

A GRAVE TALENT

LAURIE R. KING



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for Noel

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*Other sins only speak;
murder shrieks out.*

—John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*

*Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children
is increased with tales, so is the other.*

—Francis Bacon, “Of Death”

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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."



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”

1

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."

2

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 pony tail, 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