

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN
SANDFORD

A LUCAS AND LETTY
DAVENPORT NOVEL

TOXIC
PREY

ALSO BY JOHN SANDFORD

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Shadow Prey

Eyes of Prey

Silent Prey

Winter Prey

Night Prey

Mind Prey

Sudden Prey

The Night Crew

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

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Saturn Run (with Ctein)

BY JOHN SANDFORD AND MICHELE COOK

Uncaged

Outrage

Rampage



JOHN SANDFORD

TOXIC
PREY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

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PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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146677205

ELEVEN MONTHS EARLIER...

A dinged-up, dust-covered ten-year-old Subaru Outback bumped along a fire road that ran downhill from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, through an old patch of controlled burn that had renewed itself with shoulder-high aspen saplings, and then back into dense stands of dark green piñon.

Lionel Scott was lost in northern New Mexico, as he had intended, but after four nights of meditation and his personal version of prayer, he could use a shower and a salad.

Now, he focused on missing the larger stones. He didn't always succeed, both hands tight on the steering wheel, glasses bouncing on his sunburned nose; every once in a while, he had to stop, get out, and move a fallen log or clump of brush. The battered wagon was reasonably tough, took the knocks with good grace, and they eventually debouched onto a gravel road.

Scott was of middle height, short of six feet, and thin, almost gaunt, with lines of muscle cut in his arms and neck. His salt-and-pepper hair fell to the middle of his ears, and one lock constantly fell over his left eye. His nose was long and straight, his eyes blue-gray, his skin fair, but roughened with outdoor wear.

So: left or right? Scott looked both ways, and then at the gas gauge. He had a quarter tank, and decided to take the downhill route away from the mountains, where he would be more likely to find a gas station. The gravel was noisier than the dirt road, but smoother, aside from the occasional washed-out dip. Taos, he thought, was probably off to the north, but he wasn't entirely sure of that—he had no GPS, nor a signal on his cell phone.

The landscape was dry, and warm, but not hot. Maybe upper seventies Fahrenheit, he thought, getting warmer as he dropped down the hills; bright sun, puffy white fair-weather clouds. A flock of crows was working the

mountainside. Scott could never quite make out what they were doing, but they were working hard at it, whatever it was, ink spots against the blue sky. He drove with the windows down, breathing in the scents of piñon, juniper, aspen, the silver-green chamisa, and his own dried sweat.

Scott didn't know precisely where he was, but did know he was headed west, unless the sun had changed its position in the solar system. He was more or less driving into it, given the wiggles in the road, and at this time of year, it should be setting generally to the northwest. As it would be in two hours.

He thought, *A motel would be welcome...a martini with three olives?*

The gravel track took him up a hillside, then down again, then up even higher, with a dirt cutbank to his left and a drop-off to his right, then back down a long, steep pitch. He rounded a turn and found, to his surprise, an intersection with a real gravel road and two more fire roads.

The side of the gravel road was edged with a ramshackle brown trailer, now up on blocks, that long ago had been converted into a convenience store. No sign of a gas pump; a pickup was parked in front, another around at the back. A neon-red Budweiser beer sign glowed from one window.

Scott could use something cold: a beer, a Coke, even water. He pulled in next to the pickup, a Tacoma older than his Subaru, climbed out, stretched, and walked over to the front door. A sign above the door had two words in large hand-painted letters: "More, Store."

Above the large letters was a hand-painted script in much smaller letters which said, "Everything Costs..." and beneath the "More, Store," an additional script in small letters which said, "Because I have to Drive to Sam's Club to Get It."

Almost made him smile.

A lot of things in the American West almost made him smile, especially the essential emptiness. If the entire world were as empty as America between the Mississippi and the Coastal Ranges, there'd be no global warming, no melting glaciers. Earlier in the spring, he'd made a pilgrimage to the Lightning Field art installation in southwest New Mexico. The field consisted of hundreds of steel poles sticking up from a level plain, apparently

designed to attract lightning strikes from passing thunderstorms. He found that only vaguely interesting, but he was gob-smacked by the night.

There was no light but that from the stars. No moon, no artificial light sources within dozens of miles, and dry, crystal-clear skies. He spent hours staring at the Milky Way as it turned overhead, the stars dozens and hundreds and thousands of light-years distant, but right there in his face...think of all the life out there, thriving, finding a place under different suns. And think about Gaia's death spiral, the end of life on Earth.

THE CONVENIENCE STORE:

As he stepped toward it, a bulky Hispanic man in a battered straw cowboy hat walked out, carrying an open bottle of Corona, nodded, and said, "Hey," and Scott said, "How are you?"

The man slowed and smiled and said, "You English?"

Scott: "Yes, I am."

"Don't hear that accent around here, much," the man said, "You're a long way from home, buddy."

"America's my home now," Scott said.

"Hope you like it. It's a nice place, mostly," the man said, and he went on to his truck. Scott pulled the screen door open and stepped inside. A radio was playing an old Lynyrd Skynyrd tune, "Sweet Home Alabama," and dust motes floated in sunlight coming through a west-facing window.

The old trailer had been hollowed out into three separate sections: to his right, a counter, a tired-looking Indian woman behind it, and a rack of cigarettes. To his left, the main body of the store, perhaps fifteen feet long, featuring racks of snack food, warm beer, and soft drinks. A formerly white, now yellowed, refrigerator stood in one corner and had the words "Cold Drinks" written on the front with a Sharpie. Further back, a closed door had "Private—No Restrooms" written on it. The place smelled of beef jerky, overripe bananas, and nicotine.

The woman behind the counter took a cigarette from the corner of her mouth and asked, "How y'doin'?"

“I’m doing well enough,” Scott said, though he also might have chosen among a variety of approved Americanisms he’d picked up in the past year: “Okay,” or “Doin’ good,” or “Just fine.” But none of those were how he felt. He was doing well enough, but no better. “Would you have cold beer? Or a soft drink?”

“In the fridge,” the woman said, poking her cigarette toward the refrigerator. As Scott walked back to it, she asked, “You English?”

“Yes.” He walked back, opened the refrigerator door, found a mixture of Miller Lite, Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Dr Pepper, and a few tall bottles of Mexican Coke. As an Englishman, Scott thought Miller Lite tasted like beer that had been recycled through somebody’s kidneys. He took a bottle of Mexican Coke, for the sugar load, closed the refrigerator door, and returned to the counter.

“What’re you doing way the hell back here?” the woman asked around her cigarette. And, “Four dollars.”

“Driving around,” Scott said. He pushed a five-dollar bill across the counter.

“On vacation?” she asked.

“I work down at Los Alamos,” he said.

One eyebrow went up, a physical ability which Scott recognized as a scientific mystery, as yet unsolved. She said, “On them A-bombs?”

“No. Actually, I’m a doctor.”

That seemed to stop her. She gazed at him, then asked, “Like a medical doctor?”

“Yes.”

She put the five in a cash drawer and handed him a one. She said, “My boy is sick. I don’t know...maybe something he ate. Maybe we should go to the doctor, but, you know...insurance. We don’t have it.”

Scott sighed, but didn’t show it. Instead, he asked, “What are his symptoms?”

She shrugged. “He’s got a tummy ache. He’s got a fever...”

Not good. Scott: “If you’d like me to take a look...”

“I’d love that,” the woman said. “He’s in back.”

Scott popped the Mexican Coke's bottle cap on a counter-mounted bottle opener, took a swallow, and followed her past racks of snack food to the door in the back. She pushed through to a small living space, a bathroom and two tiny separate rooms on either side of a living/dining/TV area. One of the side doors was open, and she gestured to it. A young boy was lying awake on a narrow single bed; he wore a pair of shorts and a tee-shirt and was barefoot. His face, in the dim light, appeared to be on fire.

Scott said, "Hi, I'm Lionel. I'm a doctor. I understand you're sick."

The boy, who appeared to be nine or ten, said, "Hurt."

Scott reached out and put his fingers on the boy's forehead: too hot, way too hot.

"Where does it hurt?"

The boy touched his belly, lower right, near the waistband of his shorts. Scott used the fingers of his right hand to press softly the place where the boy had touched himself. The kid lurched up and blurted a long "Aaaahhhh. Awwwwww..."

Scott was used to the pain of children. He turned to the woman and asked, "He's had some nausea? Has he thrown up?"

"A little," she said. "That's why I thought maybe it was something he ate."

Scott shook his head. "I don't believe that's it. Your boy has appendicitis and it's somewhat advanced. We need to take him to a hospital. Right away. Do you know where the closest one is?"

"Taos," she said. She was frightened. "But no insurance, we always been healthy...I don't know if they'll take us."

"They'll take you. They have to," Scott said.

The woman said her pickup rode rough, so Scott suggested they drop the front passenger seat of his Subaru, and that the woman lead the way to the Taos hospital in her truck. Scott picked up the boy, who groaned and squirmed against him. His dark eyes were pools of pain, but he didn't cry.

The trip down through the mountains and then up the High Road to Taos took forty-five minutes. Twenty minutes out, Scott checked his cell phone and found that he had a bar and honked his horn until the woman pulled over.

Scott stopped behind her, and as she hurried back to the Subaru, he explained what he was doing: “Calling the hospital.”

When he had a nurse at Holy Cross on the line, he identified himself as a visiting physician, that he had a ten-year-old boy suffering from acute appendicitis, an emergency intervention was needed, and that they were on the way. He asked that a surgeon be notified.

Twenty-five minutes later, they delivered the kid to the emergency room and waited as he was wheeled away; a while later, a surgeon appeared and introduced himself and confirmed what Scott had suspected. To the woman, the surgeon said, “We have to operate on your son. We need to get his appendix out. The operation is fairly routine, but if the appendix is burst, there could be some follow-on problems...”

She gave her permission for the work. The woman clung close to Scott as she asked, “He isn’t going to die?”

“He should be fine,” the surgeon said. “If we’d waited any longer, it could have been tricky. But, I think we caught it.”

They talked about that, then the surgeon turned to Scott. “You’re British?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you go to med school?”

“Oxford.”

The surgeon nodded: “Heard of it,” and he went away to scrub up. Almost made Scott smile again: “Heard of it.”

Then the paperwork and the question about insurance. The woman in charge of payments explained that there were some costs that could be reduced, that the woman might qualify for other aid, and Scott grew exasperated and said, “Listen. Get whatever Mrs....” He didn’t know her name and he looked at her and she said, “Bernal...”

Scott said, “Learn what Mrs. Bernal can afford to pay, and what assistance she can get, and then put the rest on my Amex card. Do you take Amex?”

The payment lady said, “Absolutely. We take everything but chickens and goats.”

SCOTT PRIED HIMSELF away from the hospital and Mrs. Bernal a half hour later, when everyone was satisfied that he was willing to pay the bill for the boy's operation; and he could no longer tolerate Mrs. Bernal's appreciation. He climbed into his Subaru without telling anyone where he was going, or how to reach him, found a Days Inn, and got a room for the night.

He hadn't slept well in his tent and he didn't sleep well in the motel, despite a two-martini dinner. He wondered, in the middle of the night, why he'd worked to save the boy, and a fragment of his Oxford undergraduate education popped into his mind, courtesy of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

Stalin said, Scott recalled, "The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic."

And that was it, wasn't it?

The death of the boy would have been a tragedy. The death of a million, or five billion, would be a...

Number. And a necessity.

Letty Davenport’s apartment complex had a swimming pool filled with discouraging numbers of square-shouldered men with white sidewall haircuts—even on the black guys, unless they were called black sidewalls; who knew?

They all had big bright wolf teeth, gym muscle, and questionable sexual ethics; and their female counterparts were much the same, the major differences lying in how much butt-cheek was exposed, which, in one case, when the young woman climbed out of the pool, was like watching the moon come up over the Potomac.

They were soldiers, mostly, attached to the Pentagon, just a couple miles away.

Five o’clock on an August afternoon, too hot to be inside, where the barely adjustable air conditioning blew cold damp air on everything; so Letty dozed in the webbing of her recliner, a copy of *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* covering her face. Beneath that, pressing against her nose, was a paperback version of J. D. Robb’s *Celebrity in Death*, which Letty estimated was the fortieth of the *In Death* novels she’d read.

While not as prestigious as the *Journal*, the Robb novel was distinctly more intelligent and certainly better written; but, a girl has to maintain her intellectual status with the D.C. deep state, so the *Journal* went on top.

Some passing dude she couldn’t see made a comment about legs, which she suspected was directed at her, but she ignored him, and was still ignoring him when the phone on her stomach vibrated. She groped for it, and without looking at the screen, pressed the answer tab and said, “Yeah?”

Her boss said, “This is your boss. I’m putting you on speaker.” Other people were listening in; a modicum of respect was required.

“Yes, sir?”

“Can you get out to Dulles in the next three hours and forty-one minutes?”

“Uh, sure. Where am I going?”

“London. Well, Oxford. A guy will meet you at Dulles’s United gate with a packet including the job, your tickets, and a hotel reservation. The return ticket’s open, probably won’t take you more than a day or two.”

“How will he know who I am?”

“He’ll have seen a photograph.”

“Can you tell me more than that?” Letty asked.

“Not really. You know, the phone problem.” He meant that that phone call wasn’t secure, so whatever the problem was, security was an issue.

“How about dress? Standard business casual?”

“That will do. You can’t take your usual equipment.” He meant, *gun*. “I’m told by one of the gentlemen here that Oxford has some nice places to run, so you might take running gear.”

“Thank you,” Letty said.

“Three hours and thirty-nine minutes, now, according to my infallible Apple Watch,” said Senator Christopher Colles (R-Florida), who was actually, if not technically, Letty’s boss. He hung up.

LETTY TECHNICALLY WORKED for the Department of Homeland Security, but in practice worked for Colles, who was chairman of the Senate’s Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. He claimed to have the DHS secretary’s nuts in a vise, possibly because of the secretary’s governmental affairs. However that worked, when Colles spoke, the DHS listened.

Letty didn’t exactly have what preppers called a bug-out bag, but she had something close: selected clothes in her closet hung in dry-cleaning bags, waiting to be packed, and a man’s large dopp kit containing the cosmetic and medical necessities, ready to go. She added her running gear, passport, and the Robb novel.

She traveled with a forty-liter Black Hole duffel from Patagonia and had learned to roll her dressier clothes into tube shapes, still wrapped in the dry-cleaner plastic, so they'd be fresh-looking and unwrinkled when she got to her destination. Frequent travel does teach you things, mostly about packing.

Forty-five minutes after Colles's call, she was out the door to a waiting cab; twenty-five minutes after that, they rolled up to Dulles, and five minutes after that, she ambled through security with her DHS credentials and passport and made her way to the United gate. A young man, but older than she was, with a spray of acne across his forehead and an annoyed look on the rest of his face, walked up to her and asked, "Davenport?"

"Yes."

He handed her a manila envelope, thick with the paper inside, said, "Don't lose it," and walked away. Far too important to be sent with an envelope to meet a woman younger than he was, and it showed in his body language. Nothing to be done about that.

Letty found a seat, opened the package, extracted a thin business envelope with her air tickets. She put that in the front pocket of the duffel bag and moved on to a much thicker report on a Dr. Lionel Scott, a British subject now somewhere in the United States; exactly where, nobody knew.

Under the binder clip that held the report together was a folded piece of notepaper with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of three of Scott's friends in Oxford. She was to inquire as to what they might know about his whereabouts and activities, and whether any of them were in touch with him. A final instruction from Colles was scrawled at the bottom of the sheet: "Wring them dry."

Letty checked her watch: she had time before the flight, so she settled down to read.

LIONEL SCOTT WAS a doctor, first of all, a graduate of the Oxford medical school. After graduation, he'd done two foundation years, somewhat the equivalent of American medical residencies, then three more years studying viral and bacterial diseases in humans. Later, he'd joined Médecins Sans

Frontières—Doctors Without Borders—and had spent nine more years working in Bangladesh and Myanmar in Asia, and Uganda, Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa.

He'd left Médecins Sans Frontières for health reasons, had returned to England, where he spent a year at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, then moved again, this time to the United States, where he'd worked for a year at Fort Detrick in Maryland, at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID). Although still technically employed at USAMRIID, he was temporarily working at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, and had been for almost a year.

He had gone missing from there.

The mention of both USAMRIID and Los Alamos rang alarm bells with Letty, and she thought, *Uh-oh*.

She checked the time again and took the iPad out of her duffel, read about the Fort Detrick installation and about Los Alamos. Detrick was known as the primary research facility into diseases that might be weaponized by an enemy, which was why it was run by the Department of Defense. That job made sense; Scott was an infectious disease specialist with a lot of time in the field. She couldn't pin down why he would be at Los Alamos, which was known for creating the plutonium pits from which thermonuclear weapons were manufactured.

She read further into Scott's biography: he'd been treated for what was called nervous exhaustion after his last assignment at Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh with its refugee camp Kutupalong, home to nearly a million occupants. He'd also been treated for a recurrence of malaria that he'd originally contracted in Africa, and tuberculosis.

A note from a Médecins executive credited "...Dr. Scott with saving quite literally thousands of lives though his work with TB patients."

Altogether, Letty thought, an admirable human being. Now, just past forty, and apparently recovering from his various health problems, he'd vanished. Since he'd had extensive contacts with scientists developing atomic weapons, and other scientists doing what was called "gain of function" research on viruses—a euphemism for "making more deadly"—a number of

high-ranking functionaries further up the bureaucratic ladder than Letty had also said, “Uh-oh.”

HER FLIGHT WAS called, and after waiting for what seemed like eight or ten priority boarding groups, she worked her way halfway down the plane and took her aisle seat next to an overweight man in the middle seat, who’d already seized both armrests—not because he was a jerk, but because the seats were too small.

Unlike the man in the window seat, who was already squirming, she was small enough to survive the flight. Letty, at twenty-five, was dancer slender, perhaps because she did YouTube dancer workouts, along with weight work and a daily run. As she was settling in, pushing her carry-on under the seat in front of her, the window-seat man, who wore a clerical collar, leaned around the man in the center and said, “I wonder if we’d all be more comfortable...”

After some negotiation, they shuffled.

Letty, in making her application for sainthood, took the middle seat, with the obese man moved to Letty’s aisle seat. With the big man leaning a bit into the aisle, they all had arm rests; when the plane was in the air, the priest on the window took out a laptop, typed a few words, turned the screen toward Letty and nudged her.

She looked: “*Thanks. You saved my life.*”

She took the laptop, typed, “*Say a prayer for me.*”

He smiled, took it back and typed, “*I certainly will.*”

During the seven-and-a-half-hour flight to London, Letty read through the rest of Scott’s biography, finished *Celebrity in Death*, and got five hours of sleep. Forty minutes before landing, she lined up for the over-used lavatory to pee, wash her face, brush her teeth, jab a travel-sized anti-perspirant in her armpits, run a comb through her hair, and generally get her shit together.

Letty walked off the plane a half hour after the wheels touched down—the fat man gave her a confident smile and asked if she was staying in London, and she said, “Nope.”

She skipped a tram that was jammed to capacity and walked what seemed like a mile through a lower-level tunnel to baggage claim; since she hadn't checked any baggage, she breezed through the "Nothing to Declare" gate, heading for the LHR train station.

As she walked through, a man called, "Letty Davenport!"

The man looked, Letty thought, London stylish: summer-weight dark wool suit, silk tie, shoes that appeared to be spit-shined and probably made in Italy. He was handsome, in a weather-beaten way. Tall, thin, with almost-blond hair worn a bit long and mussed, and with the muscles of an Iron Man enthusiast. He was early thirties, she thought. *No wedding ring. Why had she noticed that so quickly? She had a boyfriend, didn't she?* A duffel sat by the man's feet, much like Letty's, but of oiled canvas, rather than plastic.

She stopped, and he stepped up to her, awkwardly pushing his duffel along with one foot, and showed her an ID card: "Alec Hawkins, MI5. I'll be traveling with you to Oxford. To clear the way, should the way need clearing."

"Didn't say anything about that in my instructions," Letty said.

He nodded: "That's why we're called the Secret Service. Nobody tells anyone anything."

"I thought it was MI6 that was called the Secret Service," Letty said.

"I suppose that's possible. Does anybody really know which is which?"

That made her smile. "You have a car?"

"God, no. Takes forever and no place to park," Hawkins said. "We'll be on the train; two trains, actually. Give me your bag and follow on."

She gave him the bag and followed on, to the express train to London's Paddington Station. "How'd you know it was me coming through the gate?"

"I was notified that you'd gone through passport control and United informed us that you had no checked baggage, so I knew you'd be through quickly. And we have many, many photographs of you, including several with blood on your face. That's really quite charming, for such a looker."

She let that pass. "Are you armed?"

He frowned. "No, of course not. What would I do with a gun?"

"Shoot a terrorist?"