



JOHN
SANDFORD

NAKED
PREY



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John Sandford

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THURSDAY NIGHT, pitch black, blowing snow. Heavy clouds, no moon behind them.

The Buick disappeared into the garage and the door started down. The big man, rolling down the highway in a battered Cherokee, killed his lights, pulled into the driveway, and took the shotgun off the car seat. The snow crunched underfoot as he stepped out; the snow was coming down in pellets, rather than flakes, and they stung as they slapped his warm face.

He loped up the driveway, fully exposed for a moment, and stopped just at the corner of the garage, in a shadow beneath the security light.

Jane Warr opened the side door and stepped through, her back turned to him as she pulled the door closed behind her.

He said, "Jane."

She jumped, her hand at her throat, choking down a scream as she pivoted, and shrank against the door. Taking in the muzzle of the shot-

gun, and the large man with the beard and the stocking cap, she screeched: "What? Who're you? Get away . . ." A jumble of panic words.

He stayed with her, tracking her with the shotgun, and he said, slowly, as if speaking to a child, "Jane, this is a shotgun. If you scream, I will blow your heart out."

She looked, and it was a shotgun all right, a twelve-gauge pump, and it was pointing at her heart. She made herself be still, thought of Deon in the house. If Deon looked out and saw them . . . Deon would take care of himself. "What do you want?"

"Joe Kelly."

They stood for two or three seconds, the snow pellets peppering the garage, the big man's beard going white with it. Then, "Joe's not here." A hint of assertion in her voice—this didn't involve her, this shotgun.

"Bullshit," the big man said. He twitched the muzzle to the left, toward the house. "We're going inside to talk to him, and he's gonna pay me some money. I don't want to hurt you or anybody else, but I'm gonna talk to Joe. If I have to hurt the whole bunch of you, I will."

He sounded familiar, she thought. Maybe one of the guys from Missouri, from Kansas City? "Are you one of the Kansas City people? Because we're not . . ."

"Shut up," the big man said. "Get your ass up the steps and into the house. Keep your mouth shut."

She did what he told her. This was not the first time she'd been present when an unfriendly man flashed a gun—not even the second or third time—but she was worried. On the other hand, he said he was looking for Joe. When he found out Joe wasn't here, he'd go. Maybe.

"Joe's not here," she said, as she went up the steps.

"Quiet!" The man's voice dropped. "One thing I learned down in Kansas City—I'll share this with you—is that when trouble starts, you pull the trigger. Don't figure anything out, just pull the trigger. If Joe or Deon try anything on me, you can kiss your butt good-bye."

"All right," she said. Her voice had dropped with his. Now she was

on the stranger's side. She'd be okay, she told herself, as long as Deon didn't do anything. But there was something too weird about this guy. *I'll share this with you?*—she'd never heard a serious asshole say anything like that.

They went up the stairs onto a back porch, then through the porch into a mudroom, then through another door into the kitchen. None of the doors was locked. Broderick was a small town, and it doesn't take long to pick up small-town habits. As they clunked into the kitchen, which smelled like microwave popcorn and week-old carrot peels, Deon Cash called from the living room, "Hey," and they heard his feet hit the floor. A second later he stepped into the kitchen, scowling about something, a thin, five-foot-ten-inch black man in an Indian-print fleece pullover and jeans, with a can of Budweiser in one hand.

He saw Warr, the big man behind her, and then, an instant later, registered the shotgun. By that time, the big man had shifted the barrel of the shotgun and it was pointing at Cash's head. "Don't even think about moving."

"Easy," Cash said. He put the can of Budweiser on a kitchen counter, freeing his hands.

"Call Joe."

Cash looked puzzled for a second, then said, "Joe ain't here."

"Call him," the big man said. He'd thought about this, about all the calling.

Cash shrugged. "HEY JOE," he shouted.

Nothing. After a long moment, the man with the shotgun said, "Goddamnit, where is he?"

"He went away last month. He ain't been back. We don't know where he is," Warr said. "Told you he wasn't here."

"Go stand next to Deon." Warr stepped over next to Cash, and the big man dipped his left hand into his parka pocket and pulled out a clump of chain. Handcuffs. He tossed them on the floor and looked at Warr. "Put them on Deon. Deon, turn around."

"Aw, man . . ."

"It's up to you," the big man said. "I don't want to hurt you two, but I will. We're gonna wait for him if it takes all night."

"He ain't *here*," Warr said in exasperation. "He ain't coming back."

"Cuffs," the big man said. "I know what it sounds like when cuffs lock up."

"Aw man . . ."

"C'mon." The shotgun moved to Cash's head, and Warr bent over and picked up one set of cuffs and the big man said, "Turn around so I can see it," and Warr clicked the cuffs in place, pinning Cash's hands behind him.

The big man dipped his hand into his pocket again and came up with a roll of strapping tape. "Tape his feet together."

"Man, you startin' to piss me off," Cash said. Even with his hands cuffed, he managed to look stupidly fierce.

"Better'n being dead. Sit down and stick your feet out so she can tape you up."

Still grumbling, Cash sat down and Warr crouched beside him and said, "I'm pretty scared," and Cash said, "We gonna be all right. The masked man can go look at Joe's stuff, see he ain't here."

The big man made her take eight tight winds of tape around Cash's ankles. Then he ordered Warr to take off her parka and cuff her own hands. She got one cuff, but fumbled with the other, and the man with the shotgun told her to turn and back toward him, and when she did, clicked the second cuff in place. He then ordered both of them to lie on their stomachs, and with the shotgun pointed at them, he checked Cash's cuffs and then Warr's, just to make sure. When he was satisfied, he pulled on a pair of cotton gloves, knelt beside Warr, and taped her ankles, then moved over to Cash and put the rest of the roll of tape around his.

When he was done, Cash said, "So go look. Joe ain't here."

"I believe you," the big man said, standing up. They looked so helpless that he almost backed out. He steadied himself. "I know where Joe is."

After a moment's silence, Cash asked, "Where is he?"

"In a hole in the ground, a couple miles south of Terrebonne. Don't think I could find it myself, anymore," the big man said. "I just asked you about him so you'd think that . . ." He shrugged. "That you had a chance."

Another moment's silence, and then Warr said, "Aw, God, Deon. Listen to his voice."

Cash put the pieces together, then said, loud, croaking, but not yet screaming, "We didn't do nothin', man. We didn't do *nothin'*."

"I *know* what you did," the big man said.

"Don't hurt us," Warr said. She flopped against the vinyl, tried to get over on her back. "Please don't hurt us. I'll tell the cops whatever you want."

"We *get* a trial," Cash said. He twisted around, the better to see the man's face, and to test the tape on his legs. "We innocent until we proved guilty."

"*Innocent.*" The big man spat it out.

"We didn't do nothin'," Cash screamed at him.

"I know what you did." The crust on his wounds had broken, and the big man began kicking Cash in the back, in the kidneys, in the butt and the back of his head, and Cash rolled around the narrow kitchen floor trying to escape, screaming, the big man wailing like a man dying of a knife wound, like a man watching the blood running out of his neck, and he kicked and booted Cash in the back, and when Cash flopped over, in the face; Cash's nose broke with the sound of a saltine cracker being stepped on and he sputtered blood out over the floor. Across the kitchen, Warr struggled against the tape and the handcuffs and half-rolled under the kitchen table and got tangled up in the chairs,

and their wooden legs clunked and pounded and clattered on the floor as she tried to inchworm through them, Cash screaming all the while, sputtering blood.

Cash finally stopped rolling, exhausted, blood pouring out of his nose, smearing in arcs across the vinyl floor. The big man backed away from him, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then took a utility knife out of his pocket and stalked across the room to Warr, grabbed the tape around her ankles, and pulled her out from under the table. Warr cried, "Jesus, don't cut me!"

He didn't. He began slicing through her clothing, pulling it away in rags. She began to cry as he cut the clothing away. The big man closed his mind to it, finished, leaving her nude on the floor, except for the rags under the tape on her ankles, and began cutting the clothing off Cash.

"What're you doing, man? What're you doing?" Cash began flopping again, rolling. Finally, frustrated with Cash's struggles, the big man backed away and again kicked him in the face. Cash moaned, and the big man rolled him onto his stomach and knelt between his shoulder blades and patiently sliced at Cash's shirt and jeans until he was as naked as Warr.

"What're you doing?" Warr asked. Now there was a note of curiosity in her voice, showing through the fear.

"Public relations."

"Fuckin' kill ya," Cash groaned, still bubbling blood from his broken nose. "Fuckin' cut ya fuckin' head off . . ."

The big man ignored him. He closed the knife, caught Cash by the ankles, and dragged him toward the door. Cash, nearly exhausted from flopping on the floor, began flopping again, but it did no good. He was dragged flopping through the mudroom, leaving a trail of blood, onto the porch, and then down the steps to the lawn, his head banging on the steps as they went down. "Mother, mother," Cash said. "God . . . mother."

There wasn't much snow on the ground—hadn't been much snow

all winter—but Cash’s head cut a groove in the inch or so that there was, spotted with more blood. When they got to the Jeep, the big man popped open the back, lifted Cash by the neck and hips, and threw him inside.

Back in the house, he picked up Warr and carried her out to the truck like a sack of flour and tossed her on top of Cash and slammed the lid.

Before leaving, he carefully scanned the house for anything that he might have touched that would carry a fingerprint. Finding nothing, he picked up the shotgun and went back outside.

“WHERE’RE WE GOING?” Warr shouted at him. “I’m freezing.”

The big man paid no attention. A quarter-mile north of town, he began looking for the West Ditch Road, a dirt track that led off to the east. He almost missed it in the snow, stopped, backed up on the dark roadway, and turned down the track. He passed an old farmhouse that he’d thought abandoned, but now, as he went by, he saw a single light glowing in a first-floor window, but no other sign of life. Too late to change plans now, he thought; besides, with this night . . .

The wind had picked up, ripping the snow off the ground. He’d be far enough from the farmhouse that he couldn’t be seen. He kept moving, the light in the farmhouse window fading away behind him. In the dark, in the snow, there were no distinctive landmarks at all.

He concentrated on the track and the odometer. Four-tenths of a mile after he turned off Highway 36, he slowed, looking out the left-side window. At first, he saw nothing but snow. After a hundred feet or so, the tree loomed, and he pulled over, then carefully backed, pulled forward, and backed again until he was parked across the road.

“What?” Cash groaned, from the back. “What?”

The big man went around to the back of the truck, opened it,

grabbed the thick wad of tape around Cash's legs, and pulled him off the truck as if he were unloading lumber. Cash's shoulders hit the frozen earth with a meaty impact. The big man got him by the tape and dragged him past the first tree into what had been, from the car, in the dark, an invisible grove of trees.

One of the trees, a pin oak, loomed at the very edge of the illumination thrown by the car's headlights. Ropes were slung over a heavy branch fifteen feet above the ground. The big man, staggering under Cash's weight, dropped him by one of the ropes, then went back for Warr. When he got her to the hanging tree, struggling and kicking against him, he dropped her beside Cash.

"Can't do this, man," Cash screamed. "This is *murder*." The storm around them quieted for a moment, but the snow pellets still whipped through the trees, stinging like so many BBs.

"Please help me," Warr called to Cash. "Please, please . . ."

"Murder?" The big man shouted back at Cash, raising his voice above the wind. He broke away from them, toward a tree branch that was sticking up out of the snow, ripped it off the frozen ground and staggered back to Cash. "*Murder?*" He began beating Cash with the long stick, ripping strips of skin off Cash's back and legs, as the black man thrashed on the ground, gophing through the snow, trying to get away. "Murder, you fuckin' animal, murder . . ."

He stopped after a while, too tired to continue, threw the stick back into the trees. "Murder," he said to Cash. "I'll show you murder."

The big man led one of the ropes over to Cash, tied a single loop around his neck, tight, with strong knots. He did the same with the second rope, around Warr's neck. She was now shivering violently in the cold.

When he was done, the big man stood back, looked at the two of them, said, "God damn your immortal souls," and began hauling on the rope tied to Cash. Cash stopped screaming as the rope bit into his neck. He was heavy, and the big man had to struggle against his weight, and

against the raw friction of the rope over the tree limb. Finally, unable to get him in the air, the big man lifted him and pulled the rope at the same time, and Cash's feet cleared the ground by a meager six inches. He didn't struggle. He simply hung. The big man tied the lower end of the rope around the tree trunk, and tested it for weight. It held.

Warr pleaded, but the big man couldn't hear her—later couldn't remember anything she said, except that there were a lot of whispered *Pleases*. Didn't do her any good. Didn't do her any good when she fought him, either, though it might have given her a brief thirty seconds of satisfaction.

He couldn't get her high enough to get her feet off the ground, and as he struggled to do it, a space opened between the bottom of his coat sleeve and the glove on his right hand. The space, the warm flesh, bumped against her face, and quick as a cat, she sank her teeth into his arm, biting ferociously, twisting her head against his arm. He let go of the rope and she fell, holding on with her teeth, pulling him down, and he hammered at the side of her head until she let go.

She was groaning when he boosted her back up, and she ground out, "We're not the only ones."

That stopped him for a moment: "What?"

"They'll be coming for you, you cocksucker." She spat at him, from three inches away, and hit him in the face. He flinched, grabbed her around the waist and boosted her higher, his gloves slippery with blood, and then he had her high enough and he stepped away, holding tight to the rope, and she swung free and her groaning stopped. He managed to pull her up another four inches, then tied the rope off on the trunk.

He watched them for a few minutes, swinging in the snow, in the dim light, their heads bent, their bodies violently elongated like martyrs in an El Greco painting . . .

Then he turned and left them.

They may have been dead then, or it might have taken a few minutes. He didn't care, and it didn't matter. He rolled slowly, carefully, out

of the side road, down through Broderick and on south. He was miles away before he became aware of the pain in his wrist, and the blood flowing down his sleeve toward his elbow. When he turned his arm over in the dim light of the car, he found that she'd bitten a chunk of flesh out of his wrist, a lemon-wedge that was still bleeding profusely.

If a cop stopped him and saw it . . .

He pulled over in the dark, wrapped his wrist with a pad of paper towels and a length of duct tape, stepped out of the truck, washed his hand and arm in snow, tossed the bloody jacket in the back of the truck and dug out a lighter coat from the bag in back.

Get home, he thought. Burn the coat, dump the truck.

Get home.

WEATHER DAVENPORT crawled sleepily out of bed. The kid was squalling, hungry in his bedroom down the hall, and she started that. Lucas woke up as the housekeeper called, "I got him, Weather. I'm up."

"Ah, great," Weather said. She came back to the bed, sat down, looked at the clock.

"Getting up?" Lucas asked.

"Alarm's going off in fifteen minutes anyway," she said. She yawned, inhaled, exhaled, pushed herself off the bed and headed for the bathroom, pulling off her cotton nightgown as she went. Lucas, lying half awake under the crazy quilt, could see nothing but darkness on the other side of the wood slats that covered the window. January in Minnesota: the sun came up at 11:45 and went down at noon, he thought.

He shifted his head around on the pillow, tried to get comfortable, tried to get back to sleep. Sleep was unlikely: He'd been feeling down for a month or more, and depression was the enemy of decent sleep.

The marriage was fine, the new kid was great. Nothing to do with that—his sense of the blue was a chemical thing, but the chemicals made sleep impossible. If he went down further, he'd check with the doc. On the other hand, it might just be the winter, which this year had started in October.

He heard the shower start, and then Ellen, the housekeeper, banging down the stairs with the kid. The kid was named Samuel Kalle Davenport, the "Kalle" a Finnish name, for Weather's late father. The housekeeper was a fifty-five-year-old ex-nurse who loved kids. The four of them together had a deal they all liked.

After a few minutes, the shower stopped and Lucas sat up. He was awake now, no point in struggling against it. He climbed out of bed, remembered the clock, picked it up and turned off the alarm. As he did, Weather came out of the bathroom, rubbing her hair with a towel.

"You getting up?" she asked cheerfully. She was a small woman, and an early bird. She liked nothing better than getting up before the sun, to begin the hunt for worms.

"Uh," Lucas said. He started for the bathroom, but she smelled so warm and good as he passed her that he slipped an arm around her waist and picked her up and gave her a warm sucking kiss on the tummy below her navel.

She squirmed around, laughed once, and then said, severely, "Put me down, you oaf."

"Mad rapist attacks naked housewife in bedroom." Lucas carried her back to the bed and threw her on it and landed on the bed next to her, hands running around where they shouldn't be.

"Get away from me," she said, rolling away. "Come on, Lucas, god-damnit." She whacked him on the ear, and it hurt, and he collapsed on the bed. She got out and started scrubbing at her hair again and said, "You men get hard-ons in the morning and you're so proud of them, just swishing around in the air. You can't help showing off."

"Try not to use the word *swish*," Lucas said.

"Sex in the morning is for teenagers, and we aren't," she said.

Lucas rolled over on his stomach. "Now you've offended me."

"Offend this," she said. She'd spun her towel into a whip, and snapped him on the ass with it. That hurt, too, more than the whack on the ear, and he rolled off the bed and said, "Arrgh, naked housewife attacks sleeping man."

Weather, laughing, backed away from him, rewinding the towel, said, "Sleeping man snapped in the balls with wet towel."

Then Ellen, the housekeeper, called from the stairs, "You guys up?"

They both stopped in their tracks, and Weather whispered, "Well, you are. What do you want me to tell her?"

WEATHER WAS A SURGEON, and she was cutting on somebody almost every morning. This morning, she had three separate jobs, all at Regions, all involving burns—two separate skin grafts, and a scalp expansion on the head of a former electric lineman, trying to stretch what hair he had left over the burn scars he'd taken from a hot line.

She was bustling around the kitchen, in full imperial surgeon mode, when Lucas finally made it down the stairs. Ellen had the kid in a high chair, and was pushing orange vegetable mush into his face.

"I'll be home by three o'clock, Ellen, but I'll be out of touch from seven-thirty to at least ten," Weather was saying. "If there's a problem, you know what to do. The man from Harper's is coming over this morning to look at the front steps . . ."

The phone rang, and they all looked at it. Maybe a canceled operation? Lucas picked it up: "Hello?"

"Lucas? Rose Marie." The new head of the state's Department of Public Safety.

"Uh-oh."

"You got that right. How soon can you get in?"

"Fifteen minutes," Lucas said. "What's up?"

"Tell you when you get here. Hurry. Oh—is Weather still there?"

"Just getting ready to leave."

"Let me talk to her."

Lucas handed the phone to Weather and at the same time said, "Rose Marie. Something happened, I gotta run."

Weather took the phone, said, "Hello," listened for a moment, and then said, "Yes, Lucas gave it to me. I think we'll start tonight. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I don't think we'll skip any of it, I was listening to the Japanese flute last night . . ."

While they were talking, Lucas went to the front closet and got his overcoat and briefcase. He took his .45 out of the briefcase and clipped it on his belt, and pulled the coat on, listening to Weather talk to his boss. Rose Marie subscribed to a theory that children became smarter if they were exposed to classical music as fetuses, continuing until they were, say, forty-five. She'd found a set of records made specifically for infants. Weather had swallowed the whole thing, and was about to start the program.

"I'm going," Lucas called to her, when he had his coat on.

Weather said, "Wait, wait . . ." and then, to the phone, "I've got to say good-bye to Lucas. Talk to you tonight." She hung up and came over to Lucas and stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the lips. "She said you'd be going out of town. So . . ."

"Oh, boy," Lucas said. He kissed her again, and then went over and kissed Sam on the top of his head. "See you all."

RUNNING A FEW MINUTES later than the fifteen he'd promised, Lucas Davenport walked a long block down St. Paul's Wabasha Street, toward the former store that housed the state Depart-