

# JOHN SANDFORD

**#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

**“ENTHRALLING AND PLAUSIBLE.” —*THE POST AND COURIER***

# HEAT LIGHTNING

**A VIRGIL FLOWERS NOVEL**

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*Shadow Prey*

*Eyes of Prey*

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*Mind Prey*

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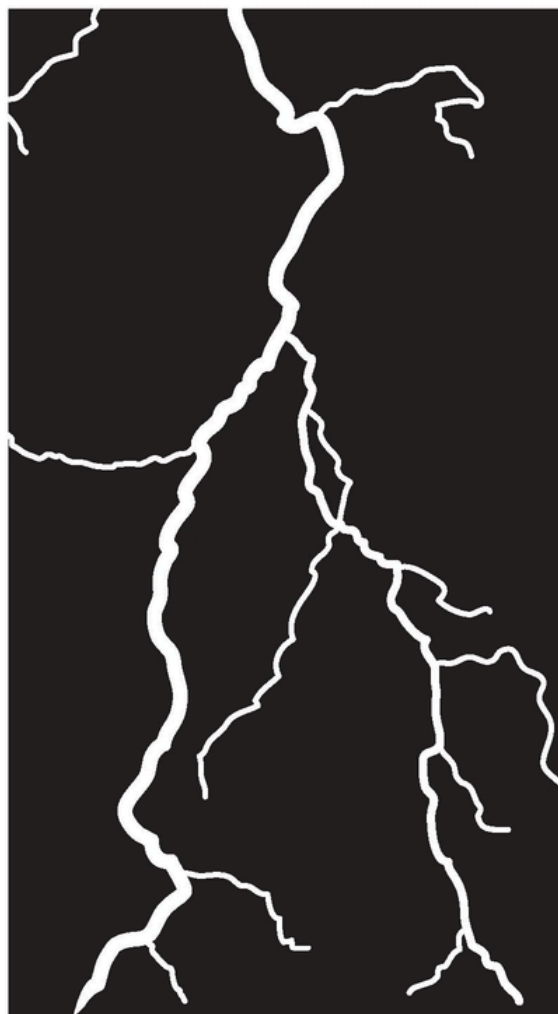
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# HEAT LIGHTNING

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Version\_6

*For Benjamin*



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—JOHN SANDFORD

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THE MIDNIGHT SHIFT: the shooter was going to work.

He jogged through the night in a charcoal-colored nylon rain suit and black New Balance running shoes, with a brilliant reflective green strap over his shoulders, like a bandolier. With the strap, he jumped out at passing cars; nothing furtive here, nobody trying to hide anything. . . .

He ran carefully, taking his time. The old sidewalk, probably laid down in the first decades of the twentieth century, was cracked and shifting underfoot. A wrong step could leave him with a sprain, or worse. Not good for a man with a silenced pistol in his pocket.

The night was hot, cloudy, humid. Lightning flickered way off to the north, a thunderstorm passing by. The tempest would miss by ten miles: no relief from the heat, not yet. He ran through the odor of summer flowers, unseen in the darkness—nice houses here, well-maintained, flourishes of Victorian gingerbread, fences with gardens, flower heads pale in the dim ambient light.

Stillwater, Minnesota, on the bluff above downtown, above the St. Croix River. Third Street once had so many churches that it was called Church Street by the locals. The churches that remained pushed steeples into the night sky like medieval lightning rods, straining to ward off the evil that men do.

• • •

THE SHOOTER passed the front of the redbrick historic courthouse, which was guarded by a bronze Civil War infantryman with a fixed bayonet and a plaque. He paused next to a hedge, behind a tree trunk, bent over with his hands on his knees, as if catching his breath or stretching his hamstrings, like runners do. Looked around. Said quietly, “On point.”

Dark, silent. Waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. After a last look around, he pulled off the reflective strap and stuffed it in a pocket. When he did that, he vanished. He was gone; he was part of the fabric of the night.

Across from the courthouse, just downhill, a metal spire pushed up from a vest-pocket park, illuminated by spotlights. Ten-foot granite slabs anchored the foot of the needle. On the slabs were more bronze plaques, with the names of the local boys who didn't make it back from all the wars fought since Stillwater was built. A blank plaque awaited names from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The shooter slipped across the street, to the edge of the memorial. The brilliant spotlights made the nearby shadows even darker. He disappeared into one of them, like an ink drop falling into a coal cellar. Before he went, he pulled back the sleeve of the running suit and checked the luminous dial of his combat watch.

If Sanderson stuck to his routine—or the dog's routine, anyway— he'd walk down the west side of Third Street sometime in the next ten minutes. Big German shepherd. Shame about the dog.

• • •

CHUCK UTECHT had been the first man on the controller's list. He'd been a smooth white egg of a man, whose insides, when he cracked, flowed out like a yellow yolk. He'd given up three names. He'd given them up easily.

"I only did one bad thing in my life," he cried. "I've been making up for it ever since."

His final words had been "I'm sorry," not for what he'd done, but because he knew what was coming and had peed his pants.

The scout could extract only so much information from a man who accepted his own execution, who seemed to believe that he deserved it. They had not been in a place where the scout could use pliers or knives or ropes or

electricity or waterboards. All he had was the threat of death, and Utecht had closed his eyes and had begun mumbling through a prayer. The scout had seen the resignation; he looked at the shooter and nodded.

The shooter shot him twice in the back of the head, halfway through the prayer.

Now he waited for Sanderson and the dog.

They needed two more names.

The scout said in the shooter's ear, "He's coming."

• • •

BOBBY SANDERSON strolled down Third Street with the dog on the end of its lead, a familiar nighttime sight. The dog was as regular as a quartz watch: took a small dump at eight o'clock in the morning, and a big one at eleven o'clock at night. If it wasn't out on the street, it'd be somewhere in the yard, and Sanderson would step in it the next day, sure as God made little green apples. So, twice a day, they were on the street.

Sanderson was preoccupied with an argument he'd had with his girlfriend. Or maybe not an argument, but he didn't know exactly what else you could call it. She didn't want him out at night; not for a while. Not until they found out whether something was going on.

"If you're scared enough that you have meetings, then you ought to be scared enough to stay inside at night," she'd said. She'd been in the kitchen, drying the dishes with an old square of unbleached muslin. She smelled of dishwashing liquid and pork chop grease.

"You know what happens with the dog if he don't get his walk," Sanderson said. "Besides, who's going to mess with Mike?"

But before he'd gone, he'd stepped back to the bedroom, as though he'd forgotten something, had taken the .38 out of a bedroom bureau and slipped it into his pocket. He was not the kind of guy to be pushed. If somebody pushed, he'd push back, twice as hard.

Sanderson was fifty-nine, five-six, a hundred and sixty pounds. A short man, with a short-man complex. You don't fuck with me. You don't fuck with the Man.

He thought like that.

He thought like a TV show.

• • •

THE SHOOTER was waiting behind a rampart of limestone blocks next to the monument. Not tense, not anything—not thinking, just waiting, like a rock, or a stump, or a loaded bullet. Waiting . . . Then two words in his ear: “He’s coming.”

He heard first the click of the dog’s toenails on the sidewalk. The animal probably went a hundred pounds, maybe even one-twenty. Had to take him smoothly. . . .

Close now.

The shooter’s hand was at his side, with the pistol dangling from it. When they’d scouted Sanderson on a previous walk, they noted that the dog was always on a long lead—there’d be some distance between the dog and Sanderson. The dog didn’t seem particularly nervous, but might well sense a man waiting in the night.

Comes the dog.

The shooter went into his routine, squaring his feet, the deep breath already taken. He exhaled slowly, held it, and the dog was there, ten feet out, turning his big head toward the shadow—the alarm, or curiosity, or something, in his eyes, he knew *something*.

• • •

THE SHOOTER was in his shooting crouch, arms extended, and the gun recoiled a bit. There was a fast *snap* sound, like an electrical spark, and a

mechanical ratcheting as the gun cycled. The dog dropped, shot between the eyes, and the shooter vaulted from the shadows, moving fast, right there in Sanderson's face in a quarter second.

This was no TV show, and you *do* fuck with the Man. Sanderson's eyes just had time to widen and his hand went to his pocket—he never really thought he'd need the pistol.

Never really thought.

The shooter had reversed the pistol in his hand and now held it by the silencer, so that it functioned as a hammer. He chopped Sanderson on the left ear and Sanderson staggered, falling, and put down his gun hand, no gun in it, and the gun pocket hit the ground with a *clank*, and the shooter, realizing that he hadn't hit him quite hard enough, hit him again, and this time, Sanderson went flat.

Not a killing blow.

They needed those names.

• • •

THE SHOOTER was trained, the shooter was a killing machine, but he was still human. Now, breathing hard, he tasted blood in his mouth like you might after a tough run; and all the time, he was looking for lights, he was looking for an alarm, a cry in the dark.

He said into the mouthpiece, "Come now."

He yanked the dog lead off Sanderson's wrist, dragged the dog's body into the darkness under the limestone blocks. Moved Sanderson next, the man twitching, trying to come back, but the shooter, gripping him by the shirt collar, moved him effortlessly into the dark. Another look around.

The scout came, all of a sudden, like a vampire bat dropping from the sky. He took a loop of rope from his pocket. The rope was a short noose, with a twisting handle, like the handle on a lawn mower starter-rope. He slipped



the noose around Sanderson's neck, twisted the handle until the rope was not quite choking the semiconscious man.

He knelt then, his knees weighing on Sanderson's chest, pinning him, and he shined an LED penlight into Sanderson's eyes. Sanderson moaned, trying to come back, then turned his head away from the burning light, his feet drumming on the ground.

"Listen to me," the scout said. "Listen to me. Can you hear me?"

It took a moment. Though the shooter had been careful, even a mild concussion is, nevertheless, a concussion. "Mr. Sanderson. Can you hear me?"

Sanderson moaned again, but his eyes were clearing. The scout turned the choke rope so that Sanderson could feel it, so that he couldn't cry out.

Slapped him, hard: not to do further injury, but to sting him, bring him up. He put his face next to Sanderson's, while the shooter watched for cars, or another runner. The scout said, "Utecht, Sanderson, Bunton, Wigge. Who were the other two? Who? Who is Carl? Mr. Sanderson ..."

Sanderson's pupils narrowed: he was coming back.

"Mr. Sanderson, who is Carl?" The scout's voice was soft, and he loosened the noose. Sanderson took a rasping breath. "It wasn't me. It wasn't me. Not me. Not me."

"Who is Carl? We know Ray Bunton, we know John Wigge, but who's Carl?"

"Don't know his name . . ." The desperation was right there, on the surface. The scout could hear it.

"But you knew Utecht," the scout said, persisting, pressuring. "Bunton and Wigge were at your house two days ago. I watched you argue. Who was the man in the car?"

"Some pal of Wigge's. I don't know, I don't know." He strained for air, feet beating on the ground again.

"There was a sixth man. Who was the sixth man?"

"Don't . . ." Then Sanderson's eyes reached up toward the scout's and he seemed to recognize him, what he was, why he was there; with the

realization came the knowledge that he would die. “Ah, shit,” he said, the sadness thick in the words. “Sally will be hurt.”

The scout saw the death in Sanderson’s eyes. Nothing more here. He stood up, shook his head. The shooter extended the gun and, without a further word, shot Sanderson twice in the forehead. He caught the ejected .22 shells in his off hand.

The shooter could smell the blood. The odor of blood sometimes nauseated him now. Didn’t happen before. Only the last couple of years. He slipped a lemon from his pocket, scraped it with a fingernail, and inhaled the odor of the lemon rind. Better. Better than blood.

Then he bent, pushed down Sanderson’s jaw, shoved the lemon into his dead mouth.

EVERY NIGHT, before he went to bed, Virgil Flowers thought about God.

The practice was good for him, he believed, and saved him from the cynicism of a cop's life. Virgil was a believer. A believer in God and the immortal soul, though not in religions—a position that troubled his father, a Lutheran minister of the old school.

“Religion is a way of organizing the culture, your relationship to God and the people around you,” his father argued the last time Virgil went back home. “It’s not a phone booth to God. A good religion reaches wider than that. A good religion would be a value in itself, even if God didn’t exist.”

Virgil said, “My problem with that is I don’t believe God cares *what* we do. Everything is equally relevant and irrelevant to God. A religion is nothing more than a political party organized around some guy’s moral views, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, like conventional political parties are organized around some guy’s economic views. Like Bill Clinton’s.”

His father disdained Bill Clinton, but he took the shot with appreciation.

So they’d argued around the breakfast table in the kitchen, enjoying themselves, the odor of breakfast rolls lingering in the air, cinnamon and white frosting and hot raisins, and coffee; and mom humming in the background. Though he and his father had the usual growing-up troubles, they’d become closer as Virgil got into his thirties, and his father began dealing with sixty and the reality of age.

His father, Virgil understood, appreciated that his son believed in the immortal soul and that he actually thought about God each night. He may have also envied the fact that his son was a cop; the preacher thought of himself as a man of peace, and he envied the man of action.

The son didn’t envy the father. Virgil had been raised in a church, and the problems his father dealt with, he thought, would have driven him crazy. It’s

relatively easy to solve a problem with a gun and a warrant and a prison; but what do you do about somebody who is unloved?

Better, Virgil thought, to carry a badge, and maintain your amateur status when it came to considering the wonders of the universe.

• • •

ON THIS HOT, close night, Virgil's consideration of the wonders of the universe were discomfited by the proximity of Janey Small's naked ass, which, in Virgil's opinion, *was* one of the wonders of the universe. Like a planet. A small, hot planet like Mercury, pulling you both with its heat and its gravity.

Janey was asleep on her side, snoring a bit, her butt thrust toward him, which Virgil believed was not an accident. They'd already gone around twice, but Janey was fond of what she called "threesies," and Virgil had been married to her long enough to understand the signal he was getting. Married to her second; that is, between his first and third wives. And before her third and fourth.

Janey Small had been a rotten idea. Virgil had been in town, had dropped by the Minnesota Music Café to see what was up, and there she was, leaning on the bar, the wonder of the universe packed into a pair of women's 501s.

One thing led to another—it wasn't like they were sexually incompatible. *That* hadn't been the problem. They'd just been incompatible in every other way, like when she became webmaster of a Celine Dion fan site, or decided that fried tofu strips were better than bacon, or that fish felt lip pain.

Janey.

A problem. He liked her, but only for a couple hours at a time.

Maybe if he could slide really slowly over to the edge of the bed . . . his jeans and boots and shirt were right there on the floor, he could be halfway to the door before she woke up.