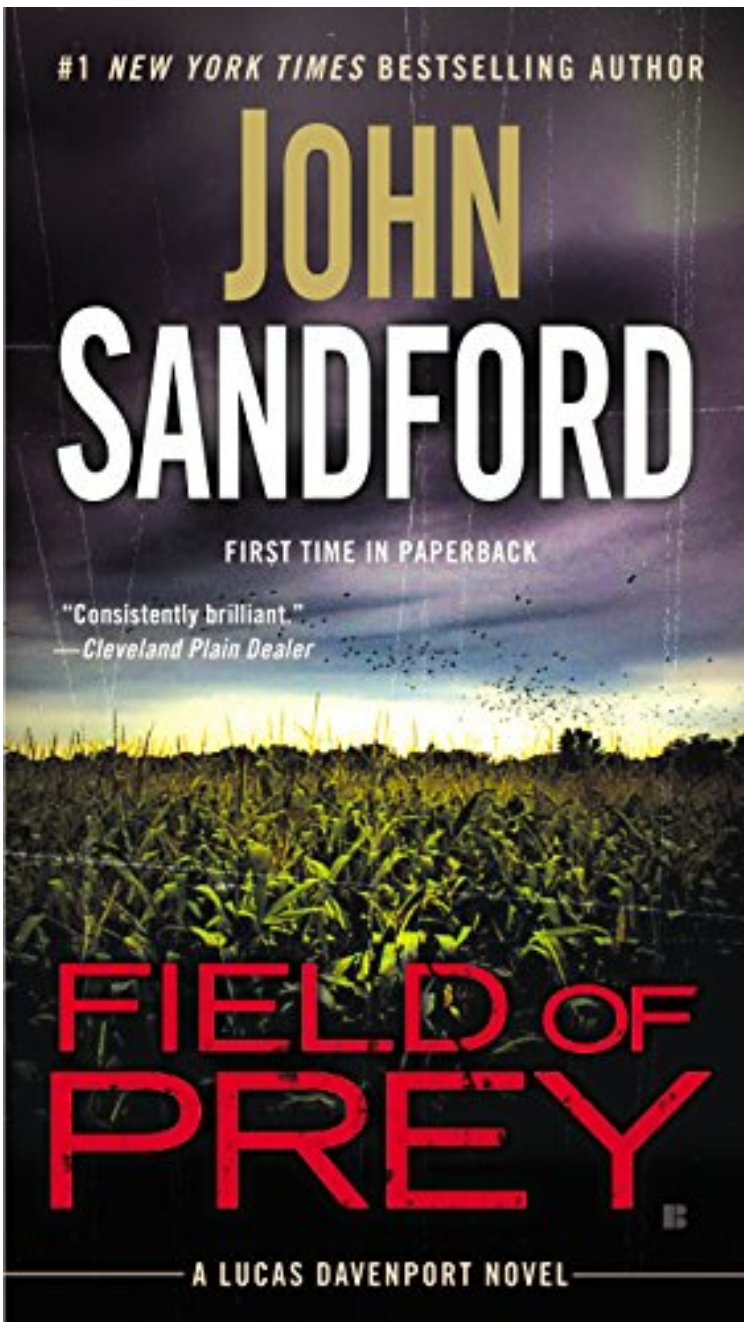


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## Field of Prey



*Par John Sandford*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe extraordinary new Lucas Davenport thriller from #1 New York Times-bestselling author and Pulitzer Prize winner John Sandford.The night after the fourth of July, Layton Carlson Jr., of Red Wing, Minnesota, finally got lucky. And unlucky.Hed picked the perfect spot to lose his virginity to his girlfriend, an abandoned farmyard in the middle of cornfields: nice, private, and quiet. The only problem

was . . . something smelled badlike, really bad. He mentioned it to a county deputy he knew, and when the cop took a look, he found a body stuffed down a cistern. And then another, and another. By the time Lucas Davenport was called in, the police were up to fifteen bodies and counting. And as if that wasn't bad enough, when Lucas began to investigate, he made some disturbing discoveries of his own. The victims had been killed over a great many years, one every summer, regular as clockwork. How could this have happened without anybody noticing? Because one thing was for sure: the killer had to live close by. He was probably even someone they saw every day. . . .

**EXTRAIT YEARS AGO...**

The fifth woman was a blond waitress who enhanced her income by staying late to do kitchen cleanup at Aunties, 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 hauled 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, Im hurt, man, Im 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 Aunties, 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: Roge 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. 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 Gingers 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. Theyd taken petting to a fever pitch, but Layton was the tiniest bit shy about asking for the Big One. Ginger had her hand on Laytons 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 wasnt sure that Layton was going to get laid that summer was Layton himself. His parents knew, her parents knew, Ginger knew, all of Laytons friends knew, all of Gingers friends knew, and Gingers youngest sister, who was nine, strongly suspected. But Layton, there in the park, wasnt organized for the moment. He groaned and said, in words made memorable by thousands of impromptu daddies, Nothinll happen. Cant 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. Hed gotten the green light to borrow his moms three-year-old Dodge Grand Caravan, which had Super Stow n Go seating in the back, converting instantly into a mobile bedroom. Hed stashed a Target air mattress and a six-pack of Coors with a friend. And hed 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 outbuildings 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 Laytons 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 rats 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 hadnt 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 didnt care. She didnt care much either, especially as shed reminded him about the flashlight. So they messed around with the flashlight for a while, and Ginger said, Youre really large, which made him feel pretty good, although hed 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-oldhe probably wouldnt have needed the fifth one. They lay naked in each others 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. Im 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 jean 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 almost entirely 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 FRIENDS 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 out of 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. Hed done it four times when, on the fifth, there was a hollow thunk. There it is, Lipsky said. Should have been filled in, doesnt 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 dont think were 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. Lets 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 theyd vomited everything in their stomachs Lipsky had gone to his hands and knees they went back and looked into the cistern, but all they saw was darkness. Let me get a flash, Lipsky said. Dont 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 didnt want to hear it. Feet? It looks like the bottoms of somebodys feet, Layton said. Lipsky turned back toward the squad car. Where are 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? Doesnt that get you in trouble? Id 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 hed parked it out of eyesight, somebody had stuck a vegan bumper sticker on it that said: Beef: Its Whats Rotting In Your Colon. He hadnt 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 whod 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 hadnt 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, hed 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 dont eat your Capn 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 Sandss 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. Theyve got fifteen skulls. They dont have them all, yet. Theyre not even sure that theyve got most of them. We just had Beatrice Sawyer on the phone, and she said its like excavating ten feet of cold bean soup. She says there might be four feet of bones at the bottom. Holy shit. Thats 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 Lucass 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. Shed go

there every once in a while to clean up her grandparents graves. The cemeterys on the Mississippi, above a slough. Theyd been looking for her body in the river. Who else? Lucas asked. Sands shook his head. Dont know, but Beatrice said that judging from the skulls, theyre all women. Carpenter had been strangled with a piece of nylon rope. Its still around her neck. Whats left of her neck. Shes probably been in the well for two weeks. Cistern, somebody said. Cant they pump it out? Lucas asked. Theyre trying, but the bottom of the cistern is cracked and the cracks below the water table, Sands said. Water seeps back in almost as fast as they can pump it out. They cant pump too fast, because they dont 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. Thats where Carpenter was when she disappeared. Ellsworth is fourteen miles away, also in Wisconsin, three thousand people. In Minnesota, theres 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. Hes down at the scene now. Another agent, a woman, jumped in: On a sheer numbers basis, the killers probably from Red Wing. Next most likely is that hes from here in the Cities were 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 dont have the facts. Weve got to identify more of the bodies before we can start talking about where the killers from. Right now, with one identifiable body, picked up in that area, Im betting hes 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 weve ever run, because, my friends, this is pretty much it. You are all standing in front of the fan that the shit just hit. Theyll 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. Therell be a lot of ins and outs to the case, so hell need a lot of guys. Anybody who isnt closing out a case, Bobll be talking to you. The only exemptions are Lucass crew... He looked over at Lucas: Can you switch off the Bryan case? Lucas shook his head. Not really. We still havent figured out whether hes dead. Hes dead, somebody said. Somebody else disagreed: No, hes not. Ten-to-one hes in Honduras, or someplace like it. Lucas said, I just dont know. Whats Flowers doing? Roux asked. Lucas said, Vacation, down in New Mexico. He left two days ago, pulling his boat. He wont be back for three weeks. New Mexicos a fuckin desert, somebody offered. He says theres a musky lake, Lucas said. He said hes 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, well 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, I want updates every couple of hours today, and then every morning and evening until we close this out. Lets get this done, guys. Lets get it done in one big hurry. While they were all there together, so theyd all hear it at once, Lucas pushed away from the wall and said, I dont think thats going to happen, Rose Marie. If there are really that many dead women, and we didnt know about it, didnt connect the disappearances, then the killer is smart and careful. I mean, really careful. This could take time. I dont want to hear that, Roux snapped. You need to, Lucas snapped back. He looked around. We dont want anyone hinting to the media that this is gonna be a walk in the park, that well get the guy next week. If we do, thats fine. But if we dont, the medias gonna be a hair shirt, and were all gonna be wearing it. All the cops looked at him for a moment, then Roux said, Okay. Hes right. So: we have one guy talking to the media. Anybody else talks, youll 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 didnt 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. Thats 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 Macys, and blue blazers. He exercised extensively and efficiently, ate right, didnt drink or smoke. Married to his high school sweetheart, he was slender, of average height, with pale brown hair. Hed come up the hard way: a patrol officer in Duluth, then a detective, then up through the ranks at the BCA, until hed become one of the go-to investigators. He knew statistics: hed taken college courses in statistics and geography at the University of Minnesotas extension school. Hed 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, hed gone to the University of Minnesota, where instead of statistics, hed studied hockey and women. Hed never had to work his way up. Hed 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. Hed been pushed out of the Minneapolis police department after beating up a pimp whod church-keyed one of his sources. Hed 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 states 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 Shaffers, 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. Hed 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, whod grown up in an Iron Range union family. He didnt like rich people, not even self-made rich people. Lucas was self-made rich. Even worse than the money was Lucass whole lifestyle: the Porsche, his history with women, the wardrobe. Lucas bought his working clothes in mens 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 HED 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 theyd 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. Were throwing Bryan out the window? Shrake blurted. No, Shaffers doing the work, Lucas said. Well be mostly talking. I hate to see that officious prick get all the glory, Jenkins said. Hes the kind of guy who wouldnt give you a six-inch putt. He does good records, Del said. Hes also exactly the right guy to run this case, Lucas said. Its gonna be all sorting bones and extracting DNA and running the spreadsheets. Still wouldnt give you a putt, Jenkins said. Probably because hes not fuckin stupid enough to play golf, Lucas said. Anyway, if Shaffer doesnt find this killer in a hurry, theyll be sniffing around our asses, looking for help. Lets close out 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. Hed been arrested and the state attorney generals 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 gonespent 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 Bryans 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 Bryans disappearance. Well, weve 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. Thatll cut the workload by ninety-eight percent. Are you gonna help? Shrake asked. First, Im gonna go down and take a look at this cistern, this well, where they found all the bodies, Lucas said. Then this evening, Ill be talking to the beautiful Carrie Lee Pitt, about Bryans missing clothes. Im hoping shell let me peek in her closet. How come were not talking to Carrie Lee Pitt? Jenkins asked. Because that will take some savoir faire, which you dont 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 Lucass visitors 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 a long-sleeved turquoise cowboy shirt and faded jeans over hiking boots. Were 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 were going down to the well the cistern were gonna want to burn the clothes afterwards, Del said. Id rather burn a polyester shirt than a two-thousand-dollar Italian suit. Or three-thousand-dollar Romanian shoes. British shoes. And when youre right, youre right. Lucas pushed himself out of his chair. Well 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. Somebodys 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 well get him. Not soon enough, Sands said. He breathed in Lucass direction, and Lucas had to fight an impulse to step back: Sandss breath was notorious. Its already not soon enough. Charlies already getting calls from the Today show. Charlie handled the BCAs media relations. AT HOME, Lucas changed into worn Levis 505s and a blue chambray work shirt from Faonnable; 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. Nobodys more qualified to make one, Lucas said. Its just this. You say, fifteen skulls, and I say, Somebodys been a bad, bad boy. If an outsider had heard that, theyd think we had no feelings at all. Id 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 were reading a bus ticket, but when we start finding out about the victims, were gonna get pissed, Del said. Were not pissed now, but we will be. Well find out about their lives, about what they wanted to do, and all the misery this killer caused, well start brooding about it, and well 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. Theyre pissed because the politics might hurt them. Theyre not pissed about fifteen women down the well, theyre pissed about how theyre 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, lets keep this psychological observation between you and me. You know what Im saying, Del said. I do, Lucas said. Its 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 didnt 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. Its been a while since Ive seen this much. Gonna be rough, Lucas said. Shaffers gonna be hip-deep in bullshit before hes through. Better him than us, Del said. THE COPS AT THE ROADBLOCK, both sweating furiously in their long-sleeved uniforms, looked at Lucass 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 doesnt get speeding tickets in Goodhue County? Youre good up to ag assault, far as Im 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. Everybodys 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 dont suppose you got a beer in there? Got a Coke or a Diet Coke, Lucas said. Or a bottle of water. Ill give you ten dollars for a Diet Coke. Lucas gave him the Coke and Buford looked around and said, Aint this a great day? Hot, sunny, no wind. Tell you what, when you get up there, youll be praying for cold, wind, and rain. The smell... half the guys up there have been pukin their guts out. Whats there to see? Lucas asked. Buford shrugged: Just the site. Theyre 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. Its a nightmare. Got boxes of skulls.

Nothing for me, though. Id eat a sandwich, if I could keep it down. Were 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 loaders 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. Power and air lines led to the hole. As they got closer, the stink hit them, and Lucas turned away. Buford was right, Del said. He dug into his pack and came up with a jar of Vicks VapoRub, opened it, and offered it to Lucas, who took out a bit on the end of a finger and rubbed under his nose. Del did the same, and they walked up to the hole, and a woman standing next to it in a dark blue hazmat suit with the hood down. Beatrice Sawyer, head of the crime-scene crew. Lucas said, Hey, Bea. She turned and said, Lucas, Del. Nice day, huh? Breathing through his mouth, Lucas peered into the cistern, which was illuminated with LED work lights. He could see another person in a hazmat suit, ten feet down, suspended on a wooden platform over a murky gray liquid that could hardly be called water. The suit was sealed, with air lines leading into the helmet. Youve been down there? he asked. Yeah. Thats Hopping Crow down there now. Were trying to find a way to get the water out, without disturbing the remains too much, Sawyer said.

Larrys placing pump lines with filters that we got from a septic-supply place in Red Wing. Were improvising. Dont know if itll work. Why wouldnt it? Oh, we could get the water out with any pump thats large enough, she said. Everything else would come, too. We need to gently remove it, with a flow fast enough to replace the inflow of groundwater. This cistern is essentially sitting on a spring. Hmm. Lucas didnt know about farm stuff. Hows the skull count? Del asked. Seventeen, now, Sawyer said. There are more. We can feel them, but we cant see them, and we dont want to damage them. We need to see the dental work. Del said, Bobbing for Satans apples. Pretty fuckin poetic, Del, Sawyer said. Any more IDs? Lucas asked. Yes. One. A probable, anyway. When we were using another pump, it got jammed up, and when we pulled it, we found it had sucked up a plastic Visa card, still readable, issued to a Janice Williams. A Janice Williams from Cannon Falls disappeared eight years ago. She was a student at Dakota technical college. Her friends thought she might have gone to Miamishe knew some guy down there, and shed talked about going down. Her parents thought shed been kidnapped, and shes never been back in touch. Thats all I know at this point, but I think its likely her, down there. Will we screw anything up... Lucas paused when a man a few feet away suddenly bent over, then rapidly walked away, still bent, and began retching against a tree. They looked away and Lucas started again: Will we screw anything up if we walk around here? To look the place over? Possibly, but I wouldnt worry about it, she said. There have been five hundred people here today, and if theres anything that hasnt been stepped on, I dont know what it would be. Del asked, Can you get DNA out of vomit? Sawyer nodded. Sure. If the killer popped the top off this thing two weeks ago, when this last woman disappeared, is it possible that he puked into the dirt, right where were standing? They all looked at their feet and Sawyer said, I wish youd asked that question yesterday afternoon. SAWYER HAD BEEN SWEATING heavily in the hazmat suit, and she greedily sucked down one of Lucass Diet Cokes. A man stepped up behind them and said, Hey, Lucas, Del. You guys got another Coke? Lucas turned: Hey, Jimmy.

We were told there was a Wisconsin guy here. Didn't know it was you. Yeah, I'd been poking around the Carpenter disappearance, over at Diamond Bluff. James Bole was an agent with Wisconsin's Division of Criminal Investigation, an earnest, square-shouldered, stocky man with strawberry blond hair and a neat strawberry blond mustache. He was familiar enough around the Minnesota BCA, working cross-river cases. He took one of Lucas's Cokes and said, "Don't have much. We didn't know whether she'd been kidnapped or had gone down to the river and fallen in. Now she..." He gestured at the hole. "We heard, Lucas said. You take her car apart? Yeah, but there was no sign that anything happened to her inside the car. Didn't find anybody's prints but hers and her mother's—nothing was wiped so she probably drove it down there herself. One thing: when she was reported missing, her car was spotted by a Pierce County deputy. It'd rained not long before she disappeared, and when he found her car, he noticed that her tires had made tracks in the mud, and they were still pretty clear. He figured if she had been kidnapped, the kidnapper must've had a vehicle down there in the cemetery... otherwise, he would have had to carry her up a bluff, or down to a boat. There weren't that many other tracks around, so he had casts made of all the different tire tracks. Good move, Del said. It's thin, but it's what we got, Bole said. All the tire tracks were probably made by trucks, all-weather tires, four different patterns, four different brands. I gave a list to Buford, he was here. Saw him down on the road... SHAFFER SHOWED UP, spotted them, lifted a hand, talked to Sawyer for a moment, then walked over. Isn't this something? It is, Del said. Get anything at all? Lucas asked. Shaffer's crew had interviewed the owner of the farm that surrounded the site, a woman named James, and from her had gotten a number of ideas that might help locate the people who'd known about the hidden cistern. Shaffer himself had interviewed the two kids who'd first smelled the decomposing body down the cistern, and the deputy who'd pried the lid off the hole. You can't see it now, but the whole site was covered with grass, with sod. The cistern was invisible: had to know it was here before you could put somebody into it, and not many people knew about it. That could help, Lucas said. Yeah. I hope. Have you seen... There they are. Gotta go talk to these guys. He walked away, toward two guys who had a laptop propped against a tree trunk, entering... data. THEY DROVE AWAY from the hole as they talked, mostly to get away from the stink. A squabble started at the hole, and they turned around to see Sawyer, in the hazmat suit, still holding the Diet Coke, faced off with a woman in a Goodhue County deputy's uniform. The deputy was tall and pretty enough, but rangy like a basketball or volleyball player, with wide shoulders and a small butt. She looked like she'd been in a few fights; her nose wasn't quite on straight. She had one hand resting on her pistol, like she might have to shoot her way out of the farm site. Sawyer was saying, "... everything goes through our office, and if you want reports, you'll have to get them there. We can't get them out to every Tom, Dick, and Harry. I'm not every Tom, Dick, and Harry—this is my jurisdiction and my job, the deputy snarled. She'd come primed for a fight, Lucas thought, or perhaps spent her life angry. She was red-faced and angry now. I want copies of everything, and I want them as soon as they come out. Lucas stepped toward her and said, mildly enough, "Everything has to go through one system, or we'll all get confused. If you're authorized to get the reports, it's not a problem: we just make an extra set of copies. Where you?" she asked, looking him up and down. "I'm a BCA agent, Lucas said. I've been assigned. And were second-class citizens? Hey, you'll get the crime-scene stuff as fast as I do, Lucas said. You need to talk to Bob Shaffer to get on the distribution list. He'll be the agent in charge. He's around, I just talked to him. Bob Shaffer?" She took out a notebook. How do you spell that? Lucas said, slowly, "B-o-b..." Her eyes snapped at him and he'd had the sense that she'd almost smiled. Instead, she rasped, "Are you giving me a hard time?" "S-h-a-f-f-e-r, Lucas said. He'll be happy to hear from you. HE DROVE AWAY, to where Del and Bole were standing. She watched him go, then folded the notebook and stalked off across the farmyard, toward the cars. "Wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley, Del said. Ah... Catrin Mattsson. She's okay. Well, some of the time, Bole said. You know her? Lucas asked. Yeah, I run into her occasionally, Bole said. She's the lead investigator for Goodhue. Pretty much known for her attitude. Not dumb, though. Good investigator. She just doesn't have a smooth, Del-like personality. It's a tragedy, Del said, as they watched her go. Yeah, well... her looks somewhat make up for it, Bole said. The thing is, you BCA guys have a teensy-weensy tendency to throw your weight around on a deal like this. Busy, busy, busy. Don't have a lot of time for the local yokels. Lucas: Really? Well, like I said, it's teensy-weensy. ALL CASES LIKE the Black Hole murders start slow. The investigators needed to know what they had, before they could start working patterns, asking questions, figuring out who might be a person of interest. Figuring out what they had was up to the crime-scene people and the medical examiners. That would not happen on the first day. Lucas and Del hung around the hole for a while, watching, passing out Cokes, then walked across the old farm site, getting a feel for cover and dimensions and views. The place was a perfect square, with the road at

the south end. The other three sides were guarded by the remnants of a barbed-wire fence and a few old steel fence posts. The north side was covered with the remnants of a wood lot, and dozens of trees were scattered around the rest of the plot, apparently having grown up since the farm was abandoned. Everything else, except a thin clearing in the middle, was covered with a variety of brush and weeds. A single track, probably along the old driveway, crossed the ditch over a rusting culvert. The spear-like tops of a few old irises grew along the edge of the ditch, and a line of ancient lilac bushes lay along the line of what had been the driveway. There were probably a thousand identical plots in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. When they were done walking it, Del said, You couldnt have invented a better place to get rid of bodies. Back country road, invisible cistern, nearest farmhouse a half-mile away. Roll in here at night, knowing where youre going, pop the lid, drop the body, put the lid back down, and roll on out. Knowing it ahead of time, you could be in and out in five minutes, with never a trace of what youd been doing. But youd have random kids coming up here to park, like the kids who found it, Lucas said. It looks a little used, anyway. Its possible the killer ran into somebody up here, one time or another. If he did, hed just back out... drive around, wait until they were gone. Yeah. Probably not much there, Lucas said. If theres anything, Shafferll find it. Del asked, What do you want to do? Go home, Lucas said. But first, lets go talk to the farm lady. Del took a last look around: The asshole really did fuck up a great place to park. Did I ever tell you about the time Cheryl and me Jesus... nooooo....

**THE LAND AROUND** the Black Hole plot belonged to a farmer named Sally James, whod inherited it from her father twelve years earlier. James was in her mid-fifties, a stout red-faced woman whose blue eyes carried the glazed look of someone whod been whacked in the forehead with a board. Lucas and Del found her at her own farmstead, a half-mile away, visiting with a couple of reddish-brown horses in a corral next to her barn. I think theyre called sorrels, but Im not sure Im pronouncing it right, Del muttered, as they walked up to her. When Lucas introduced himself and Del, James said, Ive already been interviewed three times by the police. As soon as they take the roadblocks down, therell be fifteen TV stations in here, knocking on the door. I dont know what more I can say. Lucas explained that there were two teams of BCA agents working the case, as well as the sheriffs office and the Wisconsin DCI. Since the crimes had gone interstate, he expected that the FBI might take a look. We like to talk to people in person, because something they say may ring a bell with something else that we find, later on, Lucas said. You dont think I had anything to do with it? We dont think anything in particular, Lucas said. Were just getting started. How many do they have now? It was sixteen this morning, she said. Seventeen, now, Del said. There are more to come. My lord, my lord. Ah, come on in. We can sit in the kitchen.

**THE HOUSE WAS COOL**, a relief from the days heat. The kitchen smelled like bread and cooked carrots, with an undertone of cabbage and pork chop. James fired up a coffeepot, and passed around thick china cups, and they drank coffee and talked about it. James started by sketching out a history of the place: the previous owner had sold his land to Jamess father, but nobody wanted the house or outbuildings. Eventually, title to the land was taken by the county for back taxes. The county tries to sell it every once in a while, but nobody wants it. Four acres in the middle of nowhere, old septic tanks in the ground, that cistern, old foundations... itd probably take twenty grand to clean it up. So, it sits. Kids park there, to make out, Lucas said. From time to time, in the summer, James said. Weve had Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts do overnights there. And corn detassellers, like the kid who found the bodies. Does everybody around here know about the cistern? Lucas asked. No way, she said. I didnt know about it. That cistern probably hasnt been used for sixty, seventy years. Then how would the killer find out about it? Del asked. Thats a puzzle, and Ive been thinking about it, she said. There are these guys, treasure hunters, they go around to these abandoned farm sites with metal detectors and such, looking for old junkyards and buried treasure. Somebody like that could have found it. When this all came up, a deputy took me down there to look at it. Id been in there a hundred times, and it never occurred to me that the cistern was still there. You couldnt see it, all covered up with sod. Nobody found it by accident. This is good stuff, Lucas told her. From what youve told us, the killer has to be somebody whos familiar with the place, and there arent many. Well...

There was doubt in her voice. You know, this boy who found it, knew about the place because he was a detasseler. Lucas smiled at her and said, I was a city kid. I dont totally understand detasseling. Ive heard of it. James explained that corn plants have both male and female parts, and are self-fertilizing. When youre hybridizing corn crossbreeding it two varieties of corn will be planted in alternating strips. Because the corn is to be crossbred, you dont want one strip of the corn self-fertilizing. Instead, you want it to be fertilized only by the second variety. To do that, the tassels from the target variety are removed from the cornstalks, by hand, by pulling them out of the top of the stalk. Like castrating the corn, Del said. Exactly, she said. The work was short-term, hot, tedious, and low-paid, usually done by high school kids sitting on detasseling

machines that are driven up and down the rows of corn. Me and my dad have always contracted out part of the farm to grow hybrid seed, so there are detasseling crews taking breaks in that old Clemens place, eating lunch, every summer. That could be twenty or thirty people at a time, mostly boys. Over the years, there have been hundreds of them hardly anybody does detasseling for more than a year or two. Would the hybrid company have a list of employees? Del asked. Mmm, probably not, she said. The way it works is, you need a lot of kids for a real short time, and the work is nasty. So, the seed companies recruit people who can recruit kids and that usually means teachers. A teacher might contract to detassel, say, a hundred and twenty acres. Then he'll recruit a bunch of kids from his school, the company supplies the machine, and when the tassels start to pop, they go in and start pulling.

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