

JOHN SANDFORD #1 *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A LUCAS DAVENPORT AND
VIRGIL FLOWERS NOVEL

**JUDGMENT
PREY**

ALSO BY JOHN SANDFORD

Rules of Prey

Shadow Prey

Eyes of Prey

Silent Prey

Winter Prey

Night Prey

Mind Prey

Sudden Prey

Secret Prey

Certain Prey

Easy Prey

Chosen Prey

Mortal Prey

Naked Prey

Hidden Prey

Broken Prey

Invisible Prey

Phantom Prey

Wicked Prey

Storm Prey

Buried Prey

Stolen Prey

Silken Prey

Field of Prey

Gathering Prey

Extreme Prey

Golden Prey

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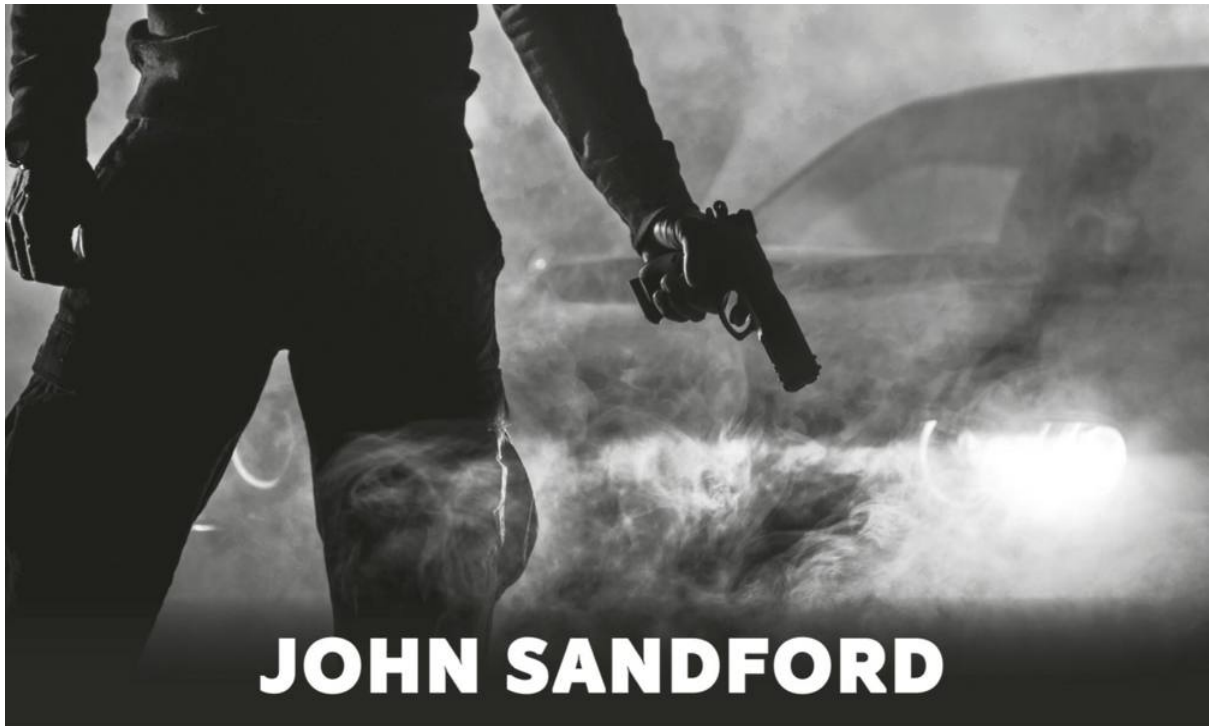
Saturn Run (with Ctein)

BY JOHN SANDFORD AND MICHELE COOK

Uncaged

Outrage

Rampage



JOHN SANDFORD

JUDGMENT
PREY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK



PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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A sullen wedge of gunmetal-colored clouds rolled in from the west, autumn's jackboot crunching down on the Twin Cities. A cold breeze sent fallen leaves skittering along the darkened October streets as a flash of blackbirds passed above the treetops, heading south.

Alex Sand was in the side yard with his boys, Blaine and Arthur, shooting baskets under a yard light. The storm was coming fast. They could smell it, taste it, they could hear the trees bending at the wind front; the falling temperature prickled their skin.

Arthur, the younger son, rolled behind his father who was throwing a pick at Blaine, but Blaine, instead of challenging the pick, rolled the other way and met Arthur coming around, stole the ball, dribbled it once and laid it into the basket.

He rebounded his own shot, made a face at Art and called, "Hey, piggy, piggy, piggy . . ."

Arthur, who still carried what the family called "baby fat," shouted, "Shut up, you fuck," and both boys took boxing stances, feigning an intention to duke it out right there, with bare fists.

Alex: "Hey, hey, hey . . . knock it off, both of you. If I hear that word again, Art, I will . . . tell your mother."

They all laughed at the toothless threat. Alex took the ball from his son, looked up at the darkening sky, and said, "We should get in. It's coming."

They hurried around to the front of the house, shoulders hunched against the first fat drops of cold rain, up the steps across the porch and inside.

They were trailed by the killer, who moved unseen from behind a privet hedge. The killer wore a dark hooded rain suit, glasses, a black Covid mask and thin vinyl gloves. Alex and the kids were only a dozen steps ahead as they went through the door.

The doorbell was right there, but . . . the door wasn't fully shut. The killer pushed it with a knuckle and as the door swung open, stepped inside. The gun was out and ready. With his off hand, he pushed the door closed behind him.

In the living room, Alex's back was to the killer. Arthur saw the intruder, eyes widened in what might have been recognition, as the killer lifted the gun and fired two shots into Alex's back. Alex staggered and went down.

The boys tried to run, twisting, screaming, stumbling but the gun was right there, only six feet away. The killer shot Arthur first, in the hip, and the boy fell, crying out; Blaine was a step farther away, running toward the kitchen, and the killer shot him in the neck.

Alex had been hit low, and lay face-down on the Persian carpet, one hand blindly groping toward the ebony leg of the grand piano. The killer moved close, and shot him twice more in the back, through the heart. The boys were next, one shot each, the gun dangling from the killer's hand, only eight or ten inches from the boys' heads.

In the deafening silence after the murders, the killer heard the baby begin to cry in a side room used as a day nursery. He went that way. The baby looked up from her bassinet, little blue eyes hazy, lips stretched open and wide, the better to scream, as the killer hovered over her. . . .

A nightmare.



LIKE ANOTHER ONE, on the very same day, full of the thunder of guns and the scent of blood on the ground.

Lucas Davenport crashed through a hedge and fired two off-balance shots at a fleeing killer who was too far away for his shotgun. The killer stopped, turned, and fired a long fully automatic burst back at him and Lucas was not too far away for an AR-15.

A bullet hit Lucas's right arm like a blow from a baseball bat and he windmilled the arm backwards as he went down. He screamed, "I'm down, I'm hit." He struggled to get back up, but his right arm hung uselessly. Pushing up with his left, he put the butt of the shotgun on the snow and used his good hand to jack a shell into the chamber.

Virgil Flowers ran up and shouted, “How bad?” and Lucas shouted back, “Go get him . . .” Again on his feet, his right arm flopping at his side, Lucas went after the killer, following Virgil, heard Virgil’s shotgun booming in the night, and he kept going, shouted, “Virgil! Coming up behind!”

Virgil shouted something at him and Lucas saw Virgil was bleeding from a head wound, but they both went on, encountered an FBI agent hovering over a wounded agent, kept going.

Virgil was dragging one leg. Lucas realized that he’d been hit there, too, and they went on and then the killer turned again and unloaded another full magazine at them and Lucas got hit in the chest and leg and went down again, and this time, he didn’t try to get back up.

He heard more shooting, Virgil’s shotgun once, twice, and he thought, *Got him*, and then blacked out for a moment, came back, looking up at the bare branches of an overhanging maple tree, and the pain came.

The pain came like an ocean wave and dimmed his sight. He groaned, once, and sputtered, and it occurred to him that he might be dying. There was a scuffling nearby, and he turned his head, and saw Virgil crawling across the thin, hard-crusting snow.

He said, he thought, “Help me,” as Virgil’s face loomed, close, inches above his eyes, and he saw that Virgil was bleeding heavily from the head wound, the blood rolling down his face and into his eyes.

Virgil’s face hovered and he asked again, “How bad?”
“I dunno . . .” And . . . blackout.

AN ACTUAL NIGHTMARE.

When Lucas opened his eyes, he was almost pain-free, though there was an ache in his right shoulder. He was lying on his own bed, in St. Paul. He was warm, safe.

Sweating. He could feel the sweat on his forehead and cheekbones without touching it. He groaned, “Jesus Christ.”

He’d never quite pooh-poohed the idea of post-traumatic stress disorder and the flashbacks that came with it, but somewhere in the back of his

hockey defenseman brain, he really thought PTSD mostly applied to guys who weren't quite tough enough.

He no longer thought that.

HE LAY IN bed for a while, angry at himself for the flashback. He should, he believed, be able to get past them, if only he had the willpower. He also knew he was wrong about that, but couldn't help believing it anyway.

His wife, Weather Karkinnen, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon, had gone to work before dawn, as she usually did, leaving behind a stack of pillows that smelled lightly of her overnight lotion, a floral scent, maybe wild roses.

He sighed, rolled over, winced as his weight pressed on his injured shoulder, patted Weather's pillow for reassurance that everything was okay. With his feet on the floor, he sat checking for chest pain—almost gone, unless he put pressure on his rib cage—and leg pain. A series of X-rays the previous month confirmed that the leg bone had healed, with a slight deformity that the docs said wasn't important. Lucas wasn't sure he agreed: it still hurt when he jogged.

In the bathroom, he showered, shaved, and inspected himself in the mirror. He was a tall, square-shouldered man, two inches over six feet, with crystalline blue eyes and dark hair now threaded with gray. The gray was gaining but was not yet dominant.

He could see a fresh puckered scar from a bullet wound outside his right nipple, and another bullet scar in the muscle of his right arm, and a pink, six-inch-long surgical scar up the ball of his right shoulder. He had exit wounds on the back of his arm and on his right shoulder blade, another two bullet scars and a surgical scar on his lower right leg, but couldn't see those, only feel them.

He looked too thin. Lucas had two basic body styles: the square, two-hundred-pound light heavyweight boxer style, and the thinner, hundred-and-ninety-pound iron-man style. Usually, when he looked thin, he also looked tough, leathery, because he was training hard. Nothing like a fast, hard five miles before breakfast, his thinner self believed.

Now, at a hundred and eighty-five pounds, he looked too thin, and yet, puffy. Too much time on a couch, watching CNN or clicking through the streaming videos, eating Wheat Thins. He enjoyed working out, running hard, sweating hard, and had, all of his life. He hadn't been able to do either for almost nine months. In late July, with approval from the docs, he'd joined a local gym, started doing some lifting and treadmill work.

It helped, and it hurt.

THIS MORNING, AFTER he'd cleaned up, he dressed in jeans, a University of Minnesota sweatshirt, and cross-training shoes. He ate a bowl of microwave oatmeal with a shot of whey protein, spent an hour reading five online newspapers and checking his stock portfolio on Morningstar. When he finished the last of the papers, he went for a walk to a Target store, as much for human contact as for the shopping. He carried an old-fashioned wooden-crook cane that he'd bought at a drugstore, just in case.

A DEPUTY U.S. MARSHAL, Lucas had been shot the previous winter, during a chase through a fashionable suburb on Long Island. He couldn't believe his luck—both the good and the bad.

The shooter had been using solid core military ammunition, probably because his target would be standing behind triple-pane glass, and he'd worried that the instant expansion of hunting or defensive ammunition might deflect after the initial impact on the windows. Whether he was right or wrong about that, he'd efficiently killed the man standing behind the glass.

In the subsequent chase, he'd shot Lucas three times, using an AR-15 equipped with a bump stock, which effectively made it into a fully automatic weapon—a machine gun.

The first shot had hit Lucas's right arm and gone cleanly through, knocking him down in the process. The docs at the Long Island hospital had told him that when he was hit, he'd probably windmilled his arm backwards to break the fall and protect his head, and the impact with the frozen ground, not the bullet itself, had caused the bone to snap below his

shoulder. That break was fixed in an operation that fitted a titanium collar around the bone, the collar held in place with eleven titanium screws.

So, three bullet wounds and a broken arm. Bad luck that he'd been shot at all; good luck that the slugs were solid, and the wounds hadn't been more serious. If he'd been hit with expanding hunting or defensive rounds, he most likely would have been killed or crippled.

Bad luck again that all three wounds were on the same side of his body. He hadn't been able to comfortably use crutches on that side, where he most needed the support, and he'd spent three weeks in a wheelchair.

The shooter himself was dead, having been shot by both Lucas and by Lucas's partner, Virgil Flowers. Virgil had been shot as well, hit in the thigh, but hadn't been hurt as badly as Lucas.

Good luck again, for them, anyway.

The shooter had killed a right-wing radio talk-show host, and two FBI agents. He'd wounded a third agent, a woman who'd been hit in the stomach, and who'd retired with a permanent disability. That's what a machine gun will do, when you don't know it's coming, and you get too close. Lucas and Virgil had gotten off easy, compared to the others.

Now, in early October, Lucas still hurt, especially at night. He'd had three months of physical therapy following the shooting, but didn't yet have full range of motion in his right arm, and he'd lost muscle from lack of exercise. The broken arm bone itself was largely healed, though he had continuous, nagging shoulder pain where the surgeons had cut through muscle to fix the bone. He'd played senior hockey for years, but now he couldn't skate, he had no slap shot.

He had additional significant pain in his upper right rib cage, especially when he lay down and his rib cage flexed. In the days after the gunfight, it had hurt simply to breathe; his breathing was now mostly pain-free, but sleeping wasn't, nor was anything but the most careful sex.

His lower leg was healed, but still complained when he tried to jog more than a few blocks. He was pushing that, both on the gym's treadmills and on the street.

Because he couldn't help himself.

ALMOST AS TROUBLING as the pain was the depression that came with the long recovery and confinement. At night, slipping in and out of a restless sleep, he would dream—or sometimes, he thought, simply remember—Virgil looking down at him as he lay on the ground, not knowing if he was dying.

Virgil's head wound, and blood-covered face, was the result of a slug that had hit a tree branch a half-inch above his head, blowing splinters into his scalp. The wound had bled like crazy but turned out to be not serious, although, Virgil told him, it had itched ferociously for two months. Lucas didn't know at the time that the wound wasn't serious, and he didn't know it in his flashbacks or dreams, either, and reexperienced the fear that Virgil had been shot in the head.

AT THE TARGET store, he browsed grooming supplies, lotions, and disposable razors. When he returned home, he popped a Vicodin and hobbled back to the TV room, where he dropped onto the couch, put his legs up on an ottoman—Weather refused to allow a La-Z-Boy in the house—and called up the streaming series called *Justified*. The main character was a deputy U.S. Marshal named Raylan Givens, who was apparently in the process of shooting everybody.

More interesting, for Lucas, was that he was close to an actual deputy U.S. Marshal named Rae Givens, though she'd never be mistaken for Raylan, as she was taller, black, and female. Lucas shared his interest in the streaming series with his adoptive daughter, Letty, who worked with the Department of Homeland Security as an investigator. They were texting daily, both appreciations and criticisms. He was still on the couch, watching a third consecutive episode, when Weather called.

"I've got a problem," she said.

LIKE THIS:

As Lucas was sinking into the couch, a six-year-old first-grader at St. Paul's Friedrich Nietzsche Elementary School had fibbed about his urgent need to visit the boys' room. Although his newly minted teacher had

suspected that he was plotting to get out of the phonics lesson, she'd been so harried that she let him go with a stern warning to return as soon as he'd completed his mission.

He'd taken his time getting down the hall, taken his time using the low-hung urinal, carefully zipped up afterward—he'd already experienced the male affliction of an overly hasty zip-up—and on the way back to his classroom, poked his head into the open door of the teachers' prep room. There was a lot of interesting stuff in the prep room, including, unfortunately, a fascinating guillotine-style paper cutter.

That morning, Weather had done a rhinoplasty, which she would not allow Lucas to call a "nose job." From her office window at the University of Minnesota Hospitals, she'd seen the hints of the incoming storm, not dangerous billowing orange clouds, like a summer thunderstorm, that might be hiding a tornado, but dark and murky, the arrival of autumn, several weeks late.

After lunch she'd harvested skin from a man's thigh and moved it to his forearm, to cover up the excision of cancer tissue that had been taken out earlier.

The skin graft was the last op on her schedule. That done, she'd changed out of her scrubs, into street dress, and returned to her office. Her assistant, Alice, was in her cubicle, on the phone to a prospective patient, while Weather met with a friend, an associate professor of history, about the pros and cons of breast-reduction surgery.

They'd gotten to the question of whether the professor's husband's desires were relevant, when a plastic surgery resident knocked twice, hard, on the office door then burst in without waiting to be invited.

"We got a good one," he crowed, excited, his voice like a truck horn, urgent, hoarse, too loud. "Elementary school kid chopped off three fingers of his dominant hand with a paper cutter. A teacher's aide picked up the fingers and iced them. Happened a half hour ago. They're on the way. Bulthorpe told me to get you. He's putting together a team, whoever he can find. I'm on it."

Weather said, "Oh, shit," and to the associate professor, "We'll continue this later, Marie, but my bottom line is, you wouldn't regret it."

The prof said, "Go! Go!"

Weather went. Not to her first rodeo. On the way to the OR, she called Lucas, to tell him that she wouldn't be home for dinner, and probably not until after midnight.

As she talked, she could hear the television in the background: *More Justified*. She told him what she knew about the incoming emergency, as briefly as she could. She added: "How bad are you?"

"Not bad," Lucas said.

"On a one-to-ten scale?"

"Nagging. Maybe a two. I'm going to push it a little," he said.

"Not too much. Don't hurt yourself," Weather warned.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go take care of the kid."

"You know where the Vicodin is." And she was gone, dropping down a stairwell to the women's locker room.

The kid arrived on a gurney, conscious and hurting, his father racing into the hospital a few minutes behind him, his mother five minutes behind her husband. Nurses and orderlies moved the kid into the OR as the suits took care of the paperwork, and Weather, another plastic surgeon named Senat Morat, and two residents scrubbed up. Morat was very good, but Weather was the queen of the OR.

Over the next nine hours, the two surgeons, with assistance from the residents, an anesthesiologist and an anesthetist, two surgical techs, and three nurses, put the fingers back on. They first removed smashed tissue that couldn't be saved, trimmed the bones as little as possible, located and spliced tiny arteries and veins to get blood in and out, and rejoined nerves to make the fingers work.

The kid had been given a general anesthetic, knew nothing after he'd been wheeled into the OR, in pain, in shock, scared with pleading eyes. The gas passers were in and out during the entire procedure, watching the kid's heart and lung function.

Not exactly routine, but it wouldn't make the evening news, either.

FOR LUCAS, THE afternoon after Weather's call went like most days since the Long Island fire: alone, bored, reading, watching television,

suppressing the impulse to whine. He had friends, but they worked, and he wasn't feeling social.

He'd talked to Virgil every few days since the shootings, but Virgil had recovered, lived a hundred miles away, had a girlfriend, two toddlers, a dog, and horses, all of whom needed tending, and was chasing small-town criminals while writing a second novel and nervously awaiting the publication of his first.

Too busy to talk much.

Weather was usually home by three o'clock so they could eat dinner with the kids, or go out, but this day she wouldn't be back until late. He needed her to break up the feeling of loneliness, and to bend his mind away from the depression that had come sniffing around.

A run would be the thing, he thought, bored with the TV. He'd push it. Challenge the pain.

He put on a sweat suit, locked the house, and jogged north on the bike path across the street. He'd made most of a mile before he got back, happier, sweating, but his bad leg was on fire.

He popped another Vicodin, showered, and was back in the TV room when the kids got home from school, with Ellen, their live-in housekeeper, who'd gone to fetch them.

Gabrielle, the youngest, came to say hello. She had a cello lesson in two hours and hadn't practiced, so she was going to do that. Sam followed her in, chewing on a peanut butter sandwich, and said he was hooking up with his friend Jedediah to shoot baskets.

Lucas: "Shoot baskets down his basement on NBA 2K?"

"We're talking a lot about plays and strategy," Sam said, tap-dancing around the question. "Mrs. Clark asked if I wanted to stay for dinner and I said I'd ask you."

Right. He was talking about playing NBA 2K down the Clarks' basement. Lucas said Mrs. Clark was okay to feed him, and off he went. Gabrielle was sawing away on her cello in the family room, and Ellen would take her to practice and bring her back.

At five o'clock that afternoon, a bank of gunmetal clouds drifted in from the southwest, and his weather app said it would rain later in the day. Despite the pain in his leg, he decided to go for another walk, and did that,

shambling along, stopping to chat with a neighbor and the neighbor's German shepherd. He could smell the rain coming, but it hadn't yet arrived.

He made himself a microwave dinner and went back to the couch, switching between a John Connolly novel and West Coast baseball. Gabrielle got home from her cello lesson and talked on her cell phone to an endless list of girlfriends while she allegedly did homework.

Sam got home and hit the refrigerator, saying that Mrs. Clark had served her famous zucchini fettuccine—he stuck his index finger down his throat to illustrate his opinion of the food—and went to work on his math before he headed to bed.

As Sam went up to his room, the Sands were being murdered five miles away.

LUCAS WAS WATCHING CNN at ten o'clock when his phone rang: Edie Lamb, U.S. Marshal for the Minnesota District. Lucas looked at the phone screen and said, "Huh."

Lamb only called in off-hours when she wanted something. She wouldn't be calling to console him at ten o'clock at night, unless she was drunk. She did drink a bit, and sometimes, when sufficiently hammered, wanted to share her philosophical ideas about a life well spent.

He clicked on his phone and said, "Hey, Edie. What's up?"

Lamb: "How are you feeling?"

Lucas, wary about whatever was coming: "I hurt a little all of the time. I hurt a lot some of the time."

"Gotta be tough," Lamb said, in the tone she used for insincerity. Lucas and Lamb liked each other; she'd replaced a marshal who didn't like Lucas at all. "Could you work?"

"Not if it involves fighting someone," Lucas said. So she wasn't calling about a life well spent. "Or long-distance running."

"How about brain work?"

"Nothing wrong with my brain, except that I'm still a cop," Lucas said. "I'd rather not travel. . . . What happened?"

“A federal judge and two of his three children were murdered a couple of hours ago in St. Paul. Close enough that you might have heard the sirens. They live up on Crocus Circle.” Still using the present tense, for the newly dead. Everybody did it.

“Not that close,” Lucas said. Crocus Circle was a wealthy twig off the slightly less wealthy Crocus Hill. He’d muted the television; now he picked up the remote and killed it. “Which judge?”

“Alex Sand . . .”

“Ho . . . man. Good guy, as far as I know,” Lucas said. “Since you’re calling, I’d guess the killer’s on the loose?”

“Yes. There’s a lot of verbiage being thrown around, but reading between the lies and bullshit, I’d say they haven’t got a clue who did it.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“St. Paul cops, BCA, FBI. The usual. The locals will do the investigating as part of a task force, but the FBI will keep the hammer. We’ll be observing. Not investigating. Yet. I’d like you to take a look. I’m all the way over in Minnetonka, with friends, finishing up a late dinner. I might have had a few. I’d appreciate it if you could get over there, show the flag. You still in a wheelchair?”

“No. Not for months. You sound a little pissed. I mean, pissed off, not drunk.”

“I’m a little pissed both ways. Alex was a friend of mine,” Lamb said. “He’s got, had, nice kids. I talked to the FBI agent in charge, and he wouldn’t tell me anything because, I suspect, he didn’t know anything. I called the St. Paul chief and he confirmed my suspicion. I have some bare facts: the three of them were shot. Eight shots, four for Alex, two each for the boys.”

“Since he was a friend of yours, I assume he was rich?”

“That’s an insulting suggestion, Davenport, imputing to me a selection process for choosing friends that is not at all valid,” Lamb said, slurring the longer words. “I know poor people, and you’re a friend of mine, so . . . oh, wait, *you’re* rich. I’d forgotten.”

“From the way you’re avoiding the question, I assume that I guessed correctly: he’s rich,” Lucas said.

“Yes. Alex is quite well-off. Was. Why does that matter?”

“Because it suggests a motive. Somebody might have killed him because of his money. Because of his money one way or another. So, what do you think? What was he into? Cocaine, hookers, gambling . . . ?”

“None of those. He might have smoked a little weed back in law school, but who didn’t? I don’t think anything more than that, and not anymore,” Lamb said. “From what I could tell, his marriage is solid. No fooling around.”

“No hidden boyfriends?”

“I doubt it. He has always been . . . almost intolerably straight. Like me.”

Right. Lucas knew—and she knew he knew—that she’d once been caught by her then-husband getting her bourbon-fueled brains banged loose by Elmer Henderson, a former governor and now the junior U.S. senator from Minnesota.

At the time, she’d been the number three bureaucrat in the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. Henderson’s influence had later gotten her the appointment as U.S. Marshal for the District of Minnesota.

Lucas assumed that she continued to be one of Henderson’s intimate diversions. Lucas didn’t care about that. And Lucas wouldn’t admit it to Lamb, for reasons of bureaucratic self-protection, but he was immediately interested in the Sand murders. “I’m still in quite a bit of pain,” he said, piously.

“Ah, for Christ’s sakes, suck it up, Lucas. Getting shot is not optimal, and getting shot a whole bunch of times is worse, but you gotta get off your ass. It’s time.”

That was true, but Lucas let the silence stretch out. Lamb knew the game and said nothing. Lucas caved first: “I’ll take a look,” he said. “You might help clear the way. The FBI doesn’t like me much.”

“As I understand it, you haven’t made yourself likeable. Besides, I’ve already cleared the way, since I knew you’re a sucker for the big-media cases, which this will be,” Lamb said. “Can you drive?”

“Not very well. Got hit in the fibula and if I have to hit the brakes hard, it’s like getting shot again.”

“A fibula is like an appendix?”

“It’s a bone in my lower leg.”