

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN

SANDFORD

FIELD OF
PREY

A NOVEL

ALSO BY JOHN SANDFORD

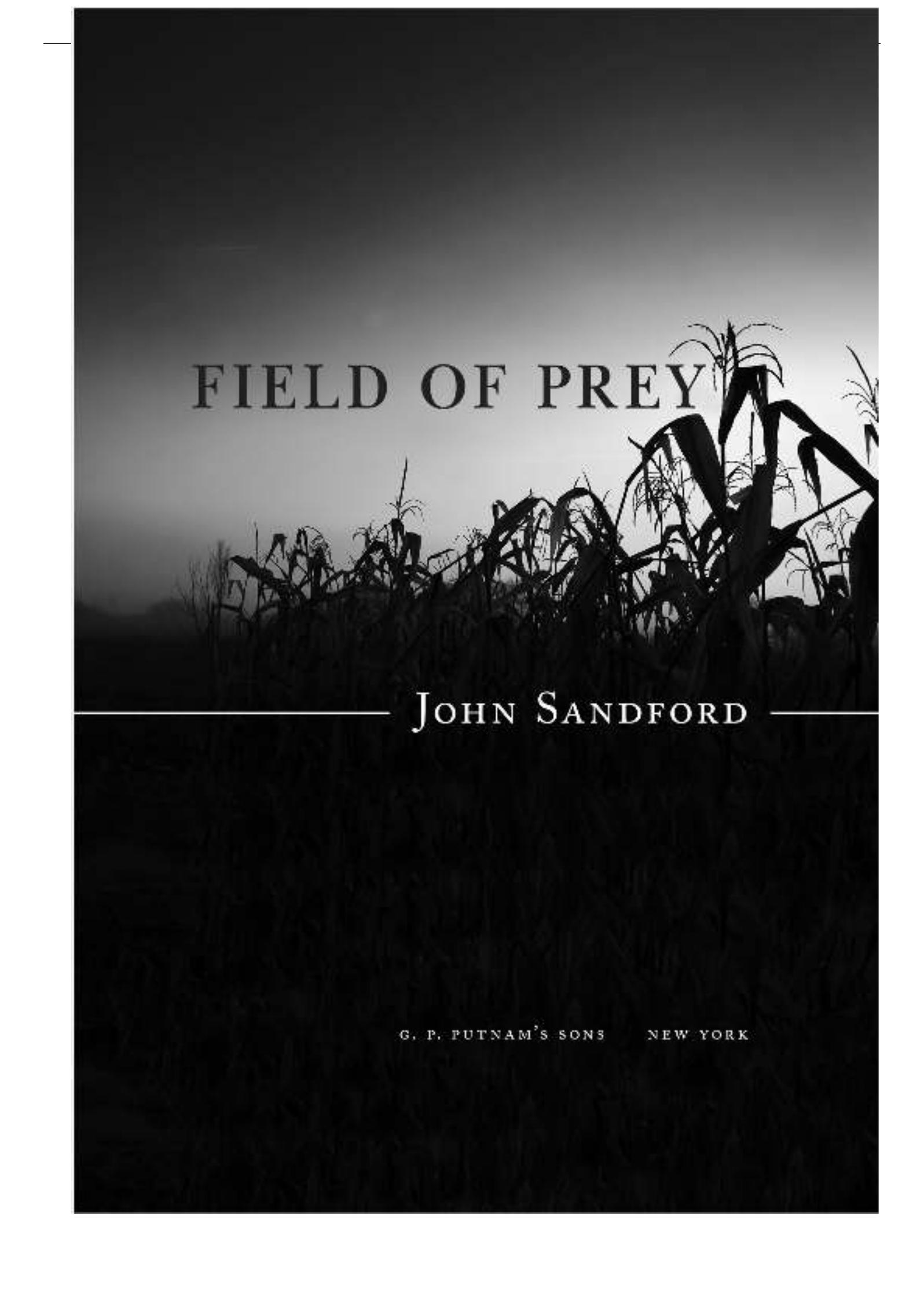
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FIELD OF PREY

— JOHN SANDFORD —

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YEARS AGO . . .

The fifth woman was a blond waitress who enhanced her income by staying late to do kitchen cleanup at Auntie's, a diner in Faribault, a small city on Interstate 35 south of the Twin Cities. The diner had excellent qualities for a kidnapping. The blacktop parking lot was wide and deep in front, shallow and pitted in back, which meant that nobody parked there. When the fifth woman finished her cleanup, at midnight, she'd haul garbage bags to a dumpster out back.

In the dark.

She was out there alone, sweating in the summer heat, sickened by the odor from the dumpster, with no light except what came through the diner's open rear door and two pole lights in the front lot.

R-A waited for her there, hidden behind the dumpster. He was carrying an old canvas postal bag, of the kind once used to carry heavy loads of mail in cross-country trucks. The bags, forty-eight inches long and more than two feet in diameter, had eyelets around the mouth, with a rope running through the eyelets. The rope could be cinched tight with a heavy metal clasp.

R-A also carried a leather-wrapped, shot-filled sap, in case something went wrong with the bag.

Horn sat in his truck, in an adjacent parking lot, no more than a hundred feet away, where he could see the action at the dumpster, and warn against any oncoming cop cars. When the waitress came out with her second load of garbage bags, R-A waited until she was standing on tiptoe, off-balance while throwing one of the bags into the dumpster. He stepped out behind her, unseen, and dropped the canvas bag over her head, like a butterfly in a net.

The woman struggled and fought, and screamed, but the screams were muffled by the heavy bag, and two seconds after he took her to the ground, R-A slipped the locking clasp tight around her legs.

Horn was coming, in the truck. He stopped beside them, blocking the view from the street. Together, Horn and R-A lifted her and threw her in the back of Horn's extended cab truck. Horn climbed in on top of her with a roll of duct tape, and threw a half dozen fast wraps around the woman's ankles. Sort of like calf-roping, he thought.

As he did that, R-A jogged a half-block down the street to where he'd parked his own truck. When Horn had finished taping the woman's ankles, he jumped out and slammed the narrow door, ran around the back of the truck and climbed into the driver's seat, and they were gone, Horn a half-block ahead of R-A.

The system had worked again.

In three minutes, they'd gotten to the edge of town and were starting cross-country toward a hunter's shack in the backwaters of a Mississippi River impoundment. There, they'd rape the waitress and kill her.

R-A trailed a half-mile behind Horn. That was part of the system, too. If a cop car came along, and showed any interest at all in Horn's truck, R-A could provide warning, and support. If worse came to

worst, R-A would drive recklessly and way too fast past the cop, provoking a chase, while Horn would re-route.

• • •

THE SYSTEM HAD WORKED BEFORE, and would have worked again, except that Heather Jorgenson had always worried about being alone in that parking lot in the night. She carried a Leatherman multi-tool which included a three-inch-long serrated blade, in the pocket of her waitress uniform, and while her feet were restricted by the locked bag and the duct tape, her hands were free.

For the first minute or so of the truck ride, she fought with a panic-stricken violence against the heavy bag, without making any progress at all. In the thrashing, her hand slapped against the Leatherman.

The knife!

She fumbled it out and broke a nail trying to get it open, but hardly noticed; three minutes into the ride, she had the knife out and open. Jorgenson knew she'd only have one chance at it, so she continued to shout and scream, and thrash with one hand, as the truck drove through town. At the same time, she slit the bag with the razor-sharp blade, and at the bottom end, cut the binding rope around her legs. Finally, she carefully sliced through the duct tape at her ankles.

She took a moment to get her courage up, then pushed herself up in the back of the truck, and screaming, "You sonofabitch," she stabbed Horn in the neck, and then stabbed him again, in the back in the spine, and then in the arms, and in the neck again, and Horn was shouting, screaming, trying to swat her away, while struggling to control the truck. He failed, and the truck swerved to the left edge of the road, two wheels dropping off the tarmac. They ran along like that for a hundred feet, then the truck began to tip, and finally rolled over into the ditch.

Jorgenson, in the back, felt the truck going. A former cheerleader, still with a cheerleader's suppleness, despite the extra pounds she'd picked up in the diner, she braced her feet against the roof of the truck and locked herself in place as it went over. When it settled, driver's side down, she found the handle on the back door, unlocked it, shoved it open, and crawled out.

She ran across the roadside ditch, tumbled over a barbed-wire fence, ripping her clothes and hands into a cornfield—she was afraid to run down the road, because the kidnapper could see her, might come after her.

They'd just left town, and there were house lights no more than four or five hundred yards away. She ran as hard as she could, choking with fear, through the knee-high corn, then fell again and found herself in a mid-field swale, a seasonal creek, dry now.

Breathing hard, she crouched for a moment, listening, fearing that the kidnapper was right behind her. When she heard nothing, she got to her feet, stooped over so far that her hands touched the ground, and groped forward in the dark, toward the house lights.

She had no idea how long she'd been in the field when she made it into a tree line, the branches of the saplings slapping her in the face and chest. She crossed another fence and a ditch, out onto a road, then ran across the road toward the house lights. She was now so frightened and exhausted that she took no care about waking the house. She leaned on the lighted doorbell and pounded on the door while screaming, "Help! Help me!"

• • •

THE COPS were there in five minutes.

They found an upside-down truck with lots of blood in the front seat, and the cut-open mail sack in the back. They traced the truck in another five minutes, and were on their way to Horn's house in ten

• • •

WHEN R-A GOT TO Horn's truck, the woman was gone.

Horn groaned, "I'm hurt, man, I'm hurt bad."

"Where is she?" R-A asked.

"She ran off, she's gone, man, we gotta get out of here." Horn was crumpled onto the driver's side window of the truck. R-A was kneeling on the narrow back door on the passenger side, looking down into the truck, the front door propped half open. "Help me out, help me."

Horn was covered with blood, down to his waist. R-A pulled him out of the truck, but Horn couldn't walk: "Did something to my legs, they don't work . . ."

R-A carried him to his own truck, put him in the back, and told him to stay down. "The hospital . . ."

"Fuck that. Fuck the hospital," Horn said. "They're gonna find my truck. The bitch knows my face from the scouting trips. She'll pick me out."

"Then where?"

"Your place," Horn groaned. "They'll be at my place, sure as shit."

• • •

R-A GOT HIM BACK to his place, managed to half-drag, half-carry him down to the basement bomb shelter. Put him on a cot, plastered his wounds the best he could.

Thought about killing him. Horn's legs didn't work, he could never be anything but a liability. But R-A couldn't do it: Horn was the closest thing he'd ever had to a friend.

• • •

HORN MADE THE TV the next morning: Heather Jorgenson, according to police reports, said she'd been attacked by *a man* in the parking lot behind Auntie's, and had stabbed *him*. The police were looking for Jack Horn, of Holbein. Jack Horn, singular. No mention of two men. R-A cruised by his house, and the cops were all over it.

Horn himself, down in the bomb shelter, was drifting in and out of consciousness. In one of his lucid moments, he saw R-A staring at him.

"What're you staring at?" he mumbled. And, "Water. I need a drink. Need some . . . medicine."

R-A ran a country hardware store, with veterinary medicine in a locked cabinet at the back. Horn was out of it, so never felt the horse-sized needle that R-A used to give him the penicillin.

• • •

HORN WAS still in and out. During one of his lucid moments, R-A told Horn that the cops had taken his truck away, and that there was a warrant out for him, for kidnapping. "They're looking for you everywhere between Chicago and Billings. You can't look at the TV without seeing your ugly face."

“Water,” said Horn. R-A went away and came back with a glass of water, but Horn found he couldn’t even lift his hand. R-A poured it awkwardly into Horn’s open, trembling mouth.

“How long?” he said, when he found his voice again.

“You’ve been up and down for two days,” R-A said. A pause. “Mostly down.”

“No hospital . . .” Horn said.

“If I don’t, I figure you’ll die,” R-A said. “Then what’ll I do?”

“No hospital . . .” Horn repeated. And then he was gone again.

It went like that for two more days; by the end of the second day, the bomb shelter smelled like an unclean hospital room, with the stink of human waste and corruption.

Then, on a Friday, R-A got back from the store and found Horn deathly still, his face as pale and gray as newsprint. At first, R-A thought him dead. That would have . . . made things easier. He could get rid of the body, and still feel he’d filled the requirements of male comradeship.

Then Horn opened his eyes and said in a calm voice, “You been thinking about choking me out, haven’t you?”

“The thought crossed my mind,” R-A admitted.

“No need, now. Things are different now.”

“Yeah, I . . .”

“I been thinking about it. This is the perfect place. You’re going to have to start bringing the girls here.”

“I . . . thought I might stop.”

Horn grunted: “Roger—you can’t stop. But there’s no more banging them out in the woods. That’s all done. . . . Now you’ll have to bring them down here. Look around. It’s perfect. Down here, we can keep them for a while. Half the trouble, twice the fun.”

And it’d worked. For a very long time.

1

There comes a crystalline moment in the lives of most young male virgins when they realize that they are about to get laid, and they will clutch that moment to their hearts for the rest of their days.

For some, maybe most, the realization comes nearly simultaneously with the moment. With others not so much.

For Layton Burns Jr., of Red Wing, Minnesota, a recent graduate of Red Wing High School (Go Wingers!), the moment arrived on the night of the Fourth of July. He and Ginger Childs were wrapped in a blanket and propped against a tree of some sort—neither was a botanist—in a park in Stillwater, Minnesota, looking down at the river, where the fireworks were going off.

Fireworks were not going off in Red Wing, because the city council was too cheap to pay for them.

In any case, Stillwater *did* have fireworks. Layton, a jock, had his muscular right arm wrapped around Ginger's back, then under her arm and in past the unbuttoned second button on her blouse, where he was getting, in the approved parlance of the senior class at Red Wing High School, a bare tit. One of those hot, nipple-rolling bare tits. Not only a bare tit, but a semi-public one, which added to the *frisson* of the moment.

While intensely pleasant, this was not entirely a new development. They'd taken petting to a feverish pitch, but Layton was the tiniest bit shy about asking for the Big One.

Ginger had her hand on Layton's thigh, where, despite his shyness, his interest was evident, and then as the final airbursts exploded in red-white-and-blue over the hundred boats in the harbor below, Ginger turned and bit him lightly on the earlobe and muttered, "Oh, God, if only you had some . . . protection."

. . .

UNTIL THAT VERY MOMENT, one of the few people in Red Wing who wasn't sure that Layton was going to get laid that summer was Layton himself. His parents knew, her parents knew, Ginger knew, all of Layton's friends knew, all of Ginger's friends knew, and Ginger's youngest sister, who was nine, strongly suspected.

But Layton, there in the park, wasn't organized for the moment. He groaned and said, in words made memorable by thousands of impromptu daddies, "Nothin'll happen."

"Can't take a chance," said Ginger, who was no dummy, and for whom, not to put it too bluntly, Layton was more or less a passing bump in the night. "Do you think by tomorrow night?"

Wul, yeah.

BY THE NEXT NIGHT, Layton was organized.

He'd gotten the green light to borrow his mom's three-year-old Dodge Grand Caravan, which had Super Stow 'n Go seating in the back, converting instantly into a mobile bedroom. He'd stashed a Target air mattress and a six-pack of Coors with a friend. And he'd stolen three, no make it four, lubricated condoms from a twelve-pack that his father had conveniently left unhidden in the second drawer of his bedroom bureau, for the very purpose of being stolen by his son, his wife being on the pill.

Layton also had the perfect spot, discovered a year earlier when he was detasseling corn. The perfect spot had once been a farmyard with a small woodlot on the north side. The farm had failed decades earlier. Most of the land had been sold off, and the house had fallen into ruin and had eventually been burned by the local volunteer fire department in a training exercise. The outbuilding had either been torn down or had simply rotted in place. Still, the home site had not yet been plowed under, though the cornfields were pressing close to the sides of the old yard.

A narrow track, once a driveway, led across a culvert into the site; and there were good level places to park. An hour before he was to pick up Ginger, Layton signed onto his computer and went out to his favorite porn site to review his knowledge of female anatomy; which also reminded him to put a flashlight in the car in case he wanted to . . . you know . . . *watch*.

LAYTON HAD BUILT a sex machine, and it worked flawlessly.

He got the beer and air mattress from his friend, picked up Ginger, and they headed west on Highway 58, out of the Mississippi River Valley, up on top, then down through the Hay Creek Valley up on top again, and out into farm country. The ride was short and sweet in the warm summer night, with fireflies in the ditches and Lil Wayne on the satellite radio, which was a good thing, because Ginger was hotter than a stovepipe, and had her hand in Layton's jeans before they even got off the main highway and onto the back roads.

They found the turnoff into the farm lot on the first try, pushed aside some senile, overgrown lilacs as they wedged into a parking space, pumped up the air mattress with an air pump powered through the cigarette lighter, and got right to it.

There was some confusion at the beginning, when Layton unrolled the first rubber, rather than rolling it down the erect appendage, and was reduced to trying to pull it on like a sock. A bit later, if Layton had been more attentive, he might have noticed that Ginger knew a good deal about technique and positioning, but he was not in a condition to notice; nor would he have given a rat's ass.

And it all went fine.

They did it twice, stopped for a beer, and then did it again, and stopped for another beer, and Layton was beginning to regret that he hadn't stolen *five* rubbers, when Ginger said, demurely, "I kinda got to go outside."

"What?"

"You know . . ."

She had to pee. Layton finally got the message and Ginger disappeared into the dark, with the flashlight. She was back two minutes later.

"Boy, something smells really bad out there."

"Yeah?" He didn't care. She didn't care much either, especially as she'd reminded him about the

flashlight.

So they messed around with the flashlight for a while, and Ginger said, “You’re really large,” which made him feel pretty good, although he’d measured himself several dozen times and it always came out at six and one-quarter inches, which numerous Internet sources said was almost exactly average.

Anyway, the fourth condom got used and stuffed in the sack the beer had come in, and Layton began to see the limits of endurance even for an eighteen-year-old—he probably wouldn’t have needed the fifth one. They lay naked in each other’s arms and drank the fifth and sixth beers and Ginger burped and said, “We probably ought to get back and establish our alibis,” and Layton said, “Yeah, but . . . I kinda got to go outside.”

Ginger laughed and said, “I wondered about that. You must have a bladder like an oil drum.” “I’m going,” he said. He took the flashlight and moved off into the trees, wearing nothing but his Nike Airs, found a spot, and as he was taking the leak, smelled the smell: and Ginger was *right*. Something *really* stank.

It was impossible to grow up in the countryside and not know the odor of summertime roadkill, and that’s what it was. Something big was dead and rotting, and close by.

He finished and went back to the car and found Ginger in her underpants, and getting into her jeans shorts. “I want to go out and look around for a minute,” he said. In the back of his mind he noticed his own sexual coolness. Even though her breasts were right there, and as attractive and pink and perky as they’d been fifteen minutes ago, he could have played chess, if he’d known how to play chess. “There’s something dead out there.”

“That’s the stink I told you about.”

“Not an ordinary stink,” Layton said. “Whatever it is, is big.”

She stopped dressing: “You mean . . . like a body?”

“Like something. Man, it really stinks.”

When they were dressed, and with Ginger holding onto the back of Layton’s belt, they walked into the woods—as if neither one of them had ever seen a *Halloween* movie—following the light of the flash. As they got deeper in, the smell seemed to fade. “Wrong way,” Layton said.

They turned back and Ginger said, “Hope the light holds out.”

“It’s fine,” Layton said. Fresh batteries: Layton had been *ready*.

They walked back toward the area where the house had been, and the smell grew stronger, until Ginger bent and gagged. “God . . . what is it?”

Whatever it was, they couldn’t find it. Layton marched back and forth over the old farmstead, shining the light into the underbrush and even up into the trees. They found nothing.

“Don’t ghosts smell?” Ginger said. “I saw it on one of those British ghost-hunter shows, that sometimes ghosts make a bad smell.”

Every hair on Layton’s neck stood up: “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

They started walking back to the car, but by the time they got back, they were running. They jumped in, slammed the doors, clicked the locks, backed out of the parking place, and blasted off down the gravel road, not slowing until they got to the highway. The bag with the used condoms and the empty beer cans went into an overgrown ditch, and fifteen minutes later, they were headed down the hill into the welcoming lights of Red Wing.

. . .

LAYTON LAY IN BED that night and thought about it all—mostly the sex, but also about Ginger’s best

friend, Lauren, and what a wicked threesome that would be, and about that awful odor. Ginger called him the next morning to say it had been the most wonderful night of her life, and he told her that it had been the most wonderful night of his.

The night had been wonderful, but not quite perfect. There'd been that smell.

• • •

LAYTON'S BEST FRIEND'S older brother was a Goodhue County deputy named Randy Lipsky, who was only six or eight years older than Layton. If not quite a friend, he was something more than an acquaintance.

Layton got up late, shaved, ate some Cheerios, and still not sure if he was doing the right thing, called the sheriff's office and asked if Lipsky was around. He was.

"I need to talk to you for a minute, if I could run over there," Layton said.

So he went over to the law enforcement center, found Lipsky, and they walked around the block.

Layton said, "Just between you and me."

"Depending on what it is," Lipsky said. "I'm a cop."

"Well, *I* didn't do anything," Layton said.

"What is it?" Lipsky asked.

"Last night, my girlfriend and I went up to this old farm place, out in the country, and parked for a while."

"Ginger?"

"Uh-huh."

"She's pretty hot. You nail her?"

"Hey . . . But, yeah, as a matter of fact." He was so cool about it that ice cubes could have rolled off his ears.

"Anyway . . ."

"Anyway, there's something dead up there. Something big. I never smelled anything like it. I thought it was a cow or a pig. The weird thing is, we couldn't find anything, and there aren't any dairies or pig farms around there. We could smell it, like it was right *there*: like we were standing on it. It made Ginger throw up it was so strong. I was thinking last night, what if we couldn't find it because . . . somebody buried something?"

"You mean . . ." Lipsky stopped and looked at Layton. Layton was a jock, but not an idiot.

"Yeah. I thought I should ask," Layton said. "Now you can tell me I'm a whiny little girl, and we can forget about it."

Lipsky said: "I'll tell you something, Layton: ninety-five percent it's nothing. Probably somebody shot a buck out of season, and you were smelling the gut dump. Those can be pretty hard to see in the dark, once they go gray. But, five percent, we gotta go look."

Lipsky went to get a patrol car and Layton called Ginger and told her what he'd done. "Well, God, don't mention me," she said.

"If it's something, I'll probably have to," he said.

"Well, if it's something . . . sure. I worried about it, too, last night," she said. "Like you were saying, it smelled big. What if it's a dead body?"

"I'll call you when we get back," Layton said.

• • •

THE DRIVE IN THE DAYTIME was even faster than the drive the night before, out into the countryside and the hot July sun. Layton pointed Lipsky into the abandoned farm lot and Lipsky said, “What a great place to park.”

“Yeah, it’d be okay, if it didn’t stink so bad,” Layton said. “Over here.”

He led the way back where the old house had been, and the smell was like a wall. They hit it and Lipsky’s face crinkled and he said, “Jesus Christ on a crutch.”

“I told you,” Layton said.

“Where’s it coming from?” Lipsky asked.

They quartered the area, kicking through the underbrush, and eventually always came back to the yard where the house had been, and finally Lipsky pointed to the edge of the clearing and said, “Go over and pull out that old fence post, and bring it back here.”

. . .

THE FENCE POST WAS a rusting length of steel still attached to a single strand of barbed wire. Layton wrenched it loose, pulled the barbed wire off, and carried it back to Lipsky. Lipsky was walking around a patch of fescue grass twenty feet across, a distracted look on his face.

“What do you think?” Layton asked.

“Might be an old cistern here, or an old well,” Lipsky said. “You see that line in the grass?”

“Maybe . . .”

Lipsky took the fence post from Layton and began probing the patch of grass. He’d done it four times when, on the fifth, there was a hollow *thunk*.

“There it is,” Lipsky said. “Should have been filled in, doesn’t sound like it was.”

He scraped around with the fence post and found the edge of the cistern cover, which was a circular piece of concrete. A whole pad of fescue lifted off it, in one piece, and Lipsky said, “Just between you and me, I don’t think we’re the first ones to do this.”

“Maybe we ought to call the cops,” Layton said. Lipsky gave him a look, and Layton said, “You know what I mean. *More* cops.”

“Let’s just take a look,” Lipsky said.

They pulled the grass off, and Lipsky said, “Check this out.”

One edge of the concrete cover showed what seemed to be recent scrapes, perhaps made with a pick, or a crowbar; and all around the edges, older scrapes. Lots of them. Lipsky found a place where he could get the good end of the fence post under the rim of the cistern cover, and pried. There was a *pop* when it came loose, and the gas hit them and they both reeled away, gagging, vomiting into the grass away from the cistern.

When they’d vomited everything in their stomachs—Lipsky had gone to his hands and knees—the went back and looked into the cistern, but all they saw was darkness.

“Let me get a flash,” Lipsky said. “Don’t fall in.” He spit into the weeds as he went, and then spit again, and Layton spit a couple times himself, his mouth sour from the vomit.

Lipsky got the flashlight and walked back to where Layton was standing, his forearm bent over his nose.

They looked into the hole and Lipsky turned on the six-cell Maglite, and they first saw the two white ovals.

“Is that . . . ?” Layton asked.

“What?” Lipsky looked like he didn’t want to hear it.

“Feet? It looks like the bottoms of somebody’s feet,” Layton said.

Lipsky turned back toward the squad car.

“Where’re you going?” Layton asked.

“To call the cops,” Lipsky said. “*More* cops. *Lotsa* cops.”

2

The Bureau of Criminal Apprehension is housed in a modern redbrick-and-glass building in St. Paul, Minnesota. Lucas Davenport had once explained the somewhat odd name to an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation this way: “In Minnesota, see, we actually *apprehend* the assholes, instead of just investigating them.”

The fed said, “Really? Doesn’t that get you in trouble? I’d think the paperwork would be a nightmare.”

Lucas parked his Porsche 911 in the lot below his office window, where he could keep an eye on it. The last time he’d parked it out of eyesight, somebody had stuck a vegan bumper sticker on it that said: “Beef: It’s What’s Rotting In Your Colon.”

He hadn’t found it until he pulled off the interstate, wondering why other drivers were honking at him: A tire problem? Something about to fall off? When he saw the sticker, he crawled home in shame, through the back streets, and then spent a half hour peeling it off, cursing the rotten bastard who’d stuck it there.

Today, he would park within pistol range.

. . .

HIS OFFICE WAS on the second floor, in a corner, and when he got there . . . there was nobody home. He walked back out to a conference room, where the door was open. One of his agents, Del Capslock, was sitting at the conference table, looking solemn, part of a crowd of solemn agents. Lucas was sure he hadn’t missed a scheduled meeting, so . . .

Del looked out through the door, saw Lucas, and crooked a finger at him.

Lucas had been out of the office since the previous afternoon. Before leaving, he’d heard that the BCA crime-scene crew was leaving for a murder site west of Red Wing, a small Mississippi River town something less than an hour south of St. Paul, famous for boots and country crocks and the state reform school: “If you don’t eat your Cap’n Crunch, the cops will send you to Red Wing.”

Something about a cistern, with a body in it.

Lucas slipped into the conference room. All the chairs were full, so he propped himself in a corner. Henry Sands, a bald man of limited emotional dimension, sat at the head of the table, the flats of his hands pressed to his temples, as though he were trying to hold his head together. Not a good sign, since Sands was the director of the BCA.

Rose Marie Roux, the commissioner of public safety, and Sands’s boss, whose office was in a different building entirely, was sitting at one corner of the table, rubbing her forehead with the tips of

her fingers. Another bad sign.

~~Almost everyone else—a dozen people, ten male, two female—were staring at them, waiting, or looking at a variety of yellow legal pads, laptops, and iPads. When nobody else spoke, Lucas did.~~
“How bad is it?”

Roux looked up and said, “Lucas. Good morning. They’ve got fifteen skulls. They don’t have them all, yet. They’re not even sure that they’ve got most of them. We just had Beatrice Sawyer on the phone, and she said it’s like excavating ten feet of cold bean soup. She says there might be four feet of bones at the bottom.”

“Holy shit.”

“That’s the prevailing sentiment,” Roux said. She was a heavyset woman with a notorious smoking habit and hair of an ever-changing color. A politician and former prosecutor, Minneapolis police chief, and, briefly, a street cop, she was one of Lucas’s oldest friends and a longtime ally.

“Have they identified anyone?” Lucas asked.

Sands said, “Mary Lynn Carpenter. She disappeared from Durand, Wisconsin, two weeks ago. They found her car at the Diamond Bluff cemetery, across the river from Red Wing. She’d go there every once in a while to clean up her grandparents’ graves. The cemetery’s on the Mississippi, above a slough. They’d been looking for her body in the river.”

“Who else?” Lucas asked.

Sands shook his head. “Don’t know, but Beatrice said that judging from the skulls, they’re all women. Carpenter had been strangled with a piece of nylon rope. It’s still around her neck. What’s left of her neck. She’s probably been in the well for two weeks.”

“Cistern,” somebody said.

“Can’t they pump it out?” Lucas asked.

“They’re trying, but the bottom of the cistern is cracked and the crack’s below the water table,” Sands said. “Water seeps back in almost as fast as they can pump it out. They can’t pump too fast, because they don’t want to lose any of the . . . material.”

. . .

“WHAT TOWNS ARE down there? Besides Red Wing?” Roux asked.

One of the agents was looking at a laptop and said, “Not much—closest town, besides Red Wing, is Diamond Bluff, across the river in Wisconsin, less than five hundred people. That’s where Carpenter was when she disappeared. Ellsworth is fourteen miles away, also in Wisconsin, three thousand people. In Minnesota, there’s Lake City, seventeen miles south of Red Wing, Holbein, fourteen miles southwest, Zumbrota, eight miles past Holbein, Hastings, more or less twenty-five miles north, and Cannon Falls, twenty miles west. The cistern is eight miles from Red Wing, nine miles from Holbein, eleven from Lake City, quite a bit further from Cannon Falls and Hastings.”

“Are we talking to the Wisconsin DCI?” Lucas asked.

“We are,” Sands said. “They already had an agent involved, on the Carpenter disappearance. He’s down at the scene now.”

Another agent, a woman, jumped in: “On a sheer numbers basis, the killer’s probably from Red Wing. Next most likely is that he’s from here in the Cities—we’re fifty miles from the cistern. But if you were originally from that area, and knew about the cistern, and you were living up here and needed a body dump . . .”

A third agent: “We don’t have the facts. We’ve got to identify more of the bodies before we can start talking about where the killer’s from. Right now, with one identifiable body, picked up in that

area, I'm betting he's from down there. If we find a couple more from down there . . ."

That set off a round of squabbling, until Roux held up a hand and said, "Okay, okay, okay. You guys can do the numbers later. Henry, we need a structure here. We need the most intense investigation we've ever run, because, my friends, this is pretty much it. You are all standing in front of the fan that the shit just hit. They'll be screaming about this from every TV station in the nation tonight and they will continue screaming until we get the killer. Is that perfectly clear to everyone?"

Everyone nodded.

. . .

SANDS SAID, "Bob Shaffer will run the investigation. There'll be a lot of ins and outs to the case, so he'll need a lot of guys. Anybody who isn't closing out a case, Bob'll be talking to you. The only exemptions are Lucas's crew . . ."

He looked over at Lucas: "Can you switch off the Bryan case?"

Lucas shook his head. "Not really. We still haven't figured out whether he's dead."

"He's dead," somebody said.

Somebody else disagreed: "No, he's not. Ten-to-one he's in Honduras, or someplace like it."

Lucas said, "I just don't know."

"What's Flowers doing?" Roux asked.

Lucas said, "Vacation, down in New Mexico. He left two days ago, pulling his boat. He won't be back for three weeks."

"New Mexico's a fuckin' desert," somebody offered.

"He says there's a musky lake," Lucas said. "He said he's gonna clean it out."

"He ought to bring the boat back. We could use it in the cistern," Roux said. And: "All right. Bob, get your crew together and get going."

Shaffer, who had been sitting silently taking notes, nodded and stood up and said, "I want to talk to Jon and Sandy right now, my office. Everybody else, we'll meet back here in a half hour."

Roux stood up and said, "Lucas, I want you to take a look at whatever Bob comes up with. Henry, want updates every couple of hours today, and then every morning and evening until we close this out. Let's get this done, guys. Let's get it done in one big hurry."

While they were all there together, so they'd all hear it at once, Lucas pushed away from the wall and said, "I don't think that's going to happen, Rose Marie. If there are really that many dead women and we didn't know about it, didn't connect the disappearances, then the killer is smart and careful. I mean, really careful. This could take time."

"I don't want to hear that," Roux snapped.

"You need to," Lucas snapped back. He looked around. "We don't want anyone hinting to the media that this is gonna be a walk in the park, that we'll get the guy next week. If we do, that's fine. But if we don't, the media's gonna be a hair shirt, and we're all gonna be wearing it."

All the cops looked at him for a moment, then Roux said, "Okay. He's right. So: we have one guy talking to the media. Anybody else talks, you'll be manning the new bureau down in Bumfuck, Minn. Everybody understand?"

. . .

LUCAS SPOKE TO SHAFFER for a few moments after the meeting broke up, with Del orbiting around them. Shaffer and Lucas didn't particularly like each other, but had worked several ugly cases

together, with good results. They agreed that Lucas would be on the distribution list for everything coming out of the investigation, but would stay away from the main case.

“I might talk to a few people, if I come across any that are interesting,” Lucas said.

“That’s fine,” Shaffer said. “If you get anything, be sure to update the files.”

“I will do that,” Lucas said.

Shaffer started to step away, then said, “Lucas: I appreciate what you said to Rose Marie. This could take a while. You were the right guy to tell her that.”

Lucas nodded: “Had to be said.”

• • •

LUCAS AND SHAFFER had been successful, when they worked together, precisely because they were so radically different in style.

Shaffer was a data collector and a grinder: with enough data, he believed, you could solve anything. His files were wonders, his spreadsheets were remarkable, his decision matrices were monuments to game theory. And they worked. Anytime his agents could collect enough relevant data, his clearance rate was exceptional.

Shaffer looked like a grinder: neatly dressed at all times, in short-sleeved shirts in the summer, blue or white oxford cloth in winter, with bland neckties, wrinkle-free khaki trousers from Macy’s, and blue blazers. He exercised extensively and efficiently, ate right, didn’t drink or smoke. Married to his high school sweetheart, he was slender, of average height, with pale brown hair.

He’d come up the hard way: a patrol officer in Duluth, then a detective, then up through the ranks at the BCA, until he’d become one of the go-to investigators. He knew statistics: he’d taken college courses in statistics and geography at the University of Minnesota’s extension school. He’d kept his nose clean.

• • •

LUCAS WAS A connection collector, an investigator who liked to knit people together, to put one source with another and let them fight it out. He thrived on mysteries.

A tall, brooding man with dark hair, friendly blue eyes, and a sometimes frightening smile, Lucas was hawk-faced and heavy in the shoulders, and scarred from encounters with the misbegotten. Like Shaffer, he’d gone to the University of Minnesota, where instead of statistics, he’d studied hockey and women.

He’d never had to work his way up. He’d spent a short time on patrol, and then jumped over three dozen senior men to become a Minneapolis detective. Nor had he tried very hard to keep his nose clean. He’d been pushed out of the Minneapolis police department after beating up a pimp who’d church-keyed one of his sources.

He’d gotten back into the department when Roux, the new chief, made him a deputy chief, a political appointment. That job ended when Roux quit to become the state’s commissioner of public safety. But as soon as she reasonably could, Roux had dropped Lucas into the BCA, right into a top slot.

His clearance rate, like Shaffer’s, was excellent. Lucas exercised, but inefficiently: running frequently, but not every day, playing basketball and senior hockey. Lucas had once had a reputation for chasing skirts; and catching them. He had a daughter out of wedlock, two children from his only marriage, and an adopted daughter. He’d drink a beer in the evening, and knew his barbecue.

• • •

WITH ALL THEIR natural differences, in career path and personality, Shaffer and Lucas were never going to be close: but with all the important differences, their real distaste for each other came on relatively minor issues. Shaffer was a natural socialist, who'd grown up in an Iron Range union family. He didn't like rich people, not even self-made rich people.

Lucas was self-made rich.

Even worse than the money was Lucas's whole lifestyle: the Porsche, his history with women, the wardrobe. Lucas bought his working clothes in men's boutiques, and every couple of years, went to New York.

To shop.

Lucas thought of Shaffer, when he thought of Shaffer at all, as a clerk.

Shaffer knew it.

• • •

WHEN HE'D FINISHED talking to Shaffer, Lucas and Del went down to his office, where Shrake and Jenkins were waiting. They were both big men, in suits that were too sharp, as though they'd fallen off a truck in Brooklyn. Both had even, extra-white teeth, and for the same reason: their real, natural, yellower teeth had been knocked out at one time or another. Lucas told them about the find at Red Wing.

"We're throwing Bryan out the window?" Shrake blurted.

"No, Shaffer's doing the work," Lucas said. "We'll be mostly talking."

"I hate to see that officious prick get all the glory," Jenkins said. "He's the kind of guy who wouldn't give you a six-inch putt."

"He does good records," Del said.

"He's also exactly the right guy to run this case," Lucas said. "It's gonna be all sorting bones and extracting DNA and running the spreadsheets."

"Still wouldn't give you a putt," Jenkins said.

"Probably because he's not fuckin' stupid enough to play golf," Lucas said. "Anyway, if Shaffer doesn't find this killer in a hurry, they'll be sniffing around our asses, looking for help. Let's close on Bryan."

• • •

BRYAN.

Bryan had run a St. Paul investment company that turned out to be a Ponzi scheme, a scheme that had eventually come up a couple of Ponzis short. He'd been arrested and the state attorney general's office was trying to get back the thirty-one million dollars that had been entrusted to him by 1,691 small investors, most of them elderly. Bryan said the money was gone—spent on fast Italian cars, slow Kentucky horses, and hot Russian women, along with a \$250,000 RV, which lost half its value when he turned the key on it, and an unprofitable ostrich ranch in Wyoming. Rumor said that a good deal more of the cash had gone up his nose.

There were doubters.

Bryan had divorced three years earlier, and his ex-wife, Bloomie, now lived in a house very near,

but not quite on, the Atlantic Ocean in Palm Beach. According to the local conspiracy theorists, Bryan had seen the trouble coming, had given an overly generous divorce settlement to his wife, who would support him when the problems became public and the company went broke. There was also talk that he owned a Cabo San Lucas estate under a Mexican corporate shadow.

That may have been true, but apparently had become irrelevant when Bryan's court-ordered ankle monitor went dead, and his BMW M6 convertible had been found parked near the St. Croix gorge at Taylors Falls with the front seat soaked in his blood. No body had been found. There were, at latest count, 1,691 suspects in Bryan's disappearance.

"Well, we've already interviewed twelve of them, so that only leaves one thousand six hundred and seventy-nine to go. We should have that done by 2020," Jenkins said.

"Start with the ones young enough to move a body," Lucas suggested. "That'll cut the workload by ninety-eight percent."

"Are you gonna help?" Shrake asked.

"First, I'm gonna go down and take a look at this cistern, this well, where they found all the bodies," Lucas said. "Then this evening, I'll be talking to the beautiful Carrie Lee Pitt, about Bryan's missing clothes. I'm hoping she'll let me peek in her closet."

"How come *we're* not talking to Carrie Lee Pitt?" Jenkins asked.

"Because that will take some *savoir faire*, which you don't got any of," Lucas said.

Jenkins looked offended, lifted an arm and sniffed his armpit, and said, "Yes, I do."

• • •

JENKINS AND SHRAKE LEFT, and Lucas turned to Del, who had taken Lucas's visitor's chair and put his feet up on a file cabinet.

Del was a thin man, with a sun-darkened face of knobs and wrinkled plains, a little more than average height: a dusty guy in his mid-fifties, who looked like he lived on the street. He was wearing long-sleeved turquoise cowboy shirt and faded jeans over hiking boots. "We're going down to the well?"

"Cistern," Lucas said. "Yeah, I guess we better. But Jesus, that shirt makes me want to pluck my eyeballs out. You been hanging out at Goodwill again?"

"From what I hear, if we're going down to the well—the cistern—we're gonna want to burn the clothes afterwards," Del said. "I'd rather burn a polyester shirt than a two-thousand-dollar Italian suit. Or three-thousand-dollar Romanian shoes."

"British shoes. And when you're right, you're right." Lucas pushed himself out of his chair. "We'll stop at my place on the way out. You ready?"

"As ever."

"Fifteen skulls so far," Lucas said, as he turned off the office lights. "And there are more down the well."

"Somebody's been a bad, bad boy," Del said.

• • •

ON THE WAY OUT of the building, they ran into Sands, the BCA director. He was looking harried, and said, as they walked down the stairs to the first floor, "This can come to no good end. Remember I said that."

"It already did, for at least fifteen women," Del said. "But we'll get him."

“Not soon enough,” Sands said. He breathed in Lucas’s direction, and Lucas had to fight an impulse to step back: Sands’s breath was notorious. “It’s already not soon enough. Charlie’s already getting calls from the *Today* show.”

Charlie handled the BCA’s media relations.

• • •

AT HOME, Lucas changed into worn Levi’s 505s and a blue chambray work shirt from Façonnable; he let the shirt hang loose to cover the .45 in his beltline.

He and Del loaded an Igloo cooler into the back of his black Mercedes SUV, and Lucas threw a nylon daypack on top of the cooler. On the way out of town, they stopped at a BP station for gas, and picked up ice, bottled water, Coke and Diet Coke, and headed south across the Mississippi.

“I have a psychological observation,” Del said, as they crossed the water.

“Nobody’s more qualified to make one,” Lucas said.

“It’s just this. You say, ‘fifteen skulls,’ and I say, ‘Somebody’s been a bad, bad boy.’ If an outsider had heard that, they’d think we had no feelings at all. I’d have sounded like an asshole.”

A Prius passed Lucas, doing ninety, and then cut in front of him and slowed. Lucas tapped the brakes and said, “Blow me.” And to Del, “Not you, the Prius. And what you say is true. Not a new experience, for you, though.”

“Or you. We sit around and bullshit about this stuff, like we’re reading a bus ticket, but when we start finding out about the victims, we’re gonna get pissed,” Del said. “We’re not pissed now, but we will be. We’ll find out about their lives, about what they wanted to do, and all the misery this killer caused, we’ll start brooding about it, and we’ll get pissed.”

“Get to the point. I want to put on my Pink album.”

“The point is this—Henry and Rose Marie are already pissed. They’re pissed because the politics might hurt them. They’re not pissed about fifteen women down the well, they’re pissed about how they’re going to look on TV. You know, the big-shot cops who let this happen right here in River City.”

“In the interest of your continuing employment,” Lucas said, “let’s keep this psychological observation between you and me.”

“You know what I’m saying,” Del said.

“I do,” Lucas said. “It’s the way of the world, man. There are the worker bees, and the manager bees. The worker bees take care of the work, the manager bees take care of themselves.”

• • •

THEY WERE HEADED OUT on a good summer day, but hot, down Highway 52, through Cannon Falls, and on south. The cistern site was in rolling farm country west of the Mississippi River Valley, on a gravel road off Goodhue County 1. They spent a few minutes wandering around, after an off-map shortcut didn’t work out, and so took an hour to find the site.

The road was blocked by two cop cars five hundred yards out, and a half dozen TV vans were parked on the shoulder of the road, reporters and photographers clustered on the shady sides of the vans.

“Lot of TV,” Del said. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen this much.”

“Gonna be rough,” Lucas said. “Shaffer’s gonna be hip-deep in bullshit before he’s through.”

“Better him than us,” Del said.

• • •

THE COPS AT THE ROADBLOCK, both sweating furiously in their long-sleeved uniforms, looked at Lucas ID. Lucas said, "I got ice-cold Coke, Diet Coke, and water in the back."

"Cokes," the cops said simultaneously, and Del dug them out of the cooler and passed them to Lucas, who handed them through the window to the cops and asked, "Who doesn't get speeding tickets in Goodhue County?"

"You're good up to an assault, far as I'm concerned," the cop said, and they went on through.

• • •

"TOO MANY PEOPLE," Del said, as Lucas pulled onto the shoulder of the dusty road, fifty yards short of the site. The shoulder was filled with cop cars, civilian cars and trucks and vans, and an empty heavy equipment trailer.

"Everybody's gonna want to be here, just to say they were," Lucas said.

They got out of the truck, into the hot midday air smelling of roadside weeds. Lucas stuffed Cokes and bottles of water into the daypack, and they ambled along the gravel road toward the farm turnoff. Halfway to the cistern site, they ran into a BCA agent named Don Buford, who saw them coming and said, "I don't suppose you got a beer in there?"

"Got a Coke or a Diet Coke," Lucas said. "Or a bottle of water."

"I'll give you ten dollars for a Diet Coke."

Lucas gave him the Coke and Buford looked around and said, "Ain't this a great day? Hot, sunny, no wind. Tell you what, when you get up there, you'll be praying for cold, wind, and rain. The smell . . . half the guys up there have been pukin' their guts out."

"What's there to see?" Lucas asked.

Buford shrugged: "Just the site. They're calling it the Black Hole of Goodhue. You know, like . . ."

". . . the Black Hole of Calcutta. We get it," Del said.

"The whole crime-scene crew is up there," Buford said, rolling the cold Coke bottle across his forehead. "It's a nightmare. Got boxes of skulls. Nothing for me, though. I'd eat a sandwich, if I could keep it down."

"We're wasting our time?" Lucas asked.

"Oh . . . no. You gotta go look, and look around," Buford said. "Maybe tell you something about the guy who did this. Got to be some kind of crazy farmer. Somebody who butchers his own meat, or something. Some kinda . . ." Buford shuddered. ". . . monster."

• • •

THEY LEFT BUFORD in the road and walked up a slight rise to the turnoff, showed their IDs to another cop, and walked up the grassy track into the heart of the old farmstead. There they found four people in hazmat suits peering into a hole in a concrete slab, and a dozen cops scattered through the trees and brush, watching.

A yellow front-end loader's lift bucket dangled over the hole, with a steel cable dropping into the hole itself. Off to one side was a stack of semi-transparent plastic tubs, the kind you can buy at Target with paper stickers on the top-covers: human remains. A skull grinned out of one of them. A hundred feet from the hole, an air compressor was working, and in the other direction, a Honda generator.

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