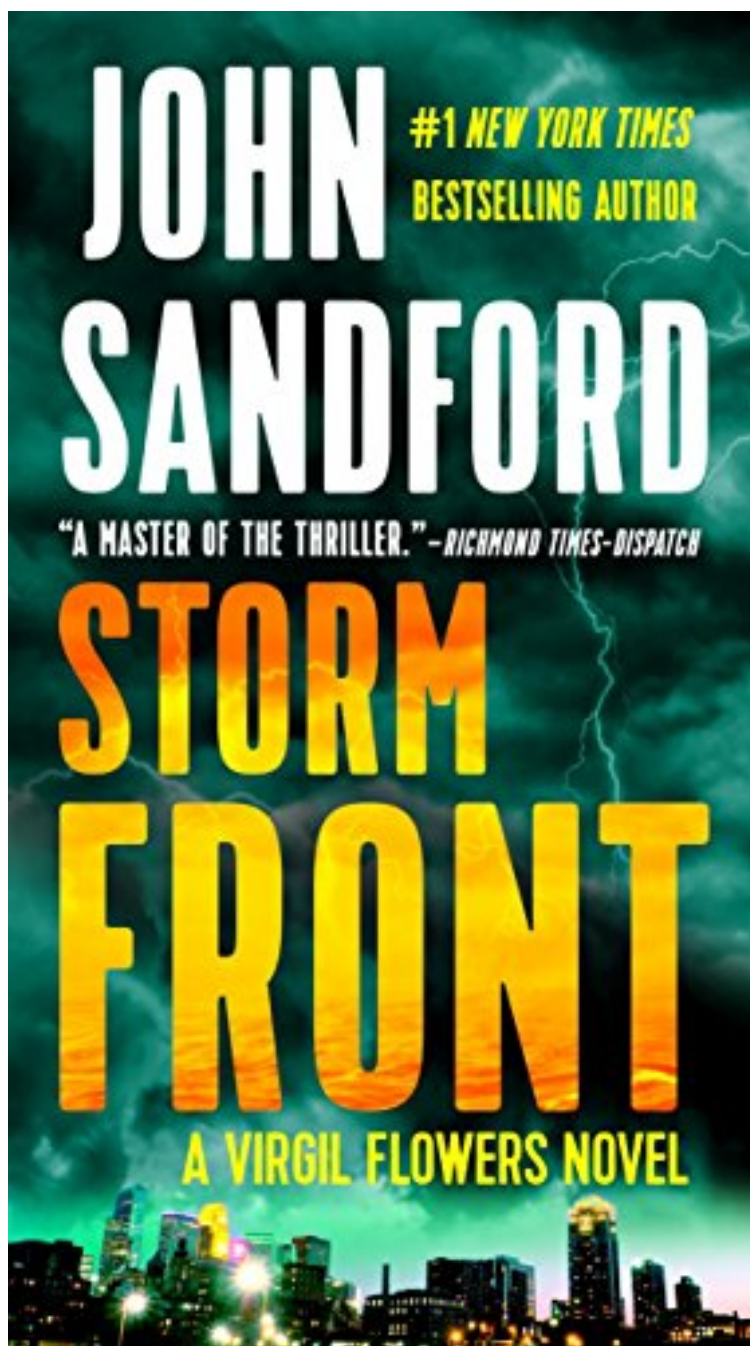


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Storm Front (A Virgil Flowers Novel, Book 7)



Par John Sandford
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur#1 New York Times Bestseller An ancient relic is unearthed during an archaeological dig. A Minnesota college professor is keeping a secret that could change the worlds history as we know it. For Virgil Flowers, the link between the two is inescapableand his investigation, more dangerous and far-

reaching than he can possibly imagine. Extrait**This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.**

1 His bags were packed and sitting by the door. Nobody thought that was strange, because four diggers were jammed into each small living suite. With two eight-by-ten bedrooms feeding into a tiny sitting and kitchen area, and an even tinier bathroom, there was hardly anyplace to keep clothing, so they kept it in their bags. Elijah shared a room with a middle-aged volunteer from Alabama named Steve Phelps. When Elijah's cell phone vibrated at two o'clock, his first move was to roll up on one shoulder, turn it off, and listen to Phelps breathe. Phelps was a sound sleeper, and he was sound asleep now. Elijah often got up to pee at night, and hadn't awakened anyone doing that for two weeks the days and the sun were exhausting, and once his roommates were familiar with his night moves, they never twitched. When he was sure of Phelps, Elijah rolled out of bed, moving as quietly as he could. He'd loaded all of his personal items—wallet, passport, small cash—into his pants the night before, so all he had to do now was get into them. His socks were already rolled into his shoes, which he would put on outside. When he was dressed, he listened again to Phelps, then eased through the door into the sitting area. Here was the tricky part. Another of the diggers, who slept in the adjoining room, had keys to one of the dig cars and the keys were sitting on a radiator in his room. Elijah stepped to the door of the other bedroom, and again, listened for a moment. Both of the men snored, which was why they'd been put together. When he was sure that he could distinguish the separate snoring, he eased open the door (he'd put a dab of Crisco on the hinges the night before, when the others were out) and stepped silently into the room. The men continued to snore, which helped cover his movement as he stepped barefooted across the room and picked up the car keys. Two seconds later, he was out of the room; a minute after that, he was outside with his bags, in the cool of the Israeli night, sitting on the steps, tying his shoes, and again, listening and watching. It had been an exciting day—maybe somebody else had been restless? But nothing moved anywhere on the kibbutz as far as he could tell. He'd been through one tricky part, and now here was the second one. When his shoes were tied, he walked down to the first floor with his bags—a nylon backpack and a leather satchel—around behind the dormitory to a low wooden building used to sort and classify pottery and other finds at the dig. There were no lights inside the building. He reached into his bag, took out a large screwdriver, and pried open the door. Inside, navigating without lights, he went to a row of metal lockers, felt for the fifth handle down, and with the same screwdriver, pried open the locker door. A stone sat on the locker shelf. He couldn't see it, much, but he could feel it, and it was heavy. He put it in his leather satchel, closed the locker door and the outer door. A half hour later, Elijah the Mankato-ite sped west in a stolen car past Jezreel, where, roughly 2,850 years earlier, Jezebel the queen had been thrown out a window. Her body had been eaten by dogs—all except for the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet—just as predicted by the other Elijah, the prophet guy. As they didn't say at the time, Bummer. The latter-day Elijah paid no attention to Jezreel, as the former royal city was now just another stony field. Ten minutes later, he rocketed past Armageddon—Megiddo to the locals—where there was no battle going on, penultimate or otherwise. At Megiddo, he turned northwest toward Mount Carmel and the Mediterranean coast at Haifa. Elijah was in a hurry: he had to be gone before the diggers got up, and some of them got up very early, at four o'clock. He kept his foot on the floor, and the much-abused Avis rent-a-car groaned with pain. Out the passenger-side window, as he went past Megiddo, he could see the lights of Nazareth twinkling across the farm fields of the Jezreel Valley. It was pretty, all right, but he'd been to Israel too often to be impressed. He remembered that first naive astonishment, forty-five years earlier, when he found that the Mount of Olives was full of fake religious sites, that the Sea of Galilee was full of Diet Coke bottles, and that Jesus' hometown was an Arab city where a good Christian could get his ass kicked if he wasn't careful. Not that he didn't love the place, because he did. He loved all of it, from the green and blue mountains in the north to the sere desert in the south, and especially the shephelah, the Judean lowlands, and above all Jerusalem. But he loved it more like an Israeli than an American; that is, despite its faults. The flanks of Carmel were still dark when he drove into town. He'd leave the Avis car outside the dealership, he'd decided, where they'd find it when they opened at eight o'clock. He had a legitimate set of keys for the car, but it had been rented on a credit card provided by a credulous American graduate student from Penn State. The student would be mightily pissed if Elijah lost the car. In fact, he'd be mightily pissed if Elijah left the car outside the Avis agency, but Elijah had more important things to worry about than the feelings of grad students. Luckily, the Avis agency wasn't far off Route 75, and not far from the harbor, either. He found it easily enough, dumped the car, left a message on the dashboard, and called a cab. As he waited, he fumbled a couple of pills from a bottle that he kept in the backpack, swallowed them without water. The cabdriver didn't speak much English, but Elijah had excellent Hebrew, so they got along. The cabdriver asked, Only that luggage? Elijah had the

nylon backpack and the leather duffel with brass buckles. That's all, he said. It's only a day trip. I don't go on the water, the cabdriver said over his shoulder. If the water grows too deep in my shower, I get seasick. Never been a problem for me, though I live as far as you can get from an ocean, Elijah said. This is in the States? Yes, Minnesota, Elijah said. The driver noticed that his fare was sweating, even in the cool of the early morning. He also had the expensive leather bag clenched in his lap, as though it might contain an atomic bomb. The driver didn't ask. Strange things happened in Israel every day of the week, and asking could be dangerous. Though in this case, the driver thought, danger was unlikely: the man wore a black snap-brimmed hat, a white clerical collar under his black polyester suit, and he had an olive-wood cross hanging from a silver chain around his neck. He was a type. He would have been a type anywhere, but in Israel, he was really a type. Give a guy a black suit, a clerical collar, a wooden cross, and a sick, screaming baby, and he could walk through any checkpoint in Israel with his socks full of cocaine or C-4. Because he was an annoying, proselytizing, American Christian type—the kind who usually came with slightly noxious religious and political opinions, and who was almost always chintzy with the tips. Though not in this case. The driver dropped Elijah at the Fishermans Anchorage at HaKishon, the mouth of the Kishon River, and Elijah gave him a hundred-shekel note, which was way too much. He didn't ask for change, simply hustled away, the pack on his back and the leather bag clutched in his arms, like a sick baby. Elijah had been to the port four days earlier, where he'd found the people he'd been looking for: a German couple, drifting around the Med on an ancient fiberglass sailboat with an engine that worked some of the time. He'd offered them five hundred dollars to transport him, without questions, across the water to the Old Port at Limassol on the Greek half of Cyprus. The Germans had been reduced to eating pilchards fished from the dirty port waters and cooked over an alcohol stove, so a little human smuggling wasn't really a central ethical problem for them. The woman, a lanky blonde named Gerta, told him that she could provide carnal entertainment during the trip for an extra two hundred, but Elijah declined, citing conservative religious values. When Elijah arrived on the dock, the Germans were awake and waiting, perhaps nervous that their five hundred dollars had gone somewhere else. Gerta's partner, also lanky and blond, but improbably called Ricardo, pushed them off the dock within thirty seconds of his arrival. He fired up the engine, which coughed loudly before resuming its silence. Ricardo whacked it a couple of times, and got it running well enough to get them out into open water, where the Germans launched the sails. Ricardo said, Such a nice day for sailing. Should I put your bags below? No, no, they make a place to sit, Elijah said, in German. His German, like his Hebrew, was excellent, and their English was no better than the cabdrivers, so it was what they had. He sat on his pack and clutched the leather bag in his lap. So you are carrying your valuables there, Ricardo said, as Haifa slowly lowered itself on the horizon. He was eyeing Elijah's bag as a great white shark might examine a dog-paddling fat lady. Yes, but I'm afraid some of them will have to go over the side before we get to the Old Port, Elijah said. Over the side? Ricardo was puzzled. Yes, over the side, Elijah said. He pulled an older-looking Beretta 92F from the bag, a gun that may have migrated from Iraq to Israel, looking for work. It fit well in Elijah's rugged hand, a hand that might have seen an early life throwing bales of hay onto a horse-drawn wagon. It's a shame, because it is a fine piece of weaponry. Fast, powerful, and accurate. The muzzle was not pointed at Ricardo, but neither was it pointed far away. Ricardo, who'd been sitting unnecessarily close to the reverend for Elijah was indeed an ordained minister in the Lutheran Church in America, eased away. Perhaps not over the side, Ricardo said. When we get to the port, I could find a place to put it. Such a fine piece of weaponry would sell for a couple of thousand dollars on the right stretch of the Med, Elijah thought, and come to no good end. Perhaps, Elijah said. AND PERHAPS NOT. The trip took all that day, the next night, and most of the following day. The winds were perfect: strong enough to give them a good run, but not so overwhelming that the seas got trashy. Elijah spent the time on deck, reading books on an iPad, wrapped in a nylon rain suit during the cool of the night. He'd come prepared. When Cyprus hove in sight, and when Ricardo was preoccupied with getting the engine started again, Elijah dropped the pistol over the side. As they came into the marina area, Ricardo, who'd properly understood the display of the pistol as a counter to any possible ambitions concerning the reverend's valuables, asked about the gun. Fell over the side, Elijah said. And, I think the man on the dock is trying to get your attention. Dockside, they told their story: Elijah Jones was an American who'd joined his German friends for a sail in the Med, but who'd unexpectedly begun urinating blood and was in great pain. Elijah explained that he was dying of colon cancer, and was making a last trip around the eastern Mediterranean to say good-bye to friends in Greece, Egypt, and Israel. Now he just wanted to get home to Mankato, Minnesota, so he could die in peace. He would need to stop at the local hospital, he said, and then go on his way. As proof of his condition, he

showed the customs man his bag of medications and a treatment letter from his physician at the Mayo Clinic. He was also sweating and stifling groans, and as the customs officials conferred over his documents, he asked to be excused to the dockside, where he promptly peed blood into the Mediterranean Sea. The chief customs agent stamped his passport and expressed the wish that God would bless him. Twenty minutes after they reached the port, Elijah was on his way to Larnaca International; six hours later, on his way to Charles de Gaulle in Paris, and six hours after landing there, on his way to Minneapolis. At Minneapolis, two uniformed paramedics, one male and one female, were waiting in the customs area. Elijah, sweating like a boxcar loader, was pushed into the baggage area in a wheelchair. The customs guys asked him if he had anything to declare, he groaned, No. A drug dog gave him a perfunctory sniff, and they waved him through to the EMS techs and the waiting ambulance. The male paramedic carried his bags, and joked, What you got in here, a rock? Ninety minutes after that, Elijah checked into the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, and told the techs to put his duffel bag on the floor by the bed. Three days later, when his condition had again been stabilized, and he was no longer peeing blood, he checked himself out. But he didnt tell anybody. He just walked. With the heavy leather bag. It was one of the great Minnesota summers of all time or maybe it just felt that way, after one of the most miserable springs in history. On April 22, in a nasty little snowstorm, hed skidded off a highway in Apple Valley, and had had to call for a tow to get his four-wheel-drive truck out of the ditch. On May 1, hed gone north to a friends cabin near Hayward, Wisconsin, to do some early-season fly-fishing for bluegills, and it had snowed the whole day, and the day after that, totaling sixteen inches of the stuff, and then it had spent two days raining old women and sticks, as the Welsh would say, although theyd actually say something more like mae hin bwrw hen wragedd a ffyn. But the summer... ah, the summer, which was now coming to its peak, the summer was a joy to behold, even from the inside of a diner. Virgil Flowers was sitting sideways in a booth in a Perkins restaurant on Highway 169 in Mankato, Minnesota, his cowboy boots hanging off the end of the seat. He was talking to Florence Ma Nobles about her involvement in a counterfeit lumber ring, of which she denied any knowledge. Hed been investigating her for a while, and had even met three of her five intra-ethnic fatherless boys Mateo, Tall Bear, and Moses. Virgil picked up a french fry and jabbed it at her: Dave Moss said you sold the same barn fifteen times, Ma. He says your boy Rolf has another two thousand board-feet of lumber down at the bottom of the Minnesota River, getting old. Dave says youll be peddling that all over New England next year. Ma made a rude noise with her lips, and Virgil said, Cmon, Ma, thats not necessary. Ma said, That goddamn Moss can kiss my asst though, to be honest, he already did that and seemed to like it all right. This is more a domestic dispute than anything else, Virgie. I broke it off with him, and hes just getting back at me. Virgil said, Im not sure I can believe that, Ma. Theres a fellow named Barry Spurgeon who spent forty-four thousand dollars buying lumber from your boy, so he can build some sort of a barn-mansion in Greenwich, Connecticut. He got suspicious and did a tree-ring test and that tree was cut down last year. Last year, for Christs sakes, Ma. You didnt even let it go five years. Spurgeon wants that money back because he paid for real old-timey barn lumber. His phone rang and he picked it up and looked at it: Lucas Davenport. I gotta take this, he said. He pushed the answer tab on the phone and said, Hang on a minute, Lucas, and to Ma, You sit right here. Do not run away. Instead of talking about barn lumber we oughta talk about how to scratch my itch, Ma said, pushing out her lower lip. Here it is July and I aint been laid since March the eighteenth. Youre just the boy to get er done, Virgie. Virgil slid out of the booth and walked back toward the mens room, where nobody was sitting. Whats up? he asked Davenport. Got an assignment for you... easy duty, Davenport said. Aw, man. I left my shotgun at home. No, no, nothing like that, Davenport said, though hed been known to lie about such things. Theres an Israeli investigator who needs to talk to a professor at Gustavus Adolphus, though the professor actually lives there in Mankato. Probably on your block. Hes a minister named, uh, let me look... Elijah Jones. A Lutheran minister, like your old man. An Israeli? Whats that about? Virgil was keeping an eye on Ma as he spoke to Davenport, and it wasnt particularly hard to do. She was undeniably a criminal redneck, but she was also a pretty blonde, only thirty-four, though she had five children, including a nineteen-year-old. She had a long, thick pigtail down her back, and a short, slender body. If, purely hypothetically, she were lying on a California king with that hair spread out over her... ..some kind of precious artifact What? Say that over again, Virgil said. Im sorry, Im trying to keep an eye on a local criminal here... that barn-lumber scam Ive been working. I said, the Israelis coming into MSP and itd be nice if youd pick her up, Davenport said. This Jones guy supposedly stole some kind of precious artifact from an archaeological dig and smuggled it back to the States. He apparently left Israel illegally the Israeli cops tracked him to a port and he caught a boat to Cyprus and then flew home from there. What kind of artifact?

Virgil asked, now semi-interested. Does it have mystical powers? I don't know about mystical powers, but supposedly it's a piece of a stele, a steele? I don't know how you pronounce it that's got some ancient writing on it. The whole thing has apparently got the state of Israel in an uproar, Davenport said. Anyway, the Israelis want it back and the State Department says if Jones stole it and brought it into the country, he broke about nine laws. I'll send you a sheet on it. That sounds like a federal case, Virgil said. Why don't the Israelis talk to the FBI? Well, it is a federal case. The feds have issued a hold on Jones, based on information from the Israelis, and also because he said he had nothing to declare when he came through customs, which was a lie. The feds asked us in because of local knowledge that'd be you and because we owe them one this month, and the boss okayed it, Davenport said. I bet the stone does have mystical powers, Virgil said. Maybe the Israelis can use it to blast Iran, or something. Or maybe it curses the person who has it, your balls rot off, or your seed only falls upon barren ground, so to speak. My seeds already got me in enough trouble, so I don't care anymore, Davenport said. Just bust the fuckin' minister, get the fuckin' stone, and get the fuckin' Israelis out of here. Okay? Ma caught Virgil looking at her, and her tongue came out and stroked her upper lip. Just in case Virgil might have missed it, she did it again. Davenport said something else, but Virgil missed that, and he said, Goddamnit, I'm up to my ass on this lumber thing. What time is she coming in? After a moment of silence, Davenport said, I just told you that: I don't know. Today, tomorrow, the next day. She'll either call ahead or send you an e-mail when she knows for sure. Sorry, I'm really... I'm afraid this guy's gonna run. What's her name? The Israeli? Yael Aronov, Davenport said. He pronounced it Yale. Is that Y-a-e-l? Yeah. That's pronounced Ya-el, Virgil said. In the Book of Judges, Yael meets this enemy commander named Sisera, and gets him in her tent, where, and I quote, Yael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer into her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. End quote. See, you're the perfect guy for this, Davenport said. You not only know the Bible, but your third wife was just like this Yale chick. Ya-el, Virgil said. And when you're right, you're right. The lumber scam did not get resolved. As they walked out to the parking lot, Virgil told Ma that she'd have to find another person to scratch her itch. Not, he said, that you don't have a pretty attractive itch. I appreciate your sayin' that, but sayin' it don't solve the problem, Ma said. You better get it scratched right quick, because if you keep selling that lumber, I am gonna put your ass in jail, Virgil said. You're one mean cowboy, Ma said. She left in a new red Ford F-150, which seemed to Virgil to be some sort of a taunt, since she'd been poor-mouthing about the depressed state of the architectural salvage business. Virgil didn't hear from the Israeli woman that afternoon, and he didn't have much on his investigative plate, so he made a quick run over to the Mississippi River, where he hooked up with his old friend Johnson Johnson to do some evening walleye fishing. He wound up spending the night at Johnson's cabin, where Johnson and his current girlfriend, Shirley, made a nice dinner out of baked walleye and fresh hand-picked watercress. Virgil and Johnson did a little northern fishing in the early morning, and then Virgil headed back home. At Rochester, he stopped at a McDonald's, got a Quarter Pounder with Cheese, declining the offer of a Double Quarter Pounder, checked his e-mail on his iPad, and found a message from the Israeli: she'd be arriving at Minneapolis-St. Paul at one o'clock. Virgil checked his watch and figured he'd have enough time to cut cross-country to the Cabela's outdoor superstore at Owatonna on his way north. Virgil Flowers was a tall, thin man, two inches over six feet unless he was wearing cowboy boots, which he usually was, and then he was three and a half inches over six feet. He wore his blond hair long, curled over his ears and the back of his neck; in general, he looked like a decent third-baseman, which he'd been in high school and for a while in college, until he found out he couldn't reliably hit a college-level fastball. After college, he did time in the army, expecting an assignment in the infantry or intelligence. The army made him a cop, which, to his surprise, he liked. He was a captain when he got out, landed a job with the St. Paul cops, and a few years later, moved to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. Now he was the only resident agent in the southern end of the state. He would work six or eight murders in the course of an average year, and spend the rest of his time chasing down people whose criminal activities required more range than an individual sheriff's office could normally cover. Ma Nobles, for example, lived in one county, her son in another, a suspected accomplice in a third, and the lumber might well be hidden underwater, precisely on a county line. In addition to his cop duties, Virgil was an outdoor writer, though he'd recently branched out and had stories printed in both the New York Times magazine and Vanity Fair. Despite a mild disregard for money, between the state job and the writing, he found himself edging toward affluence. So that's what he did. Meth labs had been his special curse for quite a while, generating a number of the killings he'd worked, but now they were beginning to fade away. Tough, on-the-ball law enforcement, Virgil was proud to say,

had forced Minnesota criminals to go back to stealing. Virgil got out of Cabelas for two hundred dollars, not a bad price, considering the possibilities, and made it into the airports short-term parking a half hour before Yael Aronovs plane was scheduled to land. He bought a fishing magazine at a newsstand and a croissant at Starbucks, and settled in to wait. He was deep into a pro-and-con article on the use of bucktails when his phone rang, a call from an unknown number. Yes? Is this Agent Flowers? Yes, it is. The plane has landed. Your supervisor gave me this number and said you would meet me. Are you here? Yes. In baggage claim. Youre at carousel nine. Im a tall, thin man with cowboy boots and a straw hat, sitting in the chairs facing the carousel. Very good. I will be there as soon as I can. She was another twenty minutes. Virgil finished the bucktails story and was reading about Bulldawg technique when people began gathering around the carousel. He put the magazine away, and two minutes later, a woman walked up and said, Youre the only cowboy. You must be Virgil? Yes, I am, Virgil said, unfolding from the chair. They shook hands and she said, Yael Aronov, and, I have two large bags. Thats fine, Virgil said. Where are you staying? At the Mankato Downtown Inn? Is that correct? Thats correct, Virgil said. Yael was a tall woman in her late twenties or early thirties, athletic, with dark hair cut short, regular features, an olive complexion, and quick, dark eyes. She was pretty, but if Virgil had been asked what she looked like, he would have said, Tough. Im tired. It was straight through Tel Aviv to Newark, and then a long layover in Newark and then to here, she said. I need to sleep. I was never told who you work for, exactly, Virgil said. I understand youre looking for an artifact of some kind. I work for the Israel Antiquities Authority, the IAA. Im an investigator really, the only investigator, she said. Were looking for part of a stele she pronounced it stellathat was stolen by this Reverend Jones. I dont know exactly what a stele is. Okay, I will tell you, she said. In the ancient Middle East, the various kings, Persian, Egyptian, Assyrian, when they conquered a place, would sometimes put up a stone pillar boasting about their conquest. They often inscribed the pillar with more than one language, usually their own and the local language. Then, after they died, another conqueror would come along, and the old pillars would get thrown down and broken up, and maybe new pillars set up. What Reverend Jones found was a piece of one of these pillars, a piece of a stele. Unfortunately, he stole it, and carried it out of the country. Youre sure? One hundred percent, she said. Jones, she said, had been working on Israeli digs since the late sixties, most recently at an excavation on the Jordan River east of the town of Beth Shean. He was one of the most trusted diggers a man with long experience, decent Hebrew, and good friends all over Israel. Then, a little more than a week earlier, there had been a stunning find: a fragment of a black limestone stele, a little more than a foot long and about ten inches thick at the thickest part. She broke off to say, Here are my bags. They were, in fact, two of the largest suitcases Virgil had ever seen come off an airplane. But when he pulled them off the carousel, they were light, as though they were almost empty. They weigh Nothing, she said. But believe me, they will weigh much more when I go home. I will put refrigerators in them, if I can. Why is that? Israeli taxes, she said. Israel would tax words, if that were possible. Would tax air. This way... no taxes. All right. They towed the two bags out to Virgils truck and threw them in the back. Out of the airport, he said, So, keep talking. The stele was a foot long and ten inches thick... Yes. Everybody was jubilant, excited, she said. The director of the dig, Rafi Frankel, this is the greatest find of his career. It came out late in the morning they stop digging at noon because of the heat. Reverend Jones was actually the one who found it. We have photos from the earliest moments, when all you could see was one dressed edge of the stone coming up through the dirt. More photos were taken as the stone was dug out of the ground, she said, and as it was removed from the dig pit and carefully wiped. When it was out of the ground, it was driven back to a dig house, put on a table, where more photos were taken. Frankel is a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in the Institute of Archaeology, Yael said. He called friends there and told them of the find, and of course, the word spread instantly. He said he would transport it the next day to Jerusalem. Some of the people from the dig stayed up late, until ten o'clock, examining the stone. Then it was secured in a locker, and the room was locked, and everybody went to bed. When they got up at four-thirty, the stone was gone. So was a car, and Reverend Jones. Frankel immediately called the Israeli cops, who eventually traced the Avis rent-a-car to the city of Haifa. There, they lost the trail for a couple of days, fooled by a false scent: the report of a tall man in a dark hat and dark suit walking near the Avis dealership with a couple of big bags. They tracked the man down, but he turned out to be an Orthodox Jew who lived in the neighborhood, and had nothing to do either with the dig or with Jones. Backtracking, they eventually found a cabdriver who had taken Jones to the port. A yachtsman there told investigators about two Germans who had vanished with their boat that same morning that Jones disappeared. The Germans were identified by customs, and four days later, they were found in the Old Port of Cyprus. The Germans said theyd taken the

American for a sail, but hed become seriously ill, had begun vomiting and urinating blood. Theyd dropped him at the Old Port, they said, as the fastest place they could get to, and had last seen Jones getting into a taxicab. We didnt believe all of that, of course. We think they were paid to take him out of the country. But, mmm, it was a hard story to break because a Cyprus customs official actually witnessed Reverend Jones urinating blood, Yael said. When we continued to trace his travels, we found that he came here, and was taken to the Mayo Clinic. He has terminal cancer. After three days, he left the clinic, without permission, and his whereabouts are now unknown. And you have reason to believe that he had the stone with him, Virgil said. Oh, yes. He was carrying a large leather bag, which he would allow nobody to touch. The cabdriver said he carried it like ababy. What could he do with it? Virgil asked. If you have all those photos, he couldnt sell it. Ah. But he could, she said. For a lot of money, if he made just the right connection. Perhaps he saw it and went a little crazy. Hes dying... maybe he thought this would be a big thing, if he could publish it himself. You know whats on the stone? What it says? No, no, that will take some study, Yael said. One side is in Egyptian hieroglyphics and the other, perhaps some primitive form of Hebrew. Nobody really knows for sure, she said. She yawned, and then said, Maybe I sleep for a few minutes. This day catches up to me. Theres a pillow right behind your seat, Virgil said. Thank you. This is excellent, she said, as she fished the pillow out of the back and then snuggled against the passenger-side window. I sleep now. And she did, as Virgil drove along, thinking about the story shed told. The story interested him for two reasons: hed grown up as a ministers son, and Bible tales had been a big part of his youth. The other thing was, shed told the truth right up to the end, and then shed begun lying. She was good at it, but Virgil had been listening to liars for years, and he could hear the lies in her voice. There was something about the stele that she didnt want him to know or that she didnt want to talk about. He wondered why. Mystical powers? Hmm. He drove on.

3Virgil dropped Yael at her hotel. She was still dazed from the jet lag, she said, so he led her inside, got her checked in, agreed to pick her up for breakfast the next morning, and sent her up to her room. He lived a mile away, and decided he might as well get going on the Jones case: with any luck, he could have it settled by the time he picked Yael up in the morning. There wasnt much of the working day left, but Gustavus Adolphus College was only fifteen minutes away, and Jones lived even closer. At home, he cut up an apple and moved to his den, where he got online with the college. Jones was listed as a professor emeritus in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. His online vita said that hed graduated from a seminary in St. Paul and had been ordained there, and later graduated from the University of Iowa with a Ph.D. in early and primitive religions. When hed been working full-time, hed taught Archaeology of the Holy Land, the History of Religion and the Hebrew Bible. Hed worked on archaeological digs in Israel, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece during the late sixties and the seventies, and after becoming a tenured professor at Gustavus, had led annual student treks to Israeli archaeological digs. Attached to the site was a note that he was leading a dig that summer, with the dig scheduled to start on Sunday, June 23, and continue for six weeks. Judging from the dates of graduation listed in his vita, Jones must have been in his late sixties. His departmental photo showed a thickbut not obesebearded man dressed in a short-sleeved blue shirt and long khaki pants and boots, standing with a group of smiling students both male and female, on the edge of a dig, with odd-looking black tents in the background. On closer examination, the tents appeared to be swaths of some kind of fabric held up with PVC drainage pipes. As with Yael, if asked to describe Jones, Virgil would have included the word smart. Jones looked like a smart, tough, prairie preacher, Virgil thought, and hed met a number of those. With Jones background in mind, Virgil went online with the Department of Motor Vehicles and took a look at his drivers license. While the online photo at the college had shown a man with jet-black hair and a thick black beard, the license photo showed a thinner man with graying hair and beard, though both were more black than white; but it was the same guy, and he lived only eight blocks from Virgil. Virgil thought, Pick him up tonight, wring him out, get the rock back, give it to Yael in the morning, and send her on her way. Warn Jones about not running, and let justice take its course. Whatever that might be. With any luck, he could be back investigating Ma Nobles by noon the next day. Ma, he thought, was a much more interesting case. With that thought, he shut down the computer, put the remains of the apple in the garbage disposal, washed it away, and headed over to Jones house. Jones lived in a plain-vanilla clapboard house that had a porch with a wooden swing and a picture window that looked out over the porch steps to his small front lawn. A flower box hung under the window, but had no flowers in it; a big but barren flowerpot sat on the porch at the top of the steps. The front door had a wide, short window that was covered with two curtains, with a crack between them; he peered through the crack and simultaneously rang the doorbell. Nothing moved. He rang again, and there was none of the vibration you got from an occupied

house. After a third ring, and another minute on the porch, he walked over to the detached garage and looked in the window: there was an SUV inside, but it appeared to be covered with a thin layer of dust, as though it hadnt been moved for a few weeks. Had Jones been home at all? Hed certainly had the time. After looking in the garage window, he wandered into the backyard and looked in a window in the back door, but couldnt see anything but the inside of a mudroom, with a bunch of coats hanging on pegs. Hed climbed down off the stoop when a woman shouted, Hello? He looked around and saw her next door, standing on her own back stoop, an old lady with a cane and Coke-bottle glasses, looking at him with suspicion. He called back, Im a police officer. Im with the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. Elijah isnt home. Hes in Israel, she called. Virgil walked over, took his ID out of his pocket, and showed it to her. Hes actually back in the countryhes been here for a while, over at the Mayo, Virgil said. Hasnt been here, she said. He always stops here first thinghe leaves a set of keys with me. His biography at the college said hes married, Virgil said. Is his wife around? Or did she go with him? Thats Magda, poor thing. She has Alzheimers, the old lady said. Shes in a home now. He couldnt take care of her anymore. No, he lives here by himself. His children are gone. One lives up inthe Cities, one is out on the West Coast, San Diego, I think. I havent seen either of them, either. How old are they? Oh, the oldest one, Dan, he must be... forty-one or forty-two? Ellen must be in her late thirties. I think shes three years younger than Danny. Would you have their addresses or phone numbers? Well, no, no, I dont. Ellen works for the state, her last name is Case. You could probably find her that way. Did something bad happen? Theres some kind of an argument going on with this dig that Reverend Jones was on, Virgil said, evading the question. Listen, Im going to leave a note on his front door. If you should see him, tell him to call me, right away. The moment he gets in. When Virgil left Jones house, he checked his watch. If Gustavus Adolphus operated like most colleges, he might be too late to talk to anyone, but he wasnt doing anything else anyway, so he decided to take fifteen minutes to run up to the town of St. Peter, where the college was. Gustavus was a mixture of old and new buildings set on a rolling campus; in the late nineties, it had been hit by a huge F3 tornado that tore the campus apart, but luckily during spring break, and none of the students were killed. Virgil had to poke around for a few minutes before he found the administration offices, and from there was sent to Jones department, where he found a woman pecking at a computer keyboard in a small book-stuffed office. Her name was Maicy, she said, an assistant professor. Shed been working every day, shesaid, because she couldnt afford to go anywhere that summer, and had not seen or heard from Jones. Weve had a lot of calls, though, she said. We just havent been able to help. We cant even believe what theyre telling us that Elijah stole this stele? I mean, if so many people werent telling us the same story, I would have said it was nonsense. I dont think Elijah ever stole a single thing in his entire life. To steal a stele? Its hardly credible. She was insistent, and said that if Virgil tracked down other department members, hed get the same thing from them: until they saw the proof, they would not believe that Jones was in any way involved in any theft. Virgil thanked her and left. Hed run out of time. The college offices were closing, and there wouldnt be much more that night. He stopped by Jones house again, found his note still on the door, leaned on the bell, got nothing. It occurred to him that Jones might be inside, dead. If another day passed with no sight of the man, hed go talk to a judge about that ideaor call the daughter, when he found her. Virgil went home, ate, and resumed work on a magazine story about fly-fishing for carp, the part about stalking tailing carp in shallow water. Yael was bright and cheerful and drinking coffee when Virgil arrived at the hotels restaurant at eight oclock the next morning. He slid into the booth across from her, and she said, I am completely screwed. I slept well until one oclock this morning and then I woke up. I havent been back to sleep since. About four oclock this afternoon, I am going to die. Virgil said, Maybe well be done by four. I couldnt find him last night, I looked, but he only lives about a half-mile from here. Well check his house again, and if we dont find him, well checkwith his daughter and see if she knows where he is. If she does, well pick him up, get the stele, and send you off to Macys. Macys and then this Best Buy. Everybody says I should go to Best Buy for good prices. Well, there are lots of them around, Virgil admitted. But first, the stele, she said. First, I need some pancakes, Virgil said. During the pancakes, he quizzed her on the investigation of Jones, trying to figure out what shed been lying about the day before: I dont want to hassle the wrong guy. Hes not the wrong man, she said. She detailed the investigation into Jones, including his positive identification by several unconnected individuals in two countries, as well as some exit photos at the airport in Cyprus, and entry checks at Minneapolis. It was him, all right, she concluded. Virgil said, You know, just off the top of my head, I would have thought that if you were going to steal an Israeli stele, you might try to sneak it out of the country. I mean this place he stole it fromis it in a town, or out in the countryside, or what? Out in the countryside, east of the city of Beth Shean, very close to

the Jordan River. Okay. Now, Jones has a Ph.D. from an actual legitimate university, so hes probably not stupid. If hed stolen the stele and then reburied it, say, a few hundred yards away, who would have known? He could have pretended to be as mystified as everyone else. When it was time for him to leave, he could dig up the stone, pack it in his luggage, get a boat out of town. Whos to know? But he didnt do that, she said. I told you what he did. That doesnt make any sense, Virgil said. I mean, look at it. He finds the stone, digs it up, steals it, steals a car, drives it to the car agency, where it can be traced instantlyhe could have left it in a parking lot somewhere, and you might still be looking for it. Then, dressed as an American Christian minister in a big black suit with a white collar, who speaks good Hebrew, he calls a taxi and overtips the driver. Then he gets a ride out of the countrywith these Germans, who everybody in the marina knows. He then pees blood into the harbor in Cyprus, so that everybody will be sure to remember him there, and flies home, where hes met by an ambulance crew. He couldnt have left a clearer, faster trail to follow if hed been dropping ten-dollar bills at each step. We considered that, Yael said. It does seem a little curiousbut. But? But he stole the stele, she said. Thats very clear. I dont care if he snuck out of the country by getting Tinker Bell to sprinkle fairy dust on his ass. I just want the stele. Your English is very good, Virgil observed. Thank you. And you know about Tinker Bell? Of course. My parents have had a condo on South Beach, in Miami Beach, for forty years, she said. I was born there. Ive been to Disney World eight or nine times. Ah. So youre actually an American? Virgil asked. No. I could have been, but I chose Israel, she said. On the way over to Jones house, Virgil went back to Jones departure from Israel. Are you telling me that he stole the car, drove to this city on the coast... Haifa. Yeah, Haifa. Then he drops the car at the Avis agency, which he just happens to know where it is, catches a cab before dawn, gets a ride to a specific marina, where he finds two Germans willing to smuggle him out of Israel, no questions asked... and he didnt prearrange it? And, of course, he couldnt prearrange it, because he didnt know the stele would be found. The diggers left the tel at noon and locked the stele up at midnight. He could have easily taken a sherut to Haifa, and back, in that time. A sherut? Like a minibus, she said. Or he could have taken a taxi. So Haifas not far? Maybe an hour and a half, Yael said. You checked to see that he was gone for at least, say, five hours in that period? Time enough to catch a bus, get there, make arrangements, and get back? There seems to be some controversy about that, but I dont care, she said. And you dont care, because he stole the stele, and thats what you care about. Correct, she said. At Jones house, Virgils note was gone from the door. He rang the doorbell again, and a second time, then reached out to the doorknob... and it turned in his hand. Hell, this was Minnesota. He pushed the door open and called, Hello? Anybody home? He heard the creak of a floorboard from the back of the house. Hello? This is the police. Anybody there? He heard two quick steps and then the back door banged open and Virgil was running through the house. It occurred to him, as he cleared a china cabinet full of blue-and-white Spode dishes and cups, that usually, in this situation, the cop had a gun. His was in the truck, and not for the first time, he thought, Jeez. He went through the kitchen and took a wrong turn, into a dead end that led to a stairs down into a basement. He reversed field, and through a back window saw a tall, dark-complected young man with long hair, in a T-shirt and jeans, hop a back fenceand dash between the two houses that backed up to Jones house. Virgil ran back through the kitchen and through the mudroom, out the back door and across the backyard. There was a four-foot fence separating Jones yard from the house it backed up to. He clambered over the fence and ran to the front of the house; but none of that was as fast as the runner had done it, because Virgil was wearing cowboy boots and the runner was wearing running shoes. He was in time to see a champagne-colored Camry pull away from the curb a hundred yards farther on, and accelerate down the block and then around the corner. The car was too far away to get the tag, but it was from Minnesota, and he noted a basketball-sized dent in the left rear bumper. Shoot. He felt for his phone, and remembered it was on the charger in the car. He jogged back around the block, got the cell phone, and called 911 and identified himself and asked the Mankato dispatcher to have her patrolmen take the tag numbers on any champagne-colored Camrys they saw in the area. The driver is tall, with long dark hair. He looked sort of like an Apache. Or, because of what Im doing, he could have been Middle Eastern. The dispatcher said she would do that, but, There are probably two hundred champagne-colored Camrys in town. Thats probably the most common car in the world. Yeah, but... do it anyway, Virgil said. The car had a dent in the left rear bumper. And you might send a car around to a probable burglary. Hed been talking to the 911 operator from Jones front lawn. When he got off the phone, he went back inside the house, where he found Yael innocently standing in Jones living room, examining a wall of photographs. Did you look around? he asked. Of course not, she said. That would be illegal. I dont have a search warrant. Good. If I were to get a search warrant and look around, do you think Id find a body? Or a stele? No, I dont think you

would, she said. Then theres no reason to hurry, Virgil said. Well, when I came to look at these photos, I noticed a smear of some kind on the floor in the hallway, there. She pointed at a hallway that probably went back to a bathroom and some bedrooms. Perhaps you should check it. Virgil went that way. The smear was three feet from the point where the hallway entered the front room and was about the size of Virgils index finger. Looks like dried blood, Virgil said. I couldnt really tell from this far away, Yael said. Right, Virgil said. The police are here, she said. Virgil walked back through the living room and saw two city cops coming up the walk. He stepped out on the porch and said, Hey, Jimmy. Paula. Hey, Virg, Jimmy said. You got a burglary? Well, I got a runner, anyway, Virgil said. He told them about chasing the Camry man out of the house, and introduced Yael, and she told them about the search for Elijah Jones. Neither of the cops knew Jones, and Virgil said, Im going to walk around for a while, see what the neighbors say. Well take a look around, said Jimmy. Paula, get the basement. Yael said, I should stay here with Paula and Jimmy. I would recognize the stele. Virgil went first to the house on the right, but nobody was home. Then he went back to the old ladys house. She answered the door and said, I think he was back last night. He didnt come over, but I saw lights in the house, late. You didnt see him this morning? No, and I get up early. I went and knocked on his door, but nobody answered, and your note was gone. But youre not sure it was Jones himself. No, I guess not. Could have been Ellen, I suppose. Virgil thanked her, and walked back to his truck and called Davenport. This may be a little more complicated than you thought, he said. After a moment of silence, Davenport asked, Why cant anything you do be simple? Get the steele and send Yale home. Well, I went over to talk to Jones this morning, but he wasnt there, but a burglar was, and I think theres blood on the floor. Ahhhh... shit. Yeah. But it might not be from violence. Hes got cancer, andhes apparently been leaking a lot of blood. Virgil told him about the runner, and about the smear, and about how Yael was lying about something, and then he asked, Do you have any hint what this stele might involve? I mean, it looks like Yaels not the only one who wants it. And wants it bad enough to break into ahouse. No idea, Davenport said. But if theres blood, and a burglary, then put the screws to this chick. We need to know. I dont think shell tell me, Virgil said. How about the other people on this dig? They must know something. Couldnt you call one of them? I was just about to do that, Virgil lied. Im tracking down some names now. But I wanted to update you on the blood thing. Okay. Dont bother to call me unless youve got something serious. If this is gonna be another fuckin Flowers circus, I dont want the details. Davenport occasionally had some good ideas, Virgil thought, as he rang off. Like calling people from the dig. It should be late afternoon in Israel, so if he could call soon... He dug his iPad out of the pocket of the passenger-side seat-back. He signed on, went to the Gustavus Adolphus website, got the names of the other faculty in Jones department, and the main number for the school. After hassling a bit with a functionary in the schools office, he got home phone numbers for four other faculty members. He struck out on the first oneno answerbut the second one, Patricia Carlson, picked up on the first ring. Virgil identified himself, and asked her what she knew about the dig, or anyone else on it. Hang on a minute, she said. I need to go online here. A minute later, she said, There are seven Gustavus students at the dig, and one parent. I have the emergency cell phone number for the parent, in Israel. Her name is Annabelle Johnson. The miracles of modern communication, Virgil thought. Hed gone online from a computer in his truck, which coughed up phone numbers for a college faculty in a different town, and from there, had gotten a phone number for a woman half a world away. Earlier that year, hed been fishing at a fly-in camp in northwest Ontario, fifty miles from the nearest road, and another guy, whose wife was pregnant, and whose father was seriously ill, had a sat phone, and had daily conversations with them both, routed through his personal satellite link. Annabelle Johnson was in a dormitory at an Israeli kibbutz. Shed been taking her afternoon nap when Virgil called. He explained the problem, and she said, in a hushed voice, Were not supposed to talk about it. Were shocked, here. Shocked when Elijah ran away. Im working with an investigator from Israel, Virgil said. Im not sure shes being entirely up front with me. I could really use some help. He told Johnson about the encounter at Jones house and about the smear on the floor. I cant find Reverend Jones, and that worries meespecially if that smear turns out to be blood. Can you tell me if Jones was behaving differently on this trip? I know hes sick... Hes dying, Johnson said. Thats what Ive been told, Virgil said. Even given that, how was he behaving? Was there anything unusual about him, in the days before he found the stele? Listen, this dig is really rough work. Its like excavating a basement using nothing but trowels, in a hundred-and-four-degree heat. People feel bad all the time. Theres always somebody whos dehydrated, who cant make it out in the morning. So its hard to tell when something unusual is going on, Johnson said. Elijah was sick, and sometimes he didnt make it out. But he tried, every day. I was so happy when the stele came upI was right in the next square, and when he found that first edge, it was like, Okay,

this could be amazing. But well find something that could be amazing several times every dig, and they usually turn out to be disappointments. But this this was even more amazing than anything we ever expected. Why would he run away with it? Virgil asked. He'd have to know that everybody would be on his trail. What could he accomplish? Johnson said, I think he saw what was on the stele and he freaked out. Something just broke. All the stress from the dig, from the heat, from the cancer, from worrying about his wife... and then this. I think he snapped. Virgil: The Israeli investigator here said it'd be quite a while before they knew what was on the stele. You mean... he already knew? Oh, God, Johnson said. We're really not supposed to talk about that. Too many people already know. There are all kinds of photographs. Even some of the kids have photographs, although they're supposed to have turned them over to the Israelis. It's bound to get out. What is it? Virgil said. Is it really a big deal? Oh, yeah. About as big as it could get, Johnson said. What is it? Johnson told him about it. *Revue de presse* Praise for *Storm Front* One of the best in that series so far . . . [it is] exciting, complex and funny . . . There are no missteps. It is entertaining reading all the way. *Huffington Post* With another gritty storyline and appealing characters, Sandford has penned another winner, one sure to shoot to the top of the best-seller lists. *Richmond Times-Dispatch* Clever, quirky . . . unusually good-natured intrigue distinguishes this outing. *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) Praise for *Mad River* The best entry in a stellar series *Booklist* (starred review) A high-octane thrill ride. Virgil pulls out all the stops. *Publishers Weekly* There are few events more welcome in the literary world than the appearance of another John Sandford book. *Mad River* is shot through with dark humor from all sides [and] the violence that is the driving force of the book ratchets up the suspense to an almost excruciating degree. *Bookreporter.com* Praise for John Sandford and *Storm Front* Sandford writes great, unapologetic guy fiction. *Stephen King* [Virgil] Flowers works with gruff charm and Spenser-like efficiency, a winning combination. *Entertainment Weekly* Move over Dan Brown... With another gritty storyline and appealing characters, Sandford has penned another winner. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*