, “So maybe he’s a nut case,” and that was so obviously inadequate that she said nothing and followed him meekly back down the rough surface that passed as Tyler’s Road.

Five minutes later Detweiler stopped the wagon on a hilltop at a wide, clear area with, incongruously, a picnic table. The temporary, enthusiastic sunshine illuminated glimpses of the Road below them and revealed a wedge of the distant, turgid sea. A scattering of roofs and cleared fields peeped from the vista of dark redwoods. The occasional gleam of solar panels and two high-tech windpowered generators were the only indicators of the twentieth century.

“Nice, huh?” grunted Detweiler. “Tyler says he’s going to build up here when he gets old and gray. I doubt it. He likes to be in the middle of things. Always will.” He put the wagon back into gear and they lurched downhill, the engine whining now as it kept the ex-fire truck from flinging itself down to the sea. “Oh, yeah, I forgot old Peterson’s place. It’s up there, see the flag?” The flag was an old scrap of torn sheeting. “Up along that pathway. No, he doesn’t have a drive. When he built the place he carried everything in by foot.”

Kate wrote in the name Peterson and reflected that a housing inspector would have a grand time with the violations on this hillside. She said something of the sort to Detweiler, careful to avoid the impression that she was in any way connected with such a low breed of bureaucrat.

“Oh, yeah, well, what they don’t know won’t hurt them. Actually there’s been an ongoing war between Tyler and the county over the building regulations. At first they said that all the houses had to be wired for power, even if there wasn’t any for miles. So there’s half a dozen places with wall plugs and empty light fixtures, and kerosene lamps. Right now he’s trying to get around it by having the whole Road made into an experimental, nonprofit organization. Has a state senator on his side; he may do it yet. That’s Riddle’s place, do you have that?” he asked Kate.

“Yes, Ben Riddle, whose brother Bob may or may not be there or in the Cadena-Gustavson goat shed-storage barn.”

“Clear as mud, eh?” He laughed heartily, and Kate wondered if he ever ran out of clichés.

The litany continued to wind with the Road.

“That’s Brother Luke’s place. He and Maggie’ve lived there since Tyler first got the idea. He used to be a monk somewhere. Not now, though. They’ve got five kids. The Dodsons live there, funny place, real dark. Nice clearing in back for the ponies, though. Angie’s little girl Amy loves her pony. And I told you about Vaun, way up there? She’s an artist, real good one.” Visions of castles and maidens with starry-eyed unicorns danced in Kate’s head. “The Newborns—those little house things are for the pigs. And Tommy Chesler you know.”

Coming down the mountain they stopped to pull the county car out of the creek bed into which its four driven wheels had taken it, and as they continued down, they picked up several parties of chattering hill folk who might easily have been going to a hoedown rather than to a murder interrogation. (What is a hoedown, anyway? wondered Kate.) Kate found herself wedged between Hawkin and a very large, damp young man who smelled of dog, and with an even damper and more fragrant baby on her lap. After ten minutes a high voice from somewhere in the front asked if anyone had Ivanhoe.

“Is that a disease?” wondered Kate aloud.

“It’s my baby,” the voice answered.

“Is it hairless and wet?”

“Probably.”

“Then it’s here.”

“Oh, good. I just wanted to make sure he got in. You can keep him until we get to Tyler’s.”

“Thank you,” said Kate gravely, and tried to decide whether the bouncing was from the ruts or from Hawkin laughing, and if the latter, what she should do about it. In the end she did nothing.

Chapter Four

The multicolored crowd that whirled in and out of the rooms in Tyler's house was like something from another world, or perhaps several worlds—part Amish, part Woodstock, part pioneer. Children ran yelling and shrieking among the knees and the furniture, dogs wandered in and were thrown out into the rain, the smells of bread and spaghetti sauce and wood smoke mingled with wet clothing, underwashed bodies, and the occasional aura of stale marijuana. Tyler had given the police three rooms downstairs, furnished with a motley collection of tables and desks, where they prepared to take statements. Kate stood in the main room—the hall—with its fifteen-foot ceilings and the floor space of an average house, and wondered how Hawkin intended to proceed with a murder investigation in this chaos. For the first time she was very grateful that he, not she, was in charge.

As if he had heard her thoughts Hawkin appeared at her elbow.

“As I said, a nice straightforward investigation. I'm going to talk with them, and I want you with me. Over at the fireplace.” Within two steps he had disappeared, and Kate pushed through the throng in his wake, wishing that her mother had married a taller man. At the massive stone fireplace, beneath a display of broadswords that fanned out in a sunburst, they stepped up onto the high hearthstones and stood looking out over the sea of heads.

“May I have your attention, please? Please, may I have your attention, there are a few things I need to say.” He was not shouting, but he pitched his gravelly voice with a sharp volume that filled the room and reached into the adjoining doorways, and gradually faces turned in their direction and the battering pandemonium began to die down. Children were hushed, kitchen pans stopped crashing, and the assembled residents of Tyler’s Road turned to hear what this necessary evil, this representative of oppression, wanted of them.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Alonzo Hawkin. This is Casey Martinelli. As I’m sure you all know by now, we were sent down from San Francisco to coordinate the investigation into the murders of the three little girls whose bodies have been found in this area. I’d like to thank you all for coming down to Tyler’s. I know—I have seen—what an inconvenience it is for some of you to get down here, but it is saving us a great deal of time, and after all, time saved may mean a life saved.”

He had their full attention now. A small baby began to whine, and the mother settled it to her breast without taking her eyes off Hawkin.

“We are here to take statements from you in hopes that the pieces of information you give us can be put together and lead us to the killer. I don’t need to tell you that the murderer is somehow connected with your Road. You all know that, and I expect that’s why a lot of you are here. It is not nice to think that one of your neighbors might be linked to the murder of three children. Might even be that murderer.” Eyes dropped, lips smiled nervously, and fear turned a crowded room into a lot of people trying not to edge away from each other.

“We are not here, I will say now, to worry about drugs, housing code violations, or who is sleeping in whose bed, unless of course any of those things are related to the murders. We may ask you about drugs or violations, but it’s not what we’re after. Any of you are free to choose the police officer you want to take your statement. Because there are so many of you to keep

straight we'd like to take your photograph with an instant camera and attach it to your statement. This is only to make things run more smoothly. You will be asked a series of questions, some of which may sound unnecessary or rude or just plain silly. Please answer them. None of us are playing games, and we're every bit as anxious to finish here as you are. From the looks of it," he added with a smile, "perhaps more so."

There was a mild commotion in one corner, and a little voice piped up, "—to have games, Mama? Is that what he said?" Grateful, nervous laughter skittered through the room, and Hawkin's smile broadened.

"That reminds me, you see that little man in the corner over there?" Heads craned, and an enormous man with extremely black skin and an inadequate uniform lifted an identifying hand. More laughter, now uncertain. "That's Sergeant Fischer. Bob Fischer hasn't seen his own kids for two whole days now, and if you want to send your kids to talk to him while you're giving your statements, he'd be absolutely overjoyed. He'll show them all his walkie-talkie and his handcuffs, but, Bob? Try not to lose the keys this time, okay?" Relaxed laughter now, which Hawkin gathered up in his final words.

"One last thing. I know it's a bit late for saying this, but I'd appreciate it if you'd not talk to each other about what you may have seen, or what someone else thinks they saw. Your statement needs to be yours, and yours alone. We'll sift it over, and if we need further information about something, we'll come and find you. There are seven of us here to take your statements, if you would please begin at that end of the room, take one set of forms for each adult. We'd better get started." He held them for a moment with his eyes. "Thank you for your assistance. There's some bastard out there murdering babies. I think you can help us find who it is. Thank you."

"Ever coach a football team, Al?" Kate murmured in his ear as the meeting broke up.

"What do you think I was doing just then?" he replied. "Take a desk. I'll let you know when I'm going to talk with Tyler."



The morning wore on, with the painstaking business of names and numbers, photographs with the instant camera, locations on the map, questions: Where do you work? Have you ever been arrested? Where were you on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, on the twenty-fourth of January, yesterday afternoon? Did you see anyone yesterday afternoon? Did anyone see you yesterday afternoon? Did you see or hear a car on the Road yesterday evening? Do you smoke anything, use matches, go into bars, own a car, drive a car, have any other pieces of information that might possibly be related? On, and on, and on.

Answers were recorded, reactions to certain questions were noted, voices dropped, and tempers flared. Hawkin moved in and out of the rooms, chatting, encouraging, defusing hot spots, disappearing to walk through the mud to speak with the newsmen. Gallons of coffee and herbal tea were drunk, children were laid down for naps, a hugely pregnant woman began to look pale and was sent off to an upstairs room. At one point a plate of vegetarian spaghetti and hot bread appeared in front of Kate, and she and her interviewee slurped at each other and got sauce on the forms.

At one o'clock Kate found herself in one of the more difficult interviews of the day. Not that Flower Underwood wasn't cooperative—she was, and friendly and intelligent besides. It was her child who created the problems.

The child was a boy, or at least Kate assumed it was a boy, for the woman didn't correct her when she asked how old he was. He was an utterly irrepressible two-year-old who took her pens apart, ate one of the forms, emptied her purse three times (wallet and keys went into her pocket after she pried them from his inquisitive fingers), and climbed up onto his mother's lap to nurse five times, the last time squirting Kate with milk from the unoccupied breast. Deliberately. Into this stepped Hawkin, who put his hand on her shoulder as she was writing.

“Pardon me, Casey, but when you’re finished you might like to join Tyler and me upstairs. All the way to the top of the stairs, third door on your left.”

Kate nodded her agreement and looked up to catch the tail end of an extremely odd expression on the woman’s face.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, really.” She was stifling amusement.

“Something about upstairs? Was that it?”

Flower Underwood’s lips twitched, and finally she burst out laughing, which caused her son to pull back and stare at her, milky mouth agape.

“Well, you know,” she said helpfully, “the downstairs of this place is pretty public. Everyone on the Road uses it like a living room.”

“And upstairs—the top floor—is not public, you mean? Quite private, in fact?” The woman’s eyes were sparkling, those of her son drooping as she caressed his back. “By private invitation only, that sort of thing, yes?”

“That sort of thing,” she agreed.

“Have you been up there, to the top of the stairs?”

“Not in quite a while, though I don’t imagine it’s changed much. Or Tyler either, for that matter.” It seemed a good memory, thought Kate, judging from the face across from her.

“Would you say that many of the women on the Road have ‘been upstairs?’”

“A fair number. Probably most of the single women at one time or another, maybe, oh, a third of the attached ones.”

“I would have thought that would cause a lot of trouble.”

“Not here. In suburbia, perhaps, but not here. And Tyler’s very careful not to get too close if there’s another man involved who would object. He’s a good man, very caring, very generous.”

“With money?”

“With everything.” Again the amused, fond smile crossed her face.

“He only invites women upstairs?”

“Oh, no, men too. Not to bed, of course.” She giggled at the absurdity of the thought, and Kate was struck dumb by this outcrop of conventionality. “He takes guys up there to play chess, I know, or just to have a drink or a smoke if something’s happening down here and he wants some quiet.”

“But you’re sure it’s no more than that?” Kate persisted.

That gave her pause, and Kate had her turn to be amused, to see that Flower Underwood was troubled by this idea, whereas Tyler’s wholesale hetero relationships had fazed her not at all.

“No, he invites a lot of people up to his rooms, not just to sleep with them. I’ve never heard of him sleeping with a man. I’m sure I would have. There’s no hiding anything on the Road, not for long. No, I’m sure Tyler’s a normal man,” she said, firmly rejecting the possibility.

“Normal.”

“Well, straight, anyway. At any rate, he is very sweet. In bed, I mean.”

This interview is getting out of hand, thought Kate, and tried to pull it back to earth.

“Does he have any children?”

“A couple for sure. He has a wife, or an ex-wife, I guess, who lives in L.A. with their daughter, who’s ten or eleven. There’s also a little boy here on the Road who’s probably his, though it’s hard to be sure because he’s only three. There’s a couple other possibilities, but the mothers aren’t sure.”

Kate’s eyes involuntarily strayed to the sleeping blond terror, and the mother’s eyes followed.

“No, not this one. You’d only have to see my old man to be sure about that. She looks just like him. Say, if you want to know what the men do...” Her voice faltered as a thought struck her and strengthened again as she pushed it away. “If you want to hear about Tyler’s rooms from a man, you could talk to Charlie. Charlie Waters is my old man. He’s down here all the time, playing chess with Tyler.” Her voice trailed off and her eyes rose to search the room beyond, and Kate thought it a good time to call the session to a halt.

“Thank you very much for your time, Ms. Underwood. I really appreciate your coming down today,” but the woman had already risen with her groggy burden and headed for the hallway.

Kate scribbled her signature and dropped the papers on the next table—where Bob Fischer was talking to a man, with three peaceful children distributed over their two laps—and sprinted for the stairs.