

JOHN SANDFORD NIGHT PREY



JOHN
SANDFORD

NIGHT
PREY

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

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Also by John Sandford

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SHADOW PREY

EYES OF PREY

SILENT PREY

WINTER PREY

For Esther Newberg

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For Esther Newberg

The night was warm, the twilight inviting: middle-aged couples in pastel shirts, holding hands, strolled the old cracked sidewalks along the Mississippi. A gaggle of college girls jogged down the bike path, wearing sweatsuits and training shoes, talking as they ran, their uniformly blond ponytails bouncing behind them. At eight, the streetlights came on, whole blocks at once, with an audible pop. Overhead, above the new green of the elms, nighthawks made their *skizzizk* cries, their wing-flashes like the silver bars on new first-lieutenants.

Spring was shading into summer. The daffodils and tulips were gone, while the petunias spread across their beds like Mennonite quilts.

Koop was on the hunt.

He rolled through the residential streets in his Chevy S-10, radio tuned to Country-Lite, his elbow out the window, a bottle of Pig's Eye beer between his thighs. The soft evening air felt like a woman's fingers, stroking his beard.

At Lexington and Grand, a woman in a scarlet jacket crossed in front of him. She had a long, graceful neck, her dark hair up in a bun, her high heels rattling on the blacktop. She was too confident, too lively, moving too quickly; she was some-

body who knew where she was going. Not Koop's type. He moved on.

Koop was thirty-one years old, but at any distance, looked ten or fifteen years older. He was a short, wide man with a sharecropper's bitter face and small, suspicious gray eyes; he had a way of looking at people sideways. His strawberry-blond hair was cut tight to his skull. His nose was pinched, leathery, and long, and he wore a short, furry beard, notably redder than his hair. His heavy shoulders and thick chest tapered to narrow hips. His arms were thick and powerful, ending in rocklike fists. He had once been a bar brawler, a man who could work up a hate with three beers and a mistimed glance. He still felt the hate, but controlled it now, except on special occasions, when it burned through his belly like a welding torch. . . .

Koop was an athlete, of a specialized kind. He could chin himself until he got bored, he could run forty yards as fast as a professional linebacker. He could climb eleven floors of fire stairs without breathing hard.

Koop was a cat burglar. A cat burglar and a killer.



Koop knew all the streets and most of the alleys in Minneapolis and St. Paul. He was learning the suburbs. He spent his days driving, wandering, looking for new places, tracking his progress through the spiderweb of roads, avenues, streets, lanes, courts, and boulevards that made up his working territory.

Now he drifted down Grand Avenue, over to Summit to the St. Paul Cathedral, past a crack dealer doing business outside the offices of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, and down the hill. He drove a couple of laps around United Hospitals, looking at the nurses on their way to their special protected lot—a joke, that. He looked in at antique stores along West Seventh, drove past the Civic Center, and then curled down Kellogg Boulevard to Robert Street, left on Robert, checking the dashboard clock. He was early. There were two or three bookstores downtown, but only one that interested him. The Saint had a reading scheduled. Some shit about Prairie Women.

The Saint was run by a graying graduate of St. John's University. Books new and used, trade your paperbacks two-for-one. Coffee was twenty cents a cup, get it yourself, pay on the honor system. A genteel meat-rack, where shy people went to get laid. Koop had been inside the place only once. There'd been a poetry reading, and the store had been populated by long-haired women with disappointed faces—Koop's kind of women—and men with bald spots, potbellies, and tentative gray ponytails tied with rubber bands.

A woman had come up to ask, "Have you read the *Rubaiyat*?"

"Uh . . . ?" What was she talking about?

"*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*? I just read it again," she babbled. She had a thin book in her hand, with a black poetical cover. "The Fitzgerald translation. I hadn't read it since college. It really touched me. In some ways it's analogous to the poems that James was reading tonight."

Koop didn't give a shit about James or his poems. But the question itself, *Have you read the Rubaiyat?* had a nice ring to it. Intellectual. A man who'd ask that question, *Have you read the Rubaiyat?*, would be . . . safe. Thoughtful. Considerate.

Koop hadn't been in the market for a woman that night, but he took the book and tried to read it. It was bullshit. Bullshit of such a high, unadulterated order that Koop eventually threw it out his truck window because it made him feel stupid to have it on the seat beside him.

He threw the book away, but kept the line: *Have you read the Rubaiyat?*



Koop crossed I-94, then recrossed it, circling. He didn't want to arrive at the bookstore until the reading had begun: he wanted people looking at the reader, not at him; what he was doing tonight was out of his careful pattern. He couldn't help it—the drive was irresistible—but he would be as careful as he could.

Back across the interstate, he stopped at a red light and looked out the window at the St. Paul police station. The sum-

mer solstice was only two weeks away, and at eight-thirty, there was light enough to make out faces, even at a distance. A group of uniformed cops, three men, a couple of women, sat talking on the steps, laughing about something. He watched them, not a thing in his mind, just an eye. . . .

The car behind him honked.

Koop glanced in the left mirror, then the right, then up at the light: it had turned green. He glanced in the rearview mirror again and started forward, turning left. In front of him, a group of people started across the street, saw him coming, stopped.

Koop, looking up, saw them and jammed on his brakes, jerking to a halt. When he realized they'd stopped, he started through the turn again; and when they saw him stop, they started forward, into the path of the truck. In the end, they scattered, and Koop swerved to miss a barrel-shaped man in coveralls who was not quite agile enough to get out of the way. One of them shouted, an odd cawing sound, and Koop gave him the finger.

He instantly regretted it. Koop was the invisible man. He didn't give people the finger, not when he was hunting or working. He checked the cops, still a half block away. A face turned toward him, then away. He looked in the rearview mirror. The people in the street were laughing now, gesturing to each other, pointing at him.

Anger jumped up in his stomach. "Faggots," he muttered. "Fuckin'-A fags. . . ."

He controlled it, continued to the end of the block, and took a right. A car was easing out of a parking place across the street from the bookstore. Perfect. Koop did a U-turn, waited for the other car to get out, backed in, locked the truck.

As he started across the street, he heard the cawing sound again. The group he'd almost hit was crossing the end of the block, looking toward him. One of them gestured, and they made the odd cawing sound, laughed, then passed out of sight behind a building.

"Fuckin' assholes." People like that pissed him off, walk-

ing on the street. Ass-wipes, he oughta . . . He shook a Camel out of his pack, lit it, took a couple of angry drags, and walked hunch-shouldered down the sidewalk to the bookstore. Through the front window, he could see a cluster of people around a fat woman, who appeared to be smoking a cigar. He took a final drag on the Camel, spun it into the street, and went inside.

The place was crowded. The fat woman sat on a wooden chair on a podium, sucking on what turned out to be a stick of licorice, while two dozen people sat on folding chairs in a semicircle in front of her. Another fifteen or twenty stood behind the chairs; a few people glanced at Koop, then looked back at the fat woman. She said, “There’s a shocking moment of recognition when you start dealing with shit—and call it what it is, good Anglo-Saxon words, horseshit and pig shit and cow shit; I’ll tell you, on those days when you’re forkin’ manure, the first thing you do is rub a little in your hair and under your arms, really rub it in. That way, you don’t have to worry about getting it on yourself, you can just go ahead and work. . . .”

At the back of the store, a sign said “Photography,” and Koop drifted that way. He owned an old book called *Jungle Fever*, with pictures and drawings of naked black women. The book that still turned him on. Maybe he’d find something like that. . . .

Under the “Photography” sign, he pulled down a book and started flipping pages. Barns and fields. He looked around, taking stock. Several of the women had that “floating” look, the look of someone reaching for connections, of not really being tuned to the author, who was saying, “. . . certain human viability from hand-hoeing beans; oh, gets hot, sometimes so hot that you can’t spit. . . .”

Koop was worried. He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t be hunting. He’d had a woman last winter, and that should have been enough, for a while. *Would* have been enough, if not for Sara Jensen.

He could close his eyes and see her. . . .