John Sandford

SECRET

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JOHN SANDFORD

RULES OF PREY

SHADOW PREY

E Y E S O F P R E Y

SILENT PREY

WINTER PREY

NIGHT PREY

MIND PREY

SUDDEN PREY

THE NIGHT CREW

SECRET

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Chapter One

HE CHAIRMAN OF the board pulled the door shut behind him, stacked his rifle against the log-sided cabin, and walked down to the end of the porch. The light from the kitchen window punched out into the early-morning darkness and the utter silence of the woods. Two weeks of nightly frost had killed the insects and had driven the amphibians into hibernation: for a few seconds, he was alone.

Then the chairman yawned and unzipped his bib overalls, unbuttoned his pants, shuffled his feet, the porch boards creaking under his insulated hunting boots. Nothing like a good leak to start the day, he thought. As he leaned over the low porch rail, he heard the door opening behind him. He paid no attention.

Three men and a woman filed out of the house, pretended not to notice him.

"Need some snow," the woman said, peering into the dark. Susan O'Dell was a slender forty, with a tanned, dry face, steady brown eyes, and smile lines around her mouth. A headlamp was strapped around her blaze-orange stocking cap, but she hadn't yet switched it on. She wore a blaze-orange Browning parka, snowmobile pants, and

carried a backpack and a Remington .308 mountain rifle with a Leupold Vari-X III scope. Not visible was the rifle's custom trigger job. The trigger would break at exactly two and a half pounds.

"Cold sonofabitch, though," said Wilson McDonald, as he slipped one heavy arm through his gun sling. McDonald was a large man, and much too heavy: in his hunting suit he looked like a blaze-orange Pillsbury Doughboy. He carried an aging .30-06 with open sights, bought in the thirties at Abercrombie & Fitch in New York. At forty-two, he believed in a certain kind of tradition—his summer car, a racing-green XK-E, was handed down from his father; his rifle came from his grandfather; and his spot in the country club from his great-grandfather. He would defend the Jaguar against far better cars; the .30-06 against more modern rifles, and the club against parvenus, hirelings, and of course, blacks and Jews.

"You all ready?" asked the chairman of the board, as he came back toward them, buttoning his pants. He was a fleshy, red-faced man, the oldest of the group, with a thick shock of white hair and caterpillar-sized eyebrows. As he got closer to the others, he could smell the odor of pancakes and coffee still steaming off them. "I don't want any-body stumbling around in the goddamn woods just when it's getting good."

They all nodded: they'd all been here before.

"Getting late," said O'Dell. She wore the parka hood down, and the parka itself was still unzipped; but she'd wrapped a red and white kaffiyeh around her neck and chin. Purchased on a whim in the Old City of Jerusalem, and meant to protect an Arab from the desert sun, it was now protecting a third-generation Irishwoman from the Minnesota cold. "We better get out there and get settled."

Five forty-five in the morning, opening day of deer season. O'Dell led the way off the porch, the chairman of the board at her shoulder, the other three men trailing behind.

Terrance Robles was the youngest of them, still in his mid-thirties. He was a blocky man with thick, black-rimmed glasses and a thin, curly beard. His watery blue eyes showed a nervous flash, and he laughed too often, a shallow, uncertain chuckle. He carried a stainless Sako .270, mounted with a satin-finished Nikon scope. Robles had little regard for tradition: everything he hunted with was new technology.

James T. Bone might have been Susan O'Dell's brother: forty, as she was, Bone was slim, tanned, and dark-eyed, his face showing a hint of humor in a surface that was hard as a nut. He brought up the rear with a .243 Mauser Model 66 cradled in his bent left arm.

Four of the five—the chairman of the board, Robles, O'Dell, and Bone—were serious hunters.

The chairman's father had been a country banker. They'd had a nice rambling stone-and-redwood home on Blueberry Lake south of Itasca, and his father had been big in Rotary and the Legion. The deer hunt was an annual ritual: the chairman of the board had hung twenty-plus bucks in his forty-six years: real men didn't kill does.

Robles had come to hunting as an adult, joining an elk hunt as a thirtieth-birthday goof, only to be overwhelmed by its emotional power. For the past five years he'd hunted a half-dozen times annually, from Alaska to New Zealand.

O'Dell was a rancher's daughter. Her father owned twenty miles of South Dakota just east of the Wyoming line, and she'd joined the annual antelope hunt when she was eight. During her college years at Smith, when the other girls had gone to Ivy League football games with their beaux, she'd flown home for the shooting.

Bone was from Mississippi. He'd learned to hunt as a child, because he wanted to eat. Once, when he was nine, he'd made soup for himself and his mother out of three carefully shot blackbirds.

Only McDonald disdained the hunt. He'd shot deer in the past—he was a Minnesota male, and males of a certain class were expected to do that—but he considered the hunt a pain in the ass. If he killed a deer, he'd have to gut it. Then he'd smell bad and get blood on his clothing. Then he'd have to do something with the meat. A wasted

day. At the club, they'd be playing some serious gin—drinking some serious gin, he thought—and here he was, about to climb a goddamned tree.

"Goddamnit," he said aloud.

"What?" The chairman grunted, turned to look at him.

"Nothing. Stray thought," McDonald said.

One benefit: If you killed a deer, people at the club attributed to you a certain common touch—not commonness, which would be a problem, but contact with the earth, which some of them perceived as a virtue. That was worth something; not enough to actually be out here, but something.

THE SCENT OF woodsmoke hung around the cabin, but gave way to the pungent odor of burr oaks as they pushed out into the trees. Fifty yards from the cabin, as they moved out of range of the house lights, O'Dell switched on her headlamp, and the chairman turned on a hand flash. Dawn was forty-five minutes away, but the moonless sky was clear, and they could see a long thread of stars above the trail: the Dipper pointing down to the North Star.

"Great night," Bone said, his face turned to the sky.

A small lake lay just downslope from the cabin like a smoked mirror. They followed a shoreline trail for a hundred and fifty yards, moved single file up a ridge, and continued on, still parallel to the lake.

"Don't step in the shit," the woman said, her voice a snapping break in the silence. She caught a pile of fresh deer droppings with her headlamp, like a handful of purple chicken hearts.

"We did that last week with the Cove Links deal," the chairman said dryly.

The ridge separated the lake and a tamarack swamp. Fifty yards further on, Robles said, "I guess this is me," and turned off to the left toward the swamp. As he broke away from the group, he switched on

his flash, said, "Good luck, guys," and disappeared down a narrow trail toward his tree stand.

The chairman of the board was next. Another path broke to the left, toward the swamp, and he took it, saying, "See you."

"Get the buck," said O'Dell, and McDonald, O'Dell, and Bone continued on.

THE CHAIRMAN followed the narrow flashlight beam forty-five yards down a gentle slope to the edge of the swamp. The lake was still open, but the swamp was freezing out, the shallow pockets of water showing windowpane ice.

One stumpy burr oak stood at the boundary of the swamp; the kind of oak an elf might live in. The chairman dug into his coat pocket, took out a long length of nylon parachute cord, looped it around his rifle sling, leaned the rifle against the tree, and began climbing the foot spikes that he'd driven into the tree eight years earlier.

He'd taken three bucks from this stand. The county road foreman, who'd been cleaning ditches in preparation for the snow months, told him that a twelve-pointer had moved into the neighborhood during the summer. The foreman had seen him cutting down this way, across the middle of the swamp toward this very tree. Not more than two weeks ago.

The chairman clambered into the stand fifteen feet up the tree, and settled into the bench with his back to the oak. The stand looked like a suburban deck, built of preservative-treated two-by-sixes, with a two-by-four railing that served as a gun rest. The chairman slipped off his pack, hung it from a spike to his right, and pulled the rifle up with the parachute cord.

The cartridges were still warm from his pocket as he loaded the rifle. That wouldn't last long. Temperatures were in the teens, with an icy wind cutting at exposed skin. Later in the day, it would warm up, maybe into the upper thirties, but sitting up here, early, exposed, it would get real damn cold. Freeze the ass off that fuckin' O'Dell. O'Dell always made out that she was impervious to cold; but this day would get to her.

The chairman, wrapped in nylon and Thinsulate, was still a little too warm from the hike in, and he half dozed as he sat in the tree, waiting for first light. He woke once more to the sound of a deer walking through the dried oak leaves, apparently following a game trail down to the swamp. The animal settled on the hillside behind him.

Now that was interesting.

Forty or fifty yards away, no more. Still up the ridge, but it should be visible after sunrise, if it moved again. If it didn't, he'd kick it out on the way back to the cabin.

He sat waiting, listening to the wind. Most of the oaks still carried their leaves, dead brown, but hanging on. When he closed his eyes, their movement sounded like a crackling of a small, intimate wood fire.

The chairman sighed: so much to do.

THE KILLER WAS dressed in blaze orange and was moving quietly and quickly along the track. Dawn was not far away and the window of opportunity could be measured in minutes:

Here: now twenty-four steps down the track. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . twenty-three, twenty-four. A tree here to the left . . . Wish I could use a light.

The oak tree was there, its bark rough against the fingertips. And just to the right, a little hollow in the ground behind a fallen aspen.

Just get down here... quietly, quietly! Did he hear me? These leaves... didn't think about the leaves yesterday, now it sounds like I'm walking on cornflakes... Where's that log, must be right here, must be ... ah!

From the nest in the ground, the fallen aspen was at exactly the

right height for a rifle rest. A quick glance through the scope: nothing but a dark disc.

What time? My God, my watch has stopped. No. Six-seventeen. Okay. There's time. Settle down. And listen! If anybody comes, may have to shoot . . . Now what time? Six-eighteen. Only two minutes gone? Can't remember . . . two minutes. I think.

There'd be only one run at this. There were other people nearby, and they were armed. If someone else came stumbling along the track, and saw the orange coat crouched in the hole . . .

If they came while it was dark, maybe I could run, hide. But maybe, if they thought I was a deer, they'd shoot at me. What then? No. If someone comes, I take the shot then, whoever it is. Two shots are okay. I can take two. It wouldn't look like an accident anymore, but at least there wouldn't be a witness.

What's that? Who's there? Somebody?

The killer sat in the hole and strained to hear: but the only sounds were the dry leaves that still hung from the trees, shaking in the wind; the scraping of branches; and the cool wind itself. Check the watch.

Getting close, now. Nobody moving, I'm okay. Cold down here, though. Colder than I thought. Have to be ready . . . The old man . . . have to think about the old man. If he's there, at the cabin, I'll have to take him. And if his wife's there, have to take her . . . That's okay: they're old . . . Still nothing in the scope. Where's the sun?

OANIEL S. KRESGE was the chairman of the board, president, and chief executive officer of the Polaris Bank System. He'd gathered the titles to him like an archaic old Soviet dictator. And he ran his regime like a dictator: two hundred and fifty banks spread across six midwestern states, all wrapped in his cost-cutting fist.

If everything went exactly right, he would hold his job for another fifteen months, when Polaris would be folded into Midland Holding, owner of six hundred banks in the south central states. There would be some casualties.

The combined banks' central administration would be in Fort Worth. Not many Polaris executives would make the move. In fact, the whole central administrative section would eventually disappear, along with much of top management. Bone would probably land on his feet: his investments division was one of the main profit centers at Polaris, and he'd attracted some attention. O'Dell ran the retail end of Polaris. Midland would need somebody who knew the territory, at least for a while, so she could wind up as the number two or three person in Midland's retail division. She wouldn't like that. Would she take it? Kresge was not sure.

Robles would hang on for a while: a pure technician, he ran data services for Polaris, and Midland would need him to help integrate the separate Polaris and Midland data systems.

McDonald was dead meat. Mortgage divisions didn't make much anymore, and Midland already had a mortgage division—which they were trying to dump, as it happened.

Kresge turned the thought of the casualties in his head: when they actually started working on the details of the merger, he'd have to sweeten things for the Polaris execs who'd be putting the parts together, and the people Midland would need: Robles, for sure. Probably O'Dell and Bone.

McDonald? Fuck him.

KRESGE WOULD LOSE his job along with the rest. Unlike the others, he'd walk with something in the range of an after-tax forty million dollars. And he'd be free.

In two weeks, Kresge would sit in a courtroom and solemnly swear that his marriage was irretrievably broken. His wife had agreed not to seek alimony. In return for that concession, she'd demanded—and he'd agreed to give her—better than seventy-five percent of their joint assets. Eight million dollars. Letting go of the eight million had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. But it was worth it: there'd be no strings on him.

When she'd signed the deal, neither his wife nor her wolverine attorney had understood what the then-brewing merger might mean. No idea that there'd be a golden parachute for the chairman. And his ex wouldn't get a nickel of the new money. He smiled as he thought about it. She'd hired the wolverine specifically to fuck him on the settlement, and thought she had. Wait'll the word got into the newspapers about his settlement. And it would get in the newspapers.

Fuck her.

Forty million. He knew what he'd do with it.

He'd leave the Twin Cities behind, first thing. He was tired of the cold. Move out to L.A. Buy some suits. Maybe one of those BMW two-seaters, the 850. He'd been a good, gray Minnesota banker all of his life. Now he'd take his money to L.A. and live a little. He closed his eyes and thought about what you could do with forty million dollars in the city of angels. Hell, the women alone . . .

RESGE OPENED HIS eyes again with a sudden awareness of the increasing cold: shivered and carefully shook the stiffness out. Looking to the east, back toward the cabin, he could see an unmistakable streak of lighter sky. There was a ruffling of leaves to his right, a steady trampling sound. Another deer went by, a shadow in the semidark as the animal picked its way through a border of finger-thick alders at the fringe of the swamp. No antlers that he could see. He watched until the deer disappeared into the tamarack.

He picked up the rifle then, resisted the temptation to work the bolt, to check that the rifle was loaded. He knew it was, and working the bolt would be noisy. He flicked the safety off, then back on.

The last few minutes crawled by. Ten minutes before the season opened, the forest was still gray to the eye; in the next few minutes,

it seemed to grow miraculously brighter. Then he heard a single, distant shot: nobody here on the farm.

Another shot followed a minute later, then two or three shots over the next couple of minutes: hunters jumping the gun. He glanced at his watch. Two minutes. Nothing moving out over the swamp.

THROUGH THE SCOPE, the target looked like an oversized pumpkin, fifteen or twenty feet up the tree. His body from the hips down was out of sight, as was his right arm. The killer could see a large part of his back, but not the face. The crosshairs of the low-power scope caressed the target's spine, and the killer's finger lay lightly on the trigger.

Gotta be him. Damn this light, can't see. Turn your head. Come on, turn your head. Look at me. Have to do something, sun's getting up, have to do something. Look at me. There we go! Keep turning, keep turning. . . .

THIRTY SECONDS BEFORE the season opened, the crackle of gunfire became general. Nothing too close, though, Kresge thought. Either the other guys were holding off, or nothing was moving beneath them.

What about the deer that had settled off to his left?

He turned on the bench, moving slowly, carefully, and looked that way. In the last few seconds of his life, Daniel S. Kresge first saw the blaze-orange jacket, then the face. He recognized the killer and thought, *What the hell?*

Then the face moved down and he realized that the dark circle below the hood was the objective end of the scope and the scope was pointed his way, so the barrel . . . ah, Jesus. JESUS WENT THROUGH Kresge's mind at the same instant the bullet punched through his heart.

The chairman of the board spun off the bench—feeling no pain, feeling nothing at all—his rifle falling to the ground. He knelt for a moment at the railing, like a man taking communion; then his back buckled and he fell under the railing, after the rifle.

He saw the ground coming, in a foggy way, hit it face first, with a thump, and his neck broke. He bounced onto his back, his eyes still open: the brightening sky was gone. He never felt the hand that probed for his carotid artery, looking for a pulse.

He would lie there for a while, head downhill, would Daniel S. Kresge, a hole in his chest, with a mouth full of dirt and oak leaves. Nobody would run to see what the gunshot was about. There would be no calls to 911. No snoops. Just another day on the hunt.

A real bad day for the chairman of the board.

Chapter Two

THOUGH he'd been dragged through hell by the ankles, a disheveled Del Capslock stumbled out of the men's room in the basement of City Hall, fumbling with the buttons on the fly of his jeans. Footsteps echoed in the dark hallway behind him, and he turned his head to see Sloan coming through the gloom, a thin smile on his narrow face.

"Playing with yourself," Sloan said, his voice echoing in the weekend emptiness. Sloan was neatly but colorlessly dressed in khaki slacks and a tan mountain parka with a zip-in fleece liner. "I should have expected it; I knew you were a pervert. I just didn't know you had enough to play with."

"The old lady bought me these Calvin Kleins," Dell said, hitching up the jeans. "They got buttons instead of zippers."

"The theory of buttons is very simple," Sloan began. "You take the round, flat thing . . ."

"Yeah, fuck you," Del said. "The thing is, Calvin makes pants for fat guys. These supposedly got a thirty-four waist. They're really about thirty-eight. I can't get them buttoned, and when I do, I can't keep the fuckin' things up."