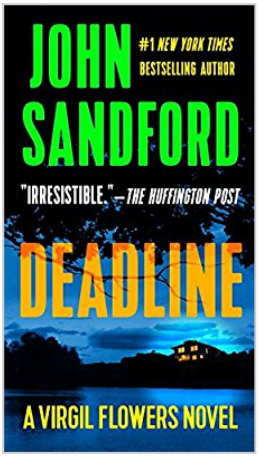

Deadline: A Virgil Flowers Novel

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In southeast Minnesota, a school board meeting is coming to an end. The chairman announces that the rest of the meeting will be closed to only a few—for personal issues. The remaining members vote on the fate of a local reporter. And it's unanimous…

Kill him.

Meanwhile, Virgil Flowers is investigating a dognapping crime wave in a Mississippi River town when he gets a call from Lucas Davenport. A corpse has been found, and the victim is local reporter Clancy Conley. Virgil has no idea where this is all headed. All he knows for sure is that things are getting nasty in Buchanan County.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *Deadline*
"Sandford keeps one last surprise up his sleeve for the denouement of the dognapping case, and it's a doozy. Exhilaratingly professional work by both Virgil and his creator that breaks no new ground but will keep the fans happy and add to their number."—Kirkus Reviews"Stellar . . . Sandford is an accomplished and amusing storyteller, and he nails both the rural characters and terrain as well as he has skewered urban life in past installments."—Publishers Weekly (starred review)"Sanford balances straight-talking Virgil Flowers' often hilariously folksy tone and Trippton's dark core of methamphetamine manufacturers and sociopaths; the result is pure reading pleasure for thriller fans."—Booklist

About the Author
John Sandford is the pseudonym for the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist John Camp. He is the author of twenty-six Prey novels, most recently *Extreme Prey*; four Kidd novels; nine Virgil Flowers novels; three YA novels coauthored with his wife, Michele Cook; and three stand-alones, most recently *Saturn Run*.

1

Dark, moonless night, in the dog days of early August.
A funky warm drizzle kept the world quiet and wet and close.

D. Wayne Sharf slid across Winky Butterfield's pasture like a greased weasel headed for a chicken house. He carried two heavy nylon leashes with choke-chain collars, two nylon muzzles with Velcro straps, and a center-cut pork chop.
The target was Butterfield's kennel, a chain-link enclosure in the backyard, where Butterfield kept his two black Labs, one young, one older. The pork chop would be used to make friends.

D. Wayne was wearing camo, head to foot, which was no change: he always wore camo, head to foot. So did his children.
His ex-wife, Truly, whom he still occasionally visited, wore various pieces of camo, depending on daily fashion demands—more at Walmart, less at Target. She also had eight pairs of camo under pants, size 4XL and 5XL, which she wore on a rotating basis: two each of Mossy Oak, Realtree, Legend, and God's Country, which prompted D. Wayne to tell her one night, as he peeled them off, "This really is God's country, know what I'm sayin', honeybunch?"

His new, alternative honeybunch wore black cotton, which she

called "panties," and which didn't do much for D. Wayne. Just some thing hot about camo.

A few thousand cells in the back of his brain were sifting through

all of that as D. Wayne crossed a split-rail fence into Butterfield's yard, and one of the dogs, the young one, barked twice. There were no lights in the house, and none came on. D. Wayne paused in his approach, watching, then slipped the pork chop out of its plastic bag. He sat for a couple of minutes, giving the dogs a chance to smell the meat; while he waited, his own odor caught up with him, a combination of sweat and whiskey-blend Copenhagen. If Butterfield had the nose of a deer or a wolf, he would have been worried.

But Butterfield didn't, and D. Wayne started moving again. He got to the kennel, where the dogs were waiting, slobbering like hounds . . . because they were hounds. He turned on the hunter's red, low-illumination LED lights mounted in his hat brim, ripped the pork chop in half, held the pieces three feet apart, and pushed them through the chain link. The dogs were all over the meat: and while they were choking it down, he flipped the latch on the kennel gate and duckwalked inside.

"Here you go, boys, good boys," he muttered. The dogs came over to lick his face and look for more pork chop, the young dog prancing around him, and he slipped the choke collars over their heads, one at a time. The young one took the muzzle okay—the muzzle was meant to prevent barking, not biting—but the older one resisted, growled, and then barked, twice, three times. A light came on in the back of the Butterfield house.

D. Wayne said, "Uh-oh," dropped the big dog's muzzle, and dragged the two dogs out of the kennel toward the fence. Again, the younger one came without much resistance at first, but the older one dug in. Another light came on, this one by the Butterfield side door, and D. Wayne said, "Shit," and he picked up the bigger dog, two arms under its belly, and yanking the other one along on the leash, cleared the fence and headed across the pasture at an awkward trot.

The side door opened on Butterfield's house, and D. Wayne, having forgotten about the red LEDs on his hat brim, made the mistake of looking back. Butterfield was standing under the porch light, and saw him. Butterfield shouted, "Hey! Hey!" and "Carol, somebody's took the dogs," and then, improbably, he went back inside the house and D. Wayne thought for seven or eight seconds that he'd caught a break. His truck was only forty yards or so away now, and he was moving as fast as he could while carrying the bigger dog, which must've weighed eighty pounds.

Then Butterfield reappeared and this time he was carrying a gun. He yelled again, "Hey! Hey!" and let off a half-dozen rounds, and D. Wayne said, "My gosh," and threw the big dog through the back door of his truck topper and then hoisted the smaller dog up

by his neck and threw him inside after the bigger one.

Another volley of bullets cracked overhead, making a truly unpleasant whip-snap sound, but well off to one side. D. Wayne realized that Butterfield couldn't actually see the truck in the dark of the night, and through the mist. Since D. Wayne was a semi-pro dog snatcher, he had the truck's interior and taillights on a cut-off switch, and when he got in and fired that mother up, none of the lights came on.

There was still the rumble of the truck, though, and Butterfield fired another volley, and then D. Wayne was gone up the nearly, but not quite, invisible road. A half-mile along, he turned on his lights and accelerated away, and at the top of the hill that overlooked the Butterfield place, he looked back and saw headlights.

Butterfield was coming.

D. Wayne dropped the hammer. The chase was short, because D. Wayne had made provisions. At the Paxton place, over the crest of the third low hill in a roller-coaster stretch of seven hills, he swerved off the road, down the drive, and around behind the Paxton kids' bus shack, where the kids waited for the school bus on wintry days.Butterfield went past at a hundred miles an hour, and fifteen seconds later D. Wayne was going the other way.

A clean getaway, but D. Wayne had about peed himself when Butterfield started working that gun. Had to be a better way to make a living, he thought, as he took a left on a winding road back toward home.

Not that he could easily think of one. There was stealing dogs, cooking meth, and stripping copper wire and pipes out of unoccupied summer cabins.

That was about it, in D. Wayne's world.

2

Virgil Flowers nearly fell off the bed when the phone began to vibrate. The bed was narrow and Frankie Nobles was using up the middle and the other side. Virgil had to crawl over her naked body to get to the phone, not an entirely unpleasant process, and she muttered, "What? Again?"

"Phone," Virgil said. He groaned and added, "Can't be anything good."

He looked at the face of the phone and said, “Johnson Johnson.” At that moment the phone stopped ringing.

Frankie was up on her elbows, where she could see the clock, and said, “At three in the morning? The dumbass has been arrested for something.”

“He wouldn’t call for that,” Virgil said. “And he’s not dumb.”

“There’s two kinds of dumb,” Frankie said. “Actual and deliberate. Johnson’s the most deliberate dumbass I ever met. That whole live-chicken-toss contest—”

“Yeah, yeah, it was for a good cause.” Virgil touched the callback tab, and Johnson picked up on the first ring.

“Virgil, Jesus, we got big trouble, man. You remember Winky Butterfield?” Johnson sounded wide awake.

“No, I don’t believe so.”

After a moment of silence Johnson said, “Maybe I didn’t introduce you, come to think of it. Maybe it was somebody else.”

“Good. Can I go back to sleep?”

“Virgil, this is serious shit. Somebody dognapped Winky’s black Labs. You gotta get your ass over here, man, while the trail is fresh.”

“Jesus, Johnson . . . dogs? You called me at three in the morning about dogs?”

“They’re family, man . . . you gotta do something.”

At ten o’clock the next morning, Virgil kissed Frankie good-bye and walked out to his truck, which was parked at the curb with the boat already hooked up. Virgil was recently back from New Mexico, where he’d caught and released every tiger musky in what he suspected was the remotest musky lake in North America. Nice fish, too, the biggest a finger-width short of fifty inches. He could still smell them as he walked past the boat and climbed into the cab of his 4Runner.

The day was warm, and promising hot. The sun was doing its job out in front of the truck, but the sky had a sullen gray look about it. There’d been a quarter-inch of rain over the past twenty-four hours, and as he rolled out of Mankato, Minnesota, the countryside looked notably damp. But it was August, the best time of the year, and he was on the road, operating, elbow out the window,

pheasants running across the road in front of him . . . nothing to complain about.

As Virgil rode along, he thought about Frankie. He'd known her as Ma Nobles before he'd fallen into bed with her, because she had about a hundred children; or, at least, it felt that way. She was a compelling armful, and Virgil's thoughts had drifted again to marriage, as they had three times before. The first three had been disasters, because, he thought, he had poor taste in women. He reconsidered: no, that wasn't quite right. His three wives had all been pretty decent women, but, he thought, he was simply a poor judge of the prospects for compatibility.

He and Frankie did not have that problem; they just got along.

And Virgil thought about Lucas Davenport for a while—Davenport was his boss at the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, and not a bad guy, though a trifle intense. There was a distinct possibility that he would not be pleased with the idea of Virgil working a dognapping case. Especially since the shit had hit the fan up north, where a couple of high school kids had tripped over an abandoned farm cistern full of dead bodies.

But Johnson Johnson was a hard man to turn down. Virgil thought he might be able to sneak in a couple good working days before Davenport even found out what he was doing. A dognapping, he thought, shouldn't take too much time, one way or the other. The dogs might already be in Texas, chasing armadillos, or whatever it was they chased in Texas.

Dognapping. He'd had calls on it before, though he'd never investigated one, and they'd always been during hunting season, or shortly before. Didn't usually see one this early in the year.

Johnson Johnson ran a lumber mill, specializing in hardwood timber—three varieties of oak, bird's-eye maple, butternut, hickory, and some walnut and cherry—for flooring and cabinetry, with a side business of providing specialty cuts for sculptors. He and Virgil had met at the University of Minnesota, where they were studying women and baseball. Virgil had been a fair third baseman for a couple years, while Johnson was a better-than-fair catcher. He might even have caught onto the bottom edge of the pros, if baseball hadn't bored him so badly. Johnson's mill was a mile outside Trippton, Minnesota, in Buchanan County, in the Driftless Area along the Mississippi River.

The Driftless Area had always interested Virgil, who had taken a degree in ecological science. Basically, the Driftless Area was a chunk of territory in Minnesota, Wisconsin, northern Iowa, and Illinois

that had escaped the last glaciation—the glaciers had simply flowed around it, joining up again to the south, leaving the Driftless Area as an island in an ocean of ice. When the glaciers melted, they usually left behind loose dirt and rock, which was called drift. Not in the Driftless Area . . .

Physically, the land was cut by steep valleys, up to six hundred feet deep, running down to the Mississippi River. Compared to the farmlands all around it, the Driftless Area was less fertile, and covered with hardwood forests. Towns were small and far between, set mostly along the river. The whole area was reminiscent of the Appalachians.

Road time from Virgil's home, in Mankato, to Trippton, on the river, was two and a half hours.

For most of it Virgil put both the truck and his brain on cruise control. He'd driven the route a few dozen times, and there was not a lot to look at that he hadn't seen before. Trippton was at the bottom of a long hill, on a sandspit that stuck out into the Mississippi; it was a religious town, with almost as many churches as bars. Virgil arrived at lunchtime, got caught in a minor traffic jam between the town's three stoplights, and eventually wedged into a boat-sized double-length parking lane behind Shanker's Bar and Grill.

Johnson Johnson came rambling out the back door as Virgil pulled in. Johnson Johnson's father, Big Johnson, had been an outboard-motor enthusiast who fairly well lived on the Mississippi. He'd named his sons after outboard motors, and while Mercury Johnson had gotten off fairly easy, Johnson Johnson had been stuck with the odd double name. He was a large man, like his father, and well tattooed.

"I can smell them fuckin' muskies from here," he said, as Virgil climbed out of the truck. He leaned into the boat and said, "I hope you brought something besides those fuckin' phone poles," by which he meant musky gear.

"Yeah, yeah, I got some of everything," Virgil said. "What about these dogs? You find them yet?"

"Not yet," Johnson said. He was uncharacteristically grim. "Come on inside. I got a whole bunch of ol' boys and girls for you to talk to."

"We're having a meeting?"

"We're having a lynch mob," Johnson said.

Virgil followed him in. One of the trucks he passed in the parking

lot had a bumper sticker that asked, “Got Hollow Points?” Another said: “Heavily Armed . . . and easily pissed.” A third one: “Point and Click . . . means you’re out of ammo.”

“Aw, jeez,” Virgil said.

Virgil was a tall man, made taller by his cowboy boots. He wore his blond hair too long for a cop—but country-long like Waylon Jennings, not sculptural long, like some New Jersey douche bag, so he got along okay.

He dressed in jeans and band T-shirts, in this case, a rare pirated “Dogs Die in Hot Cars” shirt, which he hoped the local ’necks would take for a sign of solidarity. To his usual ensemble, he added a black sport coat when he needed to hide a gun, which wasn’t often. Most times, he left the guns in the truck.

He sometimes wore a straw cowboy hat, on hot days out in the sun; at other times, a ball cap, his current favorite a black-on-black Iowa Hawkeyes hat, given to him by a devout Iowegian.

Johnson led the way through the parking lot door, down a beer-smelling corridor past the restrooms, which had signs that said “Pointers” and “Setters,” to the back end of the bar, where twenty or so large outdoorsy-looking men and women hunched over rickety plastic tables, drinking beer and eating a variety of fried everything, with link sausages on the side.

When Virgil caught up with him, Johnson said, in a loud voice, without any sign of levity, “Okay, boys and girls. This here’s the cop I was talking about, so put away your fuckin’ weed and methamphetamine, those that has them, and pay attention. Virgil?”

Virgil said, “For those of you with meth, I’d like to speak to you for a minute out back. . . .”

There were a few chuckles, and Virgil said, “I mostly came to listen. What’s going on with these dogs? Somebody stand up so we all can hear you, and tell us.”

A heavyset man heaved himself to his feet and said, “Well, I thought Johnson would have told you, but somebody’s snatching our dogs.”

A drunk at the front of the bar, who’d turned around on his barstool to watch the meeting, called, “Better’n having your snatch dogged.”

The heavyset man shouted back, “Shut up, Eddy, or we’ll kick

your ass out of here."

"Just trying to be human," Eddy said, but he turned back to the bar.

"All right," Virgil said. "Somebody's taking dogs. You know who it is?"

"Yeah, we got our suspicions," the big man said. "There're some hillbillies up at Orly's Crick, all along the valley, and you can hear the dogs howling at night. Dogs, not coyotes. Dozens of them. But when you go up there, there's only one dog per yard. You'd have to sneak up on 'em, to find the ones that are howling. Problem is, there's only one little road going in, and they can see you coming, and they move the dogs before you can get there. I tried to come down from on top, but you can't get down them bluffs without breaking your neck."

"And you could get your ass killed," somebody added. "Fuckin' peckerwoods are all carrying .223s. Pick you off like sittin' ducks."

Another big man stood up, and everybody turned to look; his face was red, and it appeared that he'd been weeping. He took off his camo cap and said, "I'm Winfred Butterfield. Winky. They took my two Labs last night. Right out of the kennel. My dogs're gone, sir. Snatched right out of my yard. Knowed what they was doin', too—left behind some pork chop bone and a cloth muzzle, used to keep them quiet."

He told the story, until he got to the part where he "let off some shots in that direction." He paused and then said, "Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"You hit anyone?" Virgil asked.

"Naw, I wasn't trying. I mean, I wouldn't mind shooting that miserable motherfucker, if I had a clear shot, but I was afraid I might hit one of the dogs."

Somebody said, "You got that right."

"Okay, just a note here. Let's decide right now that we're not going to shoot anybody over a dog," Virgil said. "Let me handle this the legal way."

The men all looked around, and then one of the women said,

"Kinda afraid we can't do that, Virgil." And they all nodded. "Well, goddamnit, people."

“This is organized crime, Virgil,” she said. “If we don’t shut these people down, no dog will be safe.”

Virgil was worried. Everyone at the meeting seemed stone-cold sober, and they talked about shooting the dognappers with the cool determination of people who might actually do that, given the chance. They didn’t seem anxious to do it, like a bunch of goofy gun nuts—they sounded more like farmers planning to eliminate a varmint that had been killing their geese.

Virgil asked them about the hillbillies on Orly’s Creek, and a dozen people gave him bits of information—sightings, rumors, incidents—that made him think they were quite possibly right.

One of the men said, “I saw this old gray truck going by Dan Busch’s place, two or three times over a week. Driving slow, looking around . . . Couple days later, Dan’s beagles got ripped off.”

“Four of them,” another man said, who added, “I’m Dan.”

The first man said, “Anyway, a couple weeks later I was driving up 26, and I see this old gray truck coming out of the Orly’s Crick Road. Same truck. Couldn’t prove it, but it was.”

Another man said, “There’s this guy called Roy, I think his last name is Zorn, he lives up there. Tall red-haired guy, skinny, got about nine million freckles on his face. They got his picture in all the animal shelters and humane societies, telling them NOT to give him any dogs or cats, because he was going around, getting them, and then he’d sell them off to animal bunchers.”

Virgil said, “Excuse me? What’s a buncher?”

“That’s guys who collect animals for the laboratories, for experiments. He’d go around and get these free animals, saying he was looking for a pet, and then he’d sell them off to the bunchers,” the big man said. “We know damn well, he’d get kittens that way, too. You know, somebody’d put an ad in the paper, saying, ‘Free Kittens,’ and he’d take as many as they’d give him, sayin’ he needed mousers for his barn. The animal people caught on, and somebody took his picture, and now he can’t go into those places.”

“I’ll go talk to him,” Virgil said. He turned to Butterfield and asked, “Winky—how much did you pay for those Labs?”

“These were top dogs, partially trained. I paid fifteen hundred for one, twelve hundred for the other,” Butterfield said. “But I don’t give a damn about the money—they’re my best friends.”

“The money makes stealing them a felony,” Virgil said. “It always helps to have a felony backing you up, when you talk to people.”

“I’ll tell you what,” said one of the women. “Most everybody here has had dogs stolen, which is why they are here. The rest of us are worried. If you took all the dogs stolen, they’d be worth twenty or thirty thousand dollars, easy. Maybe even more.”

Virgil said he’d look into it: “I’ll be honest with you, this is not what I usually do. In fact, I’ve never done it before. I can see you’re serious folks, so I’ll take it on. No promises. I could get called off . . . but if I do, I’ll be back. You all take care, though. Don’t go out there with guns, I don’t want anybody to get hurt.”

When the meeting broke up, he and Johnson drove over to the law enforcement center, which housed the Buchanan County Sheriff and the Trippton Police Department, which were one and the same, and a few holding cells. In the parking lot Johnson said, “I’ll hang out here. Jeff don’t appreciate my good qualities,” and Virgil went in alone.

Entry to the sheriff ’s office was through a locked black-steel door, with a bulletproof window next to it; there was nobody behind the window, so Virgil rang the bell, and a moment later a deputy stuck his head around the window and said, “Virgil Flowers, as I live and die.”

“That’s me,” Virgil agreed. The deputy buzzed him in, and Virgil followed him down the hall to the sheriff ’s office. The sheriff, Jeff Purdy, was a small, round man who wore fifties-style gray hats, the narrow-brimmed Stetson “Open Road” style; he had his feet up on his desk and was reading a New Yorker magazine. When he heard the footsteps in the hallway, he looked over the magazine and saw Virgil coming.

“I hope you’re here to fish,” he said.

“Not exactly, though it’d be nice to get out for a couple hours,” Virgil said. “I just came from a meeting down at Shanker’s. . . .”

Virgil told him the story, and the sheriff sighed and said, “You’re welcome to it, Virgil. I know those people have a complaint, but what the hell am I supposed to do? We patrol up Orly’s Crick, but we never see a thing.”

“You know a guy named Roy Zorn?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ve been told he cooks some meth up there, but we never caught him at it. Basically, he’s a small-time motorcycle

hood, rode with the Seed for a while, over in Green Bay, before he came here. And I know all about that thing he used to do with cats and dogs, him getting banned from the Humane Society. But we got nothing on him. Can't get anything, either. If I had ten more men . . ."

"You don't mind if I take a look?"

"Go on ahead. Keep me up on what you're doing," Purdy said. "If you find something specific, I could spring a couple guys to help out on a short-term basis. Very short-term, like a raid, something like that."

"That's all I wanted," Virgil said. "There's a good chance I won't find a thing, but if I do, I might call for backup."

"Deal," Purdy said.

The deputy who'd taken Virgil back to the sheriff 's office returned and said, "Sheriff, Sidney Migg's walking around naked in her backyard, again."

The sheriff grunted and boosted himself out of his chair. "I better handle this myself."

Back outside, Virgil took a minute to call Davenport's office. He didn't actually want to talk to him, which was why he called the office: Davenport was out working a multiple murder that everybody was calling the Black Hole case, in which a BCA agent had been murdered.

Virgil hadn't worked the case, and was happy about that, because the killing of Bob Shaffer would have preyed on his mind for weeks, or years, whether or not the killer was caught. He left a message for Davenport, which might possibly cover his ass, if worse came to worst.

Then he and Johnson drove out to Johnson's river cabin and rolled Virgil's boat into the water and tied it to Johnson's dock. Johnson's jon boat had been pulled up on shore, and a long orange extension cord snaked out of the cabin to a power drill that lay in the bottom of the boat.

"You break something?" Virgil asked.

"Changing the oarlocks," Johnson said. "They were getting too wore down."

"You never rowed six feet in your entire sorry life," Virgil said.

“How’d they get wore down? I mean, worn down?”

“Pedant,” Johnson said. “Anyway, I use them to steer my drifts. Saves gas.”

They unhooked the trailer, parked it behind the house, stuck a tongue lock on it, and went inside for coffee and to continue the conversation about dogs and hillbilly dognappers.

Virgil said, “Since the sheriff couldn’t handle it, you call the high-priced BCA guy down to figure it out?”

“Actually, I was calling my old fishin’ buddy Virgil to figure it out,” Johnson said.

“Well, fuck you, Johnson, that puts a kind of unnecessary obligation on it. I mean, would you do that for me?”

“You don’t have a dog.”

“Well, something like this . . .”

“Suppose you were going away for a couple of weeks,” Johnson said, “and you needed somebody to keep Frankie warmed up. I’d jump in my truck—”

“All right, okay.” Virgil waved him off. “Where’s this Orly’s Crick?”

In southern Minnesota, the Mississippi flowed through a deep, wide valley. The main channel of the river was rarely down the middle of the valley. Instead, it usually flowed down one side or the other, snaking between steep valley walls. The other side of the valley was often occupied by sloughs or marshes, before they ran into equally steep bluffs.

The bluffs were dissected by free-flowing streams, ranging from seasonal creeks to full-sized rivers. Johnson’s place was tucked into the north end of a slough, where the river began to bend away from the Minnesota side, toward Wisconsin; so his cabin was protected from the waves generated by the towboats and their barges, but he still had fast access to the river itself.

When he and Virgil left Johnson’s cabin, they drove a few hundred yards west to Highway 26, and then north for fifteen miles. By the time they got to Orly’s Creek Road, the river was running right beside the highway. Orly’s Creek ran below a fifty-foot-long bridge, into the river, with the road going into the valley on the north side of the bridge.

“Goes back here about a mile, or a little more,” Johnson said. “The crick comes out of Orly’s Spring, which gathers up a lot of water from west of here, then runs underground to the spring. The good thing about that is, it hardly ever floods at all. Don’t believe I’ve ever seen water over the road.”

“Any trout in there?” The creek was maybe twenty feet wide, tumbling over limestone blocks, with an occasional pool.

“Yup. I’d be a little nervous about eating them, down at this end, anyway. Lots of old septic systems, don’t work so good, anymore. Up on top, by the spring, the crick would be cleaner than Fiji Water.”

“You know about Fiji Water?”

“Fuck you.”

The first habitation in the valley was a single-wide trailer, crunched on one end, as though a tree had fallen on it. Two nineties cars were parked in a hard-dirt yard, with a mottled-gray pit bull tied to a stake.

“That’s the lookout,” Johnson said. “There are more places further in.” Johnson tried to scrunch down in his seat, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. “They might kinda recognize me up here.”

“Is that bad?”

“I prefer to remain anonymous.”

They passed a few more mobile homes, most, like the first one, located fifty or a hundred feet off the road, up the valley wall. “Must be hell to get up there in the winter,” Virgil said.

“Doubt they try. They all got cutouts down here on the road,” Johnson said. He pointed out over the dashboard to an old yellow clapboard house, with narrow fields on either side of it, running steeply down to the creek. An apple tree stood next to the house, with a Jeep Wrangler parked in front of it, and a half-dozen stripped and abandoned cars off to the right. “That’s Zorn’s place. His wife’s name is Bunny. I think she’s probably his sister.”

Virgil looked over at him, and Johnson said, “Okay. Maybe not.”

Virgil turned off at Zorn’s place, past a no-trespassing sign, and pulled up into the yard. All of the doors and windows at Zorn’s were open, behind screens; and when they pulled into his yard, they saw Zorn look warily out through the door, disappear for a minute, then come through the door to his porch, where he stood waiting.

As advertised, he was a tall, rawboned red-haired man with about a million freckles splashed across his face.

Virgil said, “You wait here.”
“Yes, dear,” Johnson said.
Virgil got out of the truck, keeping his hands in view, and ambled up to the porch.
“You can’t read my sign, or you just not give a shit?” Zorn asked.
“I’m an agent with the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension,” Virgilsaid. “A state cop.”
“What you want with me?” Zorn asked. His head twitched to one side. Virgil saw a movement at a window to his left.
“We’re looking into some stolen dogs,” Virgil said. “We understand you’ve had some problems in that area.”

“Never done a single thing illegal—got them all fair and square, and sold them up to the university for important medical research,” Zorn said. “Now, if you’re done with me, I’ll thank you to get the fuck off my lawn. You come back, bring a warrant.”

“Don’t want to talk about dogs, then,” Virgil said.
“I don’t know nothin’ about dogs,” Zorn said.
“Don’t know anybody up or down Orly’s Creek who might have come up with a few extra?”
“I don’t stick my nose into other people’s business,” Zorn said. “Now git—or I’ll call my attorney.”
Virgil considered for a moment, looking into Zorn’s narrow green eyes, and then said, “You keep that attorney close, Mr. Zorn. These recent dog thefts—the dogs are valuable, and the thefts amount to felonies. When I arrest you for them, you’ll be going away for quite some time. So keep that attorney close—and you might want to buy a new toothbrush.”

“Bullshit—nobody’s sending anybody anywhere for some fuckin’ mutts.”

“You should talk to your attorney about that. He’ll set you straight,” Virgil said. He backed away, keeping the window in sight. “Be seein’ you.”

Virgil went carefully back to his truck, climbed inside, and found Johnson with a high-capacity Para-Ordnance .45 in his lap.

“Jesus, Johnson, what were you gonna do with that?”

“I saw somebody at the window,” Johnson said. “If they shot you, I was gonna hose the place down.”

Virgil thought about that for a minute, then said, “All right.” He looked up at the porch. Zorn had gone back inside, but Virgil could see him hovering behind the screen. “That’s a bad man, right there,”

Virgil said. “Doesn’t even bother to trim his nose hair.”

“That is a bad man,” Johnson said.

They continued up the valley, looking at houses and dogs; most of the houses were ramshackle, but a few were neatly kept, with American flags on front-yard poles, and with good-looking gardens and neatly mown lawns. As someone had said at the Shanker’s meeting, they hardly ever saw more than one dog per house, usually in a chain-link kennel.

“One thing we ought to do, is get a list of everyone who lives up here,” Virgil said. “Looks like there might be some respectable people. If we could get a couple of them to talk to us, we’d be ahead of the game.”

Johnson was skeptical: “You think any of these people would talk, knowing their neighbors are assholes with M15s? Respectable is okay, long as it doesn’t buy you a bullet in the back.”

At the far end of the valley, the road went to a stretch of gravel, then to dirt, which ended at a fence. At the side of the road, the spring appeared, a fifty-foot-long pool, maybe thirty feet wide, and deep, flowing out over six-foot chunks of broken limestone, and on down the valley.

Virgil stopped the truck, and they got out to look at the spring. “That’s a piece of water I wouldn’t mind owning,” Johnson said.

Virgil knelt, put his hand in the water: cool, probably seventy degrees. In a shallow spot, he could see a school of minnows probing through underwater grass.

Johnson muttered, “Uh-oh. Look at this. On your left.”

Virgil stood up and saw a kid walking toward them. He looked like he might be twelve; he wore blue-striped bib overalls over a T-shirt, and a Marine Corps utility cap over shoulder-length brown hair. He was thin, and watched them with his head cocked to one side.

He was carrying a scoped .22 rifle.
“What are y’all doing?” he asked. He was standing on the far side of the fence, which was overgrown with black-raspberry canes.

“Scoutin’ out the valley,” Virgil said. “You know who owns this spring?”

The kid shrugged. “Nobody, I guess. When it gets really hot, people come up here and fool around in it, after work.”

“Pretty cool for swimming,” Virgil said.

“That’s the truth,” the kid said. “I seen women here with goose bumps the size of thumbs.”

Johnson asked, “You out huntin’?”

“Just shooting around,” the kid said. “What are you scouting for?”

Virgil said, “Dogs, mostly. We heard some folks up here might have some dogs that don’t belong to them.”

“You cops?”

“I am,” Virgil said. “You seen any extra dogs around?”

“Hardly seen nothing like that,” the kid said. He lifted the rifle and aimed it at a tree thirty yards away. Johnson and Virgil remained still, and the kid squeezed off a shot. A crab apple exploded off one of the tree’s lower branches.

The kid turned and grinned at them, and worked the bolt on the rifle, chambering a new round. Virgil said, “Nice shot. That’s a Magnum?”

“Yup. My dad got it to shoot groundhogs. Goddamn things are hard to get at, though.”

“They are,” Virgil agreed. He sniffed, and looked at Johnson, who nodded. “Well, I guess we’ll head on out, if you haven’t seen any dogs.”

The kid said, “If you’re a cop, where’s your gun?”

“Don’t carry a gun all the time,” Virgil said.

The kid shook his head. “You come back in here, looking for dogs, you best carry a gun.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Virgil said.

They moved back to Virgil’s truck. Inside, Johnson said, “That didn’t sound so much like a tip, as maybe a threat.”

“But nicely put,” Virgil said. He was watching the kid in the rear-view mirror. The kid was standing with the rifle across his chest, in

the port arms position. “The kid’s no dummy.”

“And a really good shot. That apple couldn’t have been much bigger than a quarter,” Johnson said. “You think he knows about the dogs?”

“You noticed how he went sort of shifty, there. ‘Hardly seen nothin’ like that.’ He doesn’t lie well.”

After another moment, Johnson asked, “You smell that shit?”

“The acetone, yeah,” Virgil said. “Not right away—I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. Wasn’t close.”

“Well, it’s cool down here and hotter up above. Cold air flows down . . . so probably up on the valley wall, somewhere.”

“The sheriff heard that Zorn might be cooking some meth. We’re quite a way from Zorn’s.”

“Nothing to keep him from hiding his cooker up the hill, like an old-timey still,” Johnson said. He looked around at the overgrown valley walls hanging over them. “Virgie? Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

They got the fuck out of there.

“Now what do we do?” Johnson asked, when they bounced back on Highway 26.

“I want to look at some aerial photography of the place. See if there’s any other way in or out.”

Johnson nodded and said, “You know who’s got the best pictures? The ag service.” He looked at his watch. “Gonna be too late today, though. I’d recommend a run up the river, instead. We can look at the pictures first thing tomorrow.”

On the way back to Johnson’s cabin, Davenport returned Virgil’s call from that morning. Virgil saw his name flash on the phone screen, and said to Johnson, “Keep your mouth shut. This is the boss. I’ll put him on the speaker.”

“What’s up?” Davenport asked, when Virgil answered.

“Man, I hate to ask this, with Shaffer dead and you working the Black Hole. But you know my friend Johnson Johnson?”

“Yeah, I know him,” Davenport said. “There’s a goddamn accident

waiting to happen."

"Actually, it's happened several times already. Anyway, Johnson needs some help on, mmm . . . a non-priority mission," Flowers said. "I'm not doing anything heavy, and nobody's called me for the Black Hole group, so I'd like to run over to Trippton. It's down south of La Crescent."

"You're not telling me what it's about," Davenport said.

"No, but if Johnson is telling the truth, and I make a couple of busts, it'll bring great credit upon the BCA."

Johnson nodded sagely, from the passenger seat.

"We don't need credit," Davenport said. "The legislature's already adjourned. But, go ahead, on your best judgment. From the way you're talking, I don't want to know what it is. If it blows up in your face, it's your problem."

"Got it. I just wanted you to know where I was," Virgil said.
"You taking your boat?" Lucas asked.
Long pause, while Virgil sorted out the possibilities. He decided to go with the semi-truth. "Maybe."
"Let me know if you get in trouble," Davenport said. "But otherwise . . ."
"You don't want to know."
"That's right."

"You're good," Johnson said, when Virgil had rung off. "Got the backing of the big guy himself. Let's get out on the river."
"I'm not going catfishing," Virgil said.
"Nah. Get your fly rod out. I know where there's a whole bunch of smallmouth, and they do like their Wooly Buggers."
So they did that.
On his first night in Buchanan County, Virgil went to sleep in Johnson's cabin with the feeling he hadn't gotten much done. But he'd gotten some heavy vibes—and the vibes were bad.

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