

# JOHN SANDFORD

## HIDDEN PREY



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The background of the book cover is a black and white photograph of a rugged coastline. The image is split vertically by a thin white line. The left side shows a calm body of water meeting a rocky shore. The right side shows a steep, rocky cliff face. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

John Sandford

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

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G. P. Putnam's Sons  
*Publishers Since 1838*  
a member of  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc.  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, NY 10014

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ISBN 0-399-15180-X

Printed in the United States of America

THE TAG END of summer, in the very heart of the night.

Annabelle Ramford sat on a soggy piece of carpet, in a patch of goldenrod on the southernmost shore of Lake Superior, a huge butter-ball moon rising to the east. A bottle of New York pinot noir was wedged securely between her thighs. She was warm, comfortable, at peace, and a little drunk, bathed in the odors of dead fish and diesel exhaust, ragweed, and the rancid sweat of her unwashed cotton shirt.

Annabelle's friends, if they were friends, called her Trey. She had shoulder-length reddish-blond hair, which hung straight and close to her skull because of the dirt in it; a deeply weathered face with feral green eyes; a knife-edged nose; and a too-slender, square-shouldered body, with the bones showing through. On her chin she carried what she thought of as her identifying mark—as in “Police said the body carried an identifying mark.”

The mark was a backwards-C-shaped scar, the product of a fight at the mission in Albuquerque. A bum named Buddy had bitten her, and when she'd gotten up off the floor, she was dripping blood and missing a piece of chin. Buddy, she believed, had swallowed it. She almost sympathized: when you're a bum, you get your protein where you can.

Like Buddy, Annabelle Ramford was a bum.

Or maybe a bummess.

A long and exceptionally strange trip, she thought, growing philo-

sophical with the wine. She'd grown up well-to-do and thoroughly educated—had sailed boats on Superior, which was why she returned to Duluth in the summer. After private schools in St. Paul, she'd gone to the University of Minnesota, where she'd majored in sociology, and then on to law school, where she'd majored in marijuana and gin-and-tonic. She'd graduated, though, and her father's influence had gotten her a job with the Hennepin County public defender's office, interviewing gang-bangers at the height of the crack plague.

Crack. She could close her eyes and feel it lifting her out of herself. She'd loved crack as she'd loved no human being. Crack had cost her first the job, then all her square friends, and finally her parents, who'd given her up for lost. Even at the end, even when she was fucking the crack man, it had seemed like a reasonable trade.

When she finally woke up, four years after she went on the pipe, she had no life and three STDs, though she'd somehow avoided HIV. She'd been traveling ever since.

*A strange trip, growing ever stranger . . .*

STRAIGHT NORTH OF her spot on the working harbor shore, she could see the bobbing anchor-light of a sailboat, and beyond it, the street and house lights stretching along Minnesota Point, the narrow spit of land across the mouth of the harbor. Though the boat was five hundred yards away, she could hear the tinkling and clanking of hardware against the aluminum mast, and, every once in a while, a snatch of music, Sinatra or Tony Bennett, and a woman's laughter.

Overhead, a million stars. Off to her right, another million stars, closer, larger, more colorful—the night lights of Duluth, sliding north along the hill.

A dying summer, and cool. The breeze off the lake had teeth. The day before, Trey'd scored a Czechoslovakian Army coat at the Goodwill store, and she tugged the wool collar up around her throat. Superior's water temperature didn't get much above fifty degrees, even at midsummer, and you could always feel the winter in the wind. But with the coat, she was warm, inside and out.

She took a pull of the wine, wiped her lips on the back of her free hand, savored the thick grape flavor. *A month*, she thought.

Another month here and she'd start moving again. Back to Santa Monica for the winter. Didn't like Santa Monica. Too many bums. But you could freeze to death in Minnesota, no joke: get a skin full of whiskey and forget what you were doing, and the next morning the cops would find you in a doorway, frozen stiff, frozen in the L shape of the doorway. She'd seen it.

Still, for the time being, she had a good spot, a cubbyhole that was safe, obscure, sheltered, and free. Women transients had a tougher life than the men. Nobody wanted to rape some broken-down thirty-five-year-old bum with no teeth and a fourteen-inch beard and scabs all over him; but women, no matter how far down they'd gone, had that secret spot that some guy always wanted to get into, even if only to prove that he was still male, somehow, someway. To further prove it, half the time they weren't happy with simple rape; they had to beat the shit out of you.

Some women got so accustomed to it that they barely cared, but Trey wasn't that far down. Scrape away the dirt and she didn't look too bad. She still worked, sometimes, waitressing, fry-cook jobs, rent-a-maid stuff. Hadn't ever quite gotten to the point of selling herself. Not technically, anyway.

Here in Duluth, she had a nice routine. The morning bus driver with the route along Garfield Avenue—his name was Tony—would let her ride into town for free. There were good safe public bathrooms at the downtown mall, and after cleaning up, she'd get up to the Miller Hill Mall to do a little subtle panhandling, avoiding security, picking just the right guys: *Got a dollar? Got a dollar, please?* She'd perfected the waif look, the thin high cheekbones and starving green eyes. Some days she cleared fifty dollars. Try doing that in Santa Monica.

She took another pull at the wine, leaned back, heard the sailboat woman laugh again. Then, a little later, something else.

Somebody coming.

CARL WALTHER SAT silently, his back against the side of the building, his senses straining into the night, the pistol cold in his hand. He could hear the elevator inside, moving grain up to the drop-pipe, and the rush of it into the ship's hold.

He'd waited like this before, in the dark, on an early-morning deer stand, listening for footfalls, trying to pick movement out of the gloom. As also happened in a deer stand, when he'd first found his ambush spot, he'd been all ears and eyes. As the minutes passed, other thoughts intruded: he thought he could feel bugs crawling on him; a mosquito whined past his ear. He needed a new job, something that didn't involve food—six months in a pizza joint was enough.

He thought about girls. Randy McAndrews, a jock-o three-letter guy, had been talking after gym class, Carl tolerated on the edge of the conversation, and he said Sally Umana had been cooling him off with blow jobs in the backroom of Cheeney's Drive-In. The account was greeted with a half dozen groans and muttered *bullshits*, but McAndrews swore it was the truth. Carl had groaned with the others but later that day had seen blond Sally in the hallway and had instantly grown a serious hard-on, which he had to conceal awkwardly with a notebook as he hiked through the school.

And thinking about it now, waiting in the dark, began to feel the same effect; the idea of that blond head bobbing up and down . . .

He heard a voice on the deck of the ship; a distant voice. He shifted position and strained into the night. Where the fuck was he? He pushed up his sleeve and looked at his watch: jeez—six minutes since the last check. Seemed more like an hour. Same as on a deer stand, waiting for dawn.

He was not exactly tense; not as tense as when he'd killed his first dog. He still thought about that, sometimes, the black-and-white pooch from the pound, out in the woods.

"Why are you killing the dog?" Grandpa asked.

"Because it's necessary to condition myself against the shock," he said. The response was a learned one, like the responses for a Boy Scout rank, or a First Communion exam.

"Exactly. When you are working as a weapon, you must focus. No pity, no regrets, no questions, because those things will slow you down. All the questions must be resolved into trust: your committee instructs you to act, and you do. That's your highest calling."

"Okay."

"Remember what Lenin said: 'There are no morals in politics: there is only expedience.'"

"Okay." Enough Lenin.

The old man said, "Now. Kill the dog."

He could remember licking his lips, working the slide on the pistol. The dog knew something was going on, looked up at him, small black eyes searching for compassion, not that it had gotten much in the pound. Then the dog turned away, as if it knew what was coming.

Carl shot him in the back of the head.

Not hard. Not hard at all; a certain satisfaction uncurled in his soul. That surprised him. The shock came a few minutes later, when they buried the dog. When he picked up the small body, it was still warm, but it was dead and there was no way to get it back. The dog was gone forever. He remembered looking back at the small grave and thinking, *Really?*

There'd been more dogs after that, and Carl's soul had hardened. He no longer dreaded the trips. He didn't enjoy it; he just didn't feel much at all.

Now he sat with his head down. Would a human be harder? He doubted it. He liked dogs better than he liked most people. And while the dog had been a test, this killing was absolutely necessary . . .

Then headlights played across the wasteland, amid the railroad tracks. A car bounced along a rutted track, then stopped a couple of hundred yards out. There was a light on the roof. A taxi. Carl slipped the safety on the pistol, felt the weight in his hand; kept his finger off the trigger, as he'd been trained.

RODION OLESHEV HAD been left in the dark.

The taxi turned away, the door locks snapped down, and it was gone, back to the hillside of light, back into town. Oleshev scowled at it: the taxi driver, a blockheaded Swede, according to his taxi license, wouldn't go any farther off-road. He might break a wheel in the dark, he'd said. He might fall in a hole. Fuckin' Swedes. The whole area was lousy with them.

Oleshev was a broad man in a black leather jacket, black denim jeans, and plain-toed military dress shoes. He hadn't shaved that morning and his two-day beard was a briar patch, chafing against his neck. He carried a black nylon briefcase. Inside were his seaman's



papers, a digital camera, a pair of Razor sunglasses, and a laptop computer.

The night was pretty, with the thinnest summer haze over the cool water of the lake, and the moon coming up, and he could clearly see the lights of a building six miles down the shoreline. Ahead of him, closer, only two hundred yards away, the bulk carrier *Potemkin* sat in a berth beneath the TDX terminal. The deck of the ship was bathed in floodlights, as it took on durum wheat from North Dakota.

There was a lot of light around, Oleshev thought; there just wasn't any where he was. The whole area south of the grain terminals was a semi-wasteland of dirt roads, waist-high weeds, railroad tracks and industrial detritus, all smelling of burned diesel. The moonlight didn't help, casting hard shadows everywhere, making holes look like bumps, and bumps like flat spots. Oleshev felt his way toward the *Potemkin*, stepping carefully; saw a shiny, knifelike streak in the dirt ahead of him, reached out with his toe, felt the steel rail of the first set of tracks.

"Fuck this place," he muttered out loud.

Oleshev was an unhappy man, thinking about the satellite call he'd have to make back to Russia. Things were more complicated than anyone had expected. The Circle at the SVR had expected either agreement or rejection, had been prepared to react with either money, as a gesture of goodwill, or blackmail. What they'd gotten was . . . bullshit.

What'd the old man say? "It is impossible to predict the time and progress of the revolution. It's governed by its own more or less mysterious laws . . ."

Vladimir Ilyich fuckin' Lenin. Oleshev spat into the weeds, thinking about it. Bullshit and more bullshit. The people here swam in it. They were *Communists*. How crazy was that? Somehow, they'd been expecting *Russians*, and they'd gotten *Communists*.

Politics complicated everything. He tripped again, swore into the quiet of the night, and stumbled on, cursing, scowling, toward the waiting ship.

OLESHEV HAD JUST stepped into the light, onto the concrete pad around the grain terminal, when another man moved out of the

shadows on the side of the terminal. The man stepped out backwards, and Oleshev saw that he was fumbling at his crotch, zipping up.

*Taking a leak:* the idea popped into Oleshev's head and he relaxed a half inch, enough that he wasn't ready. The man turned around and Oleshev saw the pink apple-cheeks and the blond hair and the thought flashed through his mind that the blond was a crewman, a member of the night watch who he'd not often seen coming across the Atlantic.

"Mr. Moshalov."

Not a crewman, not with those round, Swedish-sounding Os. The man's hand came up. Not to shake. He was holding a gun and Oleshev saw it and another thought flew through his mind, one word from his training: *Shout*.

Actually, what the manual said was *Try to relax but be prepared to move instantly. If you see that your captor intends to fire, shout at him, to distract him. Even if you are killed, perhaps your companions will gain from the edge you give them.*

A lot of horseshit, Oleshev had thought when he first read it. Let somebody else shout. Still, at the critical moment, he thought *Shout*, but before he could open his mouth, the other man shot him in the heart. Oleshev fell over backwards. His chest hurt, but his mind was okay for a few seconds, and his vision actually seemed better: there was lots of light now. Enough light that when the man stood over him and pointed the gun at his eyes, he could clearly see the O of the muzzle. He wanted to shout again.

Carl, who didn't know that he'd hit Oleshev in the heart, stepped forward and fired twice more, from short range, through the Russian's forehead. Unnecessary, but he didn't know that. He had the theory, but he didn't have the training.

TREY HAD HEARD Oleshev coming, stumbling through the weeds, muttering and grumbling.

There had been two or three people walking around the terminal in the past hour. She'd stayed out of sight in her hole with her bottle, invisible in the night, enjoying the lake. She yawned. When this one had gone up the ladder into the ship, she thought, she'd head back across the wasteland to the shack where she was crashing.

Her pad.

She'd found two whole rolls of bubble wrap in a Dumpster at the Goodwill store, and with a little duct tape, had made the most luxurious mattress out of it. Asleep on the bubble wrap, cocooned in an olive-drab army blanket, she could almost believe that she was back home. The best nights were the nights when it was raining, when the rain on the roof and the warmth of the bed made her feel cozy and snug. The problem with it was that when she was lonely, or bored, or stressed, she tended to pop the bubbles.

Now, sitting in her hole, she heard a man speak; and then a shot. She recognized the shot for what it was, though it wasn't loud. A *Bap!* like the noise made by a pellet gun. She stood up, thinking herself safe in the dark, her eyes just inches higher than the weeds around her.

A tall man, with fair hair, stood over another man, who was supine on the concrete slab. The tall man's face was turned toward her, and she registered his good looks. He pointed the pistol and fired twice more into the second man's head, *bap! bap!* The pistol had a bulbous barrel. A silencer? She'd only seen them in movies.

The killing had been cold, she thought. She shivered, lost her balance for a moment, caught herself. Stepped on piece of broken concrete, lost her balance again, and caught herself a second time. And made just enough noise to attract the attention of the killer.

His head came up, and he saw her—saw the light reflecting off her face—lifted the pistol and fired two quick shots at her. She saw the small flashes, but never heard the slugs go by, because she was already moving, running through the jumble of weeds and concrete along the bank, frantic to get away from the gun.

Moving just a fraction slower than she might have, had her hands been empty: but a bum and a drunk would never drop a half-full bottle of pinot, not if there was an alternative.

Behind her, a thrashing. Trey fell, saved the bottle by rolling, clambered to her feet, looked back, was shocked to see the killer only fifty feet away and closing. She ran, scrambling, heard him fall and cry out, ran some more, fell, smashed the bottle, cried, "Motherfucker," turned and saw him, still coming, even closer, saw him go down again, ran a

few more steps, the darkness now closing down like velvet, looked back, saw him coming, thirty feet away, catching her . . .

He stopped and fired again, and she imagined that the slug went through her hair; fired again, and now he was so close that she couldn't imagine him missing her, but he did. Running and shooting was hard, and he wasn't trained.

But he was going to catch her. She went down again, felt the rocks under her knees, and he was right there. She dug in her pocket. A helpless Mexican bum in Los Angeles, selling the last thing he owned so he could buy a little food, had given her a six-inch switchblade with a curved yellow plastic handle, for six dollars. She'd carried it for two years, more as a comfort than as a weapon, but now she dug it out, nearly dropped it, pushed the button and the blade sprang out, turned, desperate, not ready to die . . .

The killer was there, three feet away, and he pointed the gun at her and pulled the trigger . . . and nothing happened.

He said, almost conversationally, "Shit."

Trey went after him with the knife. She didn't like to fight, but she wasn't bad at it. Not for a woman her size. She knew to shout, too. She screamed, "I'm gonna cut your fuckin' face off, motherfucker . . ." and she was right at him, slashing at him, and he put up his gun arm to fend her off and she slashed his arm, and he screamed and backed away from her, and she went for his face.

He looked around, backed away, then said, "I'll come and get you." He turned and half ran, half walked, into the dark, back toward the lights of Garfield Avenue.

A minute passed, then another. Trey could hear her own heart beating, hear her breath, harsh, grating as she gasped for air. A car started, out in the wasteland between Garfield and the docks, and she saw the taillights, tall and vertical, with smaller lights below, a scarlet exclamation point.

SHE LOOKED AROUND: she was only a hundred feet from the dock. Her flight had gone almost nowhere, with all the falls on the rough ground. Still trying to catch her breath, her body trembling with

the adrenaline, she made her way slowly back to the dock. The knife was slippery in her grasp, and she thought it must be blood: she pushed the blade back into its groove with the heel of her hand, dropped the knife in her pocket, wiped her hands on her pants.

At the edge of the dock pad, she squatted in the weeds, looking around. No sign of anybody living, just the body stretched on the concrete. After a moment, scared, but powerfully tempted, she moved out of the weeds and then stole toward the body like a hungry cat looking for something to eat.

"Are you okay?" she called out loud. Stupid. The man in the leather coat was dead. She knew he was dead. She saw him killed. He lay unmoving, like a six-foot paperweight, like a leather-jacketed anvil, spread legged on the concrete.

She squatted next to him, groped under his hip for a wallet. There was a thickness there, but no wallet. Next she went into his jacket; and found a wallet, took it, shoved it into the briefcase that lay by the man's hand. She looked around again, stepped away toward the safety of the surrounding darkness, and felt again, in her mind, the sensation of thickness at the man's waist.

Looked around; a *nervous* cat.

Stole back, knelt again, fumbled at the dead man's belt buckle, uncinched it, unzipped his pants, felt . . . there. Another strap, elastic. She pulled it through her hands. She couldn't see it, but she could visualize it—she'd once had a belt like this of her own, given to her by her father for a postcollege trip to Italy. She found another buckle, freed it, and pulled hard. The man was heavy, but the money belt was made of slippery nylon, and she felt it coming free . . .

Got it. She was surprised by the weight of it. Couldn't be money, must be papers of some kind. The ship was Russian . . .

She moved away, carrying the belt and briefcase, slipping back into the dark. She was forty yards from the body when she heard somebody call from the top of the elevator: *Hey. HEY!* An American voice, not a Russian. She kept moving, faster now, deeper into the dark, choking back the panic.

HER SPOT WAS in an abandoned shed off Garfield, six hundred yards from the grain terminal, across the street from the Goodwill store. The shed's door and windows were heavily boarded. Two months earlier, she'd walked around the place, interested, but unsure of how she could get in without attracting the cops.

Then she'd seen the loose concrete blocks in the foundation on the back side of the building. She'd levered the blocks out, pulled herself beneath the shed, and found herself looking at the underside of a board floor. She'd gone back out, scouted the tracks until she found a convenient length of re-rod, and had come back and pried and pounded on the floor boards until she'd gotten inside.

Inside was perfect: empty, dry, and safe. Everything but a phone. The place smelled of creosote, like old railroad ties or phone poles, but she no longer noticed it.

NOW SHE PULLED her blocks out and crawled under the shed, up and inside. She had a pack, and inside the pack, an REI candle lantern. She lit it with a book match, then opened the wallet.

Holy shit. She fumbled the bills out, looked at them in wonder: tens, twenties, more than a dozen fifties. She counted: nine hundred and sixty dollars. She was rich.

She pried at other parts of the wallet, but it was full of cards in Russian, and a few photos, small color snaps of a dark-haired woman who looked like she came from a different time, from the fifties or sixties. But then, she thought, maybe that was what Russian women looked like.

And the money belt: papers of some kind, she thought.

She unzipped it and turned it, and thin bricks of cash began falling out. *Holy shit. Holy shit.* Hundreds. They were all hundreds, still in bank wrappers. She snapped the wrapper off one brick, and counted the bills in the pale yellow light of the candle. Fifty. She counted the bricks: ten. She had fifty thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills.

She sat motionless for a moment. People would be coming. They'd want the money. But no fuckin' way. Finders keepers. Her jaw tightened: the money was *hers*.

Trey looked around at her snug little spot, suddenly unattractive in the flickering candlelight. She'd been happy enough here, but now she had things to do, places to go. This place was history. Somebody might have seen her, the cops might be coming . . .

But she could handle all that, if she had a few minutes. She was a lawyer, for Christ's sake; she'd *lived* with criminals, and she'd worked with cops. She knew what to do. She was cleaning frantically when, far away, a siren started.

*Please God: Just a few minutes . . . just do this one thing for me.*

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, A workday off, thunderstorms rumbling to the southwest, the lawn already cut, the soft, pleasant odor of freshly mown grass and gasoline and clean sweat lying on his T-shirt . . .

Lucas Davenport sprawled on the couch, at peace, his head propped on a foam pillow, a Leinie's on the coffee table. Letty West, his twelve-year-old ward, was canoeing with a school group; his nine-month-old son slept quietly in his crib at the top of the stairs; the housekeeper was out shopping.

He was alone, and he was doing something he did only secretly, with guilty pleasure—he was watching TV golf, his mind floating like a hummingbird in the dim space between sleep and the British golf-announcer's hushed voice. This was the kind of quiet, private place where one might feel comfortable giving one's nuts a thorough scratch.

HE WAS DOING that when his wife drove through the garage door: WHANG!

The impact jammed the house like an earthquake.

The initial WHANG was followed a half second later by the screech of tearing metal, a second, smaller impact, and a sudden, short-lived silence. Into the short-lived silence, Lucas said, aloud, the heels of his



hands pressed into his eye sockets, "Jesus God, don't let it have landed on the fuckin' Porsche."

In the next half second, the kid started screaming from his crib upstairs, the phone began to ring, and all the pleasurable ambience, the golf, the odor of the grass and gasoline, vanished like a pickpocket in a subway station.

Given the sequence—the whang, the impact, the ripping noise, and the second impact, Lucas knew that his wife had just driven through the garage door, when the garage door was not entirely open. A few weeks earlier, he'd told her, "You keep coming in the driveway like that, you're gonna run into the garage door."

She sniffed: "I've got the reflexes of a surgeon." That was true, because she was one.

"Combined with the driving skills of an anteater," Lucas said. "You're gonna hit the garage door and rip it off the ceiling."

"Excuse me?" she said. "Why don't you worry about something real, like weapons of mass destruction?"

AS THE KID continued screaming and the phone continued ringing, Lucas launched himself from the couch and ran barefoot through the kitchen, ignoring both kid and phone, down the hallway to the garage access door. He burst into the garage and found his wife's Honda Prelude beneath the overhead door, which had come off the rails and dropped straight down onto her car. The Porsche, in the next stall, appeared to be untouched.

Inside the Honda, Weather was on her hands and knees, hands on the passenger seat, knees on the driver's seat, ass impolitely up in the air. The driver's-side car door was pinned by the wreckage of the overhead garage door, and she was trying to get out the passenger side. Lucas stepped around the green John Deere riding mower and pulled open the door. "Are you okay?"

Weather rarely cried. She considered crying an insult to the feminine mystique. But her lip trembled: "The door went up too slow."

Lucas had been married only a short time, but his history with women had been intense. He knew exactly what to say. He said,