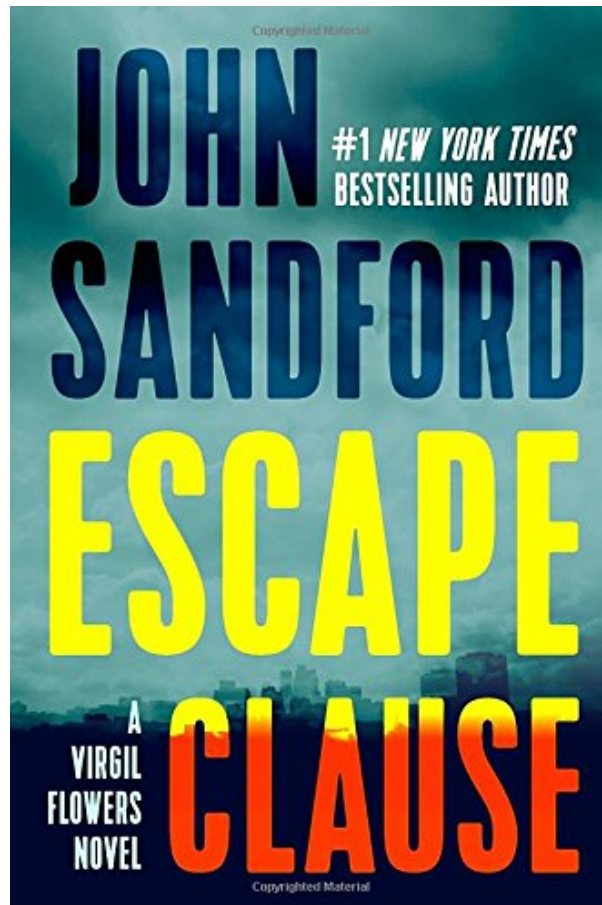
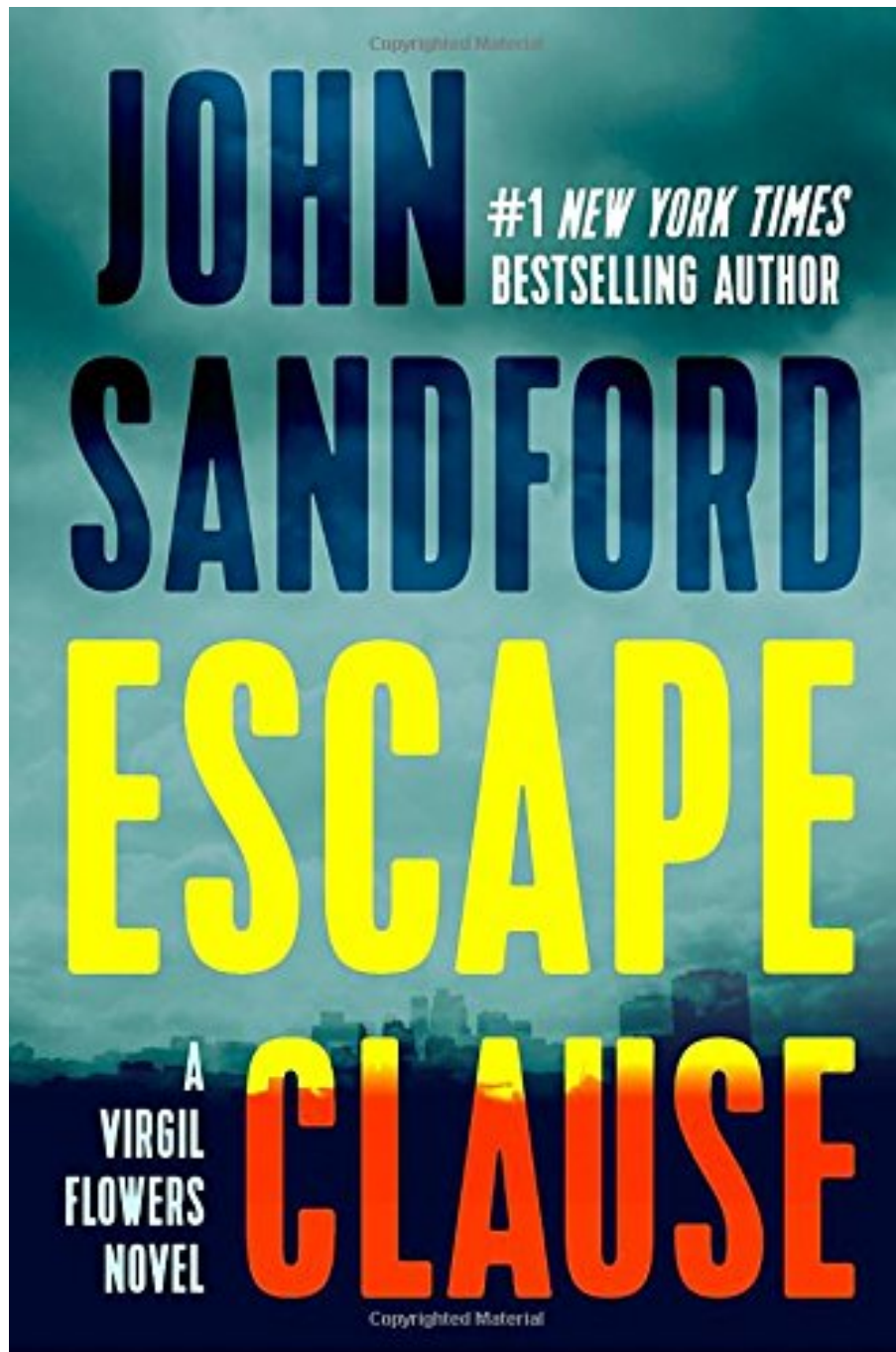


**ESCAPE CLAUSE (A VIRGIL FLOWERS
NOVEL) BY JOHN SANDFORD**



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Review

PRAISE FOR THE VIRGIL FLOWERS SERIES

“Another brainy thriller from a prolific author, *Deadline* fulfills readers’ expectations of Sandford’s fiction: tense, smart and character-driven.” —Richmond Times-Dispatch

“Sandford’s best Flowers book to date. This book is the most fun I have had reading in a long time.” —The Huffington Post

“The biggest joys of this series are Flowers himself (his boss is Lucas Davenport from Sandford’s *Prey* novels), the case of eccentric supporting characters, and the humorous dialogue.” —Shelf Awareness

“Pure reading pleasure.” —Booklist

“Sandford keeps one last surprise up his sleeve, and it’s a doozy. Exhilaratingly professional work by both Virgil and his creator.” —Kirkus Reviews

“Rich characters [and] the descriptions of small-town life, politics and corruption and the concurrent trails of action make for a fast and entertaining read.” —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

About the Author

John Sandford is the pseudonym for the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist John Camp. He is the author of twenty-six *Prey* novels, most recently *Extreme Prey*; four *Kidd* novels; nine *Virgil Flowers* novels; three YA novels coauthored with his wife, Michele Cook; and three stand-alones, most recently *Saturn Run*.

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Chapter One

Peck popped a Xanax, screwed the cap back on the pill tube, peered over the top of the bush and

through the chain link fence, and in a hoarse whisper, asked, "You see the other one?"

The big man with the rifle whispered, "Right by that tree, above the first one. She's looking down at him."

"Get her."

The big man rested the muzzle of the rifle in the V of one of the chain links, pulled the trigger: the rifle made a "pop" sound, not much louder than a handclap. They waited, staring into the darkness, then Peck said, "Ah, you dumb shit, you missed her. You missed her. She should be down, but she's not. She's moving."

"Might have hit that brush, deflected the shot..."

"She's moving out in the open. Reload," Peck said.

"I'm doing it, get off my back, will ya?"

"Can you see her now?" Peck asked. "She's getting curious about why the guy's just lying there."

Pop.

"Got her. Saw it hit," the big man said.

"Sure she's down? We don't want to make a mistake."

"She's going down now..." the big man whispered, "I'm pretty sure."

Peck could smell the nicotine and tar on the other man's breath. The big guy was addicted to Akhtamar Black Flames, and almost always had one stuck to his lower lip; but not now. Peck reached out and slapped him on the back of the head and said, "I don't want to hear that pretty sure. You know what happens if you're wrong? We're dead men."

"You fuckin' slap me again and I'll stick the gun butt up your ass and twist it sideways."

A small man, crouched on the other side of the rifleman, "I saw them get hit. I saw it, man. Both of them. But who knows if it was enough?"

They all went silent for a moment, squinting into the dark. Two bodies lay in the short grass, unmoving. The fence was twenty feet high and stouter than a normal chain link; a prison fence. With no sign of movement on the other side, Peck said, "Hamlet: cut the fence."

"What if they're faking?" The small guy had half-circles under his eyes, so dark they looked like broken blue poker chips.

"You're the one who said they got hit," Peck said. The soapy touch of Xanax was slipping into his brain.

The small guy said, "Maybe we oughta split. I'm not feeling so sure about this."

"We're here. It's done. Cut the fuckin' fence," Peck said.

Hamlet's side-cutters made a grunt sound as he snipped each piece of wire. Grunt-grunt-grunt. They'd come well-equipped: they wore rubber kitchen gloves and black clothing and trucker hats and, in addition to the gun, had brought a roll of black duct tape they'd use to put the fence back together when they left.

Hamlet was cutting a wide oval in the fence, leaving it hinged on one side. He'd gotten halfway around the oval when the big man, Hayk, hissed and touched his brother's arm and whispered, "Someone's coming."

They sank into the brush and Hayk moved the muzzle of the rifle around until it pointed out at the perimeter road. Twenty seconds later, a man in a gray uniform ambled along the road, looking at nothing in particular, talking to himself.

When he was directly opposite them, forty feet away, they heard him say, "I told him not to give her the money. She'll blow it on herself. That's what she'll do, and you know it. It won't get to your mom. She doesn't care about your mom..."

Peck realized that the security guard was wearing an ear piece and was talking into a cell phone. He lost the thread of what the man was saying as he disappeared around the curve of the frontage road. When the guard was well out of earshot, Hamlet whispered, "I think he had a gun."

“No, he didn’t – I checked that out,” Peck said.

“Not in the middle of the night.”

“The guards are not armed,” Peck said.

Hayk said, “Ham, keep cutting. We’re almost there.”

Hamlet went back to cutting and, two minutes later, pulled open the cut curve of fencing, like a gate.

Peck said, “Go on. Crawl through there.”

“Why don’t you crawl there?” Hamlet asked.

Peck had no immediate answer for that, and the Xanax now had a good grip on him, so he said, “All right, I will. Hold the fence.” Hamlet pulled the fence further back. When Peck was through, he turned to Hayk and said, “Give me the gun.”

“Not loaded.”

“That’s okay, I’m gonna use it as a poker.”

Hayk handed him the gun and Peck crawled fifteen feet to the first body and poked it with the gun’s muzzle. No reaction. That was a good thing. The other body was ten feet further on. He poked that one, too, got no response.

He turned around and whispered, “We’re good.”

“Told ja,” Hamlet said, too loud.

Peck whispered, “Shut up, you fuckin’ moron. Get the dollies in here.”

Hayk pushed the dollies through the hole in the fence and rolled them over to the bodies. The dollies were the kind used by garden shops, with a flat bed and wide soft wheels.

“Goddamn, heavier than hell,” Hayk said, as they lifted the first body onto a dolly. They couldn’t see much further than fifteen or twenty feet away, and the moon didn’t help: it sat right on the western horizon and splashed a silvery light off the trees around them. The contrast made it hard to discern shapes and movement.

“Gonna have to push them through the fence one at a time, right out to the perimeter,” Peck said. Despite the Xanax, he was sweating heavily, not from the hot summer night, but from fear. He could smell the stink of it on himself.

They loaded the second body on the second dolly and pushed them one at a time through the fence. Then Peck and Hayk dragged the dollies through the brush to the edge of the perimeter road, while Hamlet pulled the fence back into its original configuration and taped some of the cut ends together with strips of the black duct tape. Five quick repairs and the fence looked like new, in the night, anyway.

When Hamlet joined the others out at the perimeter road, Peck said, “I’m going to scout. When you see the laser, bring them.”

They nodded and he moved slowly along the edge of the perimeter road, where he could quickly step into the brush if he needed to. Peck had planned the whole operation and he knew there were only a couple of night guards. From that point-of-view, having a guard pass by only minutes before was a good thing, if a little unnerving. That meant the other guard was a half mile away, and the one they’d seen probably wouldn’t be back around for an hour or more.

The perimeter road curved gently to Peck’s right. When he’d gotten to the exit point, and had seen nobody, he stepped out to the road’s edge, took a laser pointer from his chest pocket, aimed it back toward Hayk and Hamlet, and played the red light-dot across their hiding place.

A minute later, in the ambient light from the parking lot, he saw them move out onto the road, pulling the dollies with their motionless loads. They moved slowly at first, and then more urgently, and finally began to trot.

The tires were almost, but not quite, silent; there was no one but Peck to hear them. When Hayk and Hamlet came up, Peck led them across the road to another chain link fence, which they’d already cut. They rolled the dollies through the fence, down a mild slope to the edge of a grassy yard, with a darkened house

eighty feet away. They waited there while Hamlet repaired the second fence, this time with silver duct tape. A scummy pond lay off to their left, home to any number of green-and-black frogs. Earlier in the summer, when they were making scouting trips, the frogs had been croaking their froggy asses off. Now that Peck could use the covering noise, they were resolutely silent.

Hamlet finished with the fence, and they eased the dollies across the yard to the back door of the garage, pushed the door open and pulled the dollies inside and closed the door. Hayk took a flashlight out of a cargo pocket and turned it on.

The van was ready, cargo doors open. They rolled the dollies up a handicapped ramp into the back of the van, closed the doors. Hamlet and Hayk got into the van, Hayk as the wheelman, while Peck went to the door into the house, stepped inside and looked out a kitchen window at the street.

He was looking out at a suburban neighborhood, a bunch of three-bedroom houses where everybody worked day jobs and the kids went to school: the houses were almost all dark, and the street was empty.

He hurried back to the garage, pulling the house door closed behind himself, and pushed the wall switch for the garage door opener. The garage door went up, but no light came on, because Peck had thought of everything: they'd loosened the garage light. Hayk drove the van out of the garage, Peck pushed the wall switch again and the door started down.

There was an ankle-high infra-red safety light that beamed across the door opening, to keep the door from closing on children who might be standing beneath it. Peck stepped carefully over it – he really had groomed the plan, he thought, with nothing left to chance – went to the van, and climbed into a back seat.

Hayk rolled it down to the street, took a right, and Hamlet said, "Made it."

Chapter Two

The cloudless sky was blue, of course, but the pale blue that tended almost to green, if you were lying naked in a Minnesota swimming hole on a hot summer day, looking up through the branches of the creek-side cottonwoods, thinking about nothing much, except the prospect of lunch.

Virgil Flowers was doing that, bathed in the cool spring water and the scent of fresh-mown hay. Frankie Nobles's oldest son was windrowing the teddered hay, riding a '70s International Harvester tractor, the all-original diesel engine clattering up and down the eighty-acre field on the other side of the crooked line of cottonwoods.

Virgil usually managed to evade the whole haying process, pleading the exigencies of law enforcement, but with this last cut of the summer, Frankie had her eye on him. All her farm equipment was marginal, and though a neighbor would be over with his modern baler and wagon, two-thirds of the bales – the small rectangular ones – would be unloaded in the barnyard.

From Virgil's point of view, there was one good thing about this – the neighbor would keep a third of the hay for his trouble. The bad thing was, somebody would have to load the other two-thirds of the bales on Frankie's ancient elevator, and somebody would have to stack it in the sweltering, wasp-infested barn loft.

"Why," Virgil asked, "are barn lofts always infested with wasps?"

"Because that's life," Frankie said, back-floating past him on a pair of pink plastic water-wings. She was unencumbered by clothing. They'd have the swimming hole to themselves until the tractor stopped running, and then the boys would take it over. For the time being, their privacy was assured by a sign at the beginning of the path through the woods, that said, Occupied, with newcomers required to call out before entering. "In the hay-lofts of life, there are always a few wasps."

"I'm allergic to wasps," Virgil ventured. He was a tall blond man, his long hair now plastered like a yellow bowl over his head.

"You're allergic to haying," Frankie said.

"I can't even believe you bother with it," Virgil said. "You have to give a third of the hay to Carl, to pay for his time and baling equipment. Whatever hay you manage to keep and sell, the feds and state take

half the money. What's the point?"

"I feed the hay to my cattle," she said. "We eat the cattle. There are no taxes."

"You don't have any cattle," Virgil said.

"The feds and state don't know that." She was another blond, short and partially slender.

"Please don't tell me that," Virgil said. "Your goddamn tax returns must read like a mystery novel."

"Shoulda seen my mortgage application," Frankie said. "One of those ninja deals – no income, no job. Worked out for me, though."

Honus, a big yellow dog, lay soaking wet on the bank, in a spot of sunshine. He liked to swim, but he also liked to lie wet in the sun.

Frankie kicked past and Virgil ducked under water and floated up between her legs. "You have a very attractive pussy," he said.

"I've been told that," Frankie said. "I've been thinking of entering it in the state fair."

"I could be a judge," Virgil offered.

"You certainly have the necessary expertise," she said.

"Speaking of state fairs...Lucas should have been killed," Virgil said, floating back a bit. "I can't believe the stories coming out of Iowa. I talked to him about it last night, he's up to his ass in bureaucrats, like nothing he's ever seen. He said he's been interviewed a half-dozen times by the FBI. The goddamn Purdys almost blew up the presidential election. Would have, if he hadn't been there."

"Lucas is a crazy man," Frankie said. "He chases crazy people. That's what he does, and he likes it. Anyway, that's the Iowa state fair. I'd enter the Minnesota state fair."

"Probably do better, as far as getting a ribbon," Virgil said. Frankie's knees folded over his shoulders. "Lucas said the Iowa blondes are really spectacular."

Frankie said, "Wait a minute, are you sayin' that I'm not spec..."

She stopped and they turned their faces toward the path. Somebody was scuffling down through the trees, in violation of the "Occupied" sign. Honus stood up and barked, two, three times, and Virgil and Frankie dropped their feet to the rocky bottom of the swimming hole, and Frankie called out: "Hey! Who's there?"

The scuffling continued for a few more seconds, then a tall, slender, wide-shouldered blonde emerged on the path and chirped, "Hi, Frank."

Frankie said, "Sparkle! What are you doing here?"

"I'm about to go swimming," she said. There was more scuffling behind her, and a heavy-set man who probably thought he looked like Ernest Hemingway, with a Hemingway beard and Hemingway gold-rimmed glasses, stepped out of the woods. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a schematic drawing of a host and chalice, and beneath that, the words, "Get Real. Be Catholic," plus cargo shorts and plastic flipflops.

He looked down at them and said, "Hello, there."

Sparkle pulled her top off – she was small-breasted and didn't wear a brassiere – then her shorts and underpants and jumped into the swimming hole. When she surfaced, Frankie snarled, "You really, really aren't invited."

"Oh, shut up," Sparkle said. She looked at Virgil. "You must be the famous Virgil fuckin' Flowers."

Virgil said, "Yeah. Who are you?"

Sparkle frowned at Frankie and said, "You've never told him?"

Frankie looked like she was working up a full-blown snit. "No. Why should I?"

Sparkle turned back to Virgil and said, "I'm Frankie's baby sister."

Virgil said to Frankie, "You have a baby sister?"

"Aw, for Christ's sakes," Frankie said.

"Careful," Sparkle said. "You don't want to piss off Father Bill."

They all looked at the heavy-set man, who had removed his t-shirt, glasses and watch, and was now

stepping out of his shorts, to reveal a dark brown pelt, speckled with gray, that would have done credit to a cinnamon bear. “That’s me,” he said. He flopped into the swimming hole, came up sputtering, and said, “Gosh. Nobody told me it’d be this cold.”

“What’s the Father Bill stuff?” Frankie asked.

“I’m a priest,” Bill said, shaking his head like a wet dog. “Part-time, anyway.”

“He’s a priest nine months of the year, and a bartender and libertine the other three,” Sparkle said.

“I work over at the Hanrattys’ Resort during the summer, tending bar,” Bill said. “I’m a fill-in priest for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis the other nine.”

“Must be nice for you,” Frankie said.

“It’s convenient all the way around,” Bill said. He had a mild, low-pitched voice that came out as a growl. “The Hanrattys are always hard-up for seasonal help, and the bishop gets a fill-in guy and only has to pay him for nine months.”

“And you get laid,” Frankie said.

“A fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“Hey! I’m a fringe benefit?” Now Sparkle was clouding up, or faking it, pushing out her lower lip. Virgil hadn’t seen the family resemblance before: Sparkle was tall and slender, Frankie was short and busty. They clouded up exactly the same way.

“Okay, a major fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“That’s better.”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said again. To Sparkle: “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I thought I’d stop by and see my beloved sister – and I’m also doing the last bit of research for my dissertation.” She rolled over on her back and paddled past Virgil, a not uninteresting sight. “I’m interviewing migrants at the Castro canning factory. I thought Bill and I could share your spare bedroom.”

Frankie scrutinized her for a couple of heartbeats, then asked, “Does old man Castro know about this?”

“I haven’t made what you’d call appointments, no,” Sparkle said.

“You’re going to get your ass kicked,” Frankie said. “He’s a mean old sonofabitch. When it’s about to happen, give me a call. I want to come and watch.”

“I was hoping Virgil could have a chat with the line manager over there...you know, about prisons and stuff.”

“You don’t be dragging Virgil into this,” Frankie said.

“What’s your problem, Frankie? Virgil’s a cop, it’s a part of his job,” Sparkle said.

“He investigates after the ass-kicking, not before,” Frankie said.

“What’s this all about?” Virgil asked. “Why is...Sparkle?...going to get her ass kicked?”

Sparkle, back-floating between the cop and the priest, explained: she was working on her Ph.D dissertation about seasonal migrant labor, both the social and economic aspects, at the University of Minnesota. She’d spent two years among the vegetable-growing fields of southern Minnesota and was now moving upstream to the factories. When she had incorporated the factory material, she’d have her doctorate.

“Why would that get your ass kicked?” Virgil asked.

“Because old man Castro has a deal with this village down in Mexico,” Sparkle said. She dropped her feet to the bottom of the pool. “They provide him couples to pick the cucumbers and work in his pickle factory. He pays the man a buck or two above the minimum wage, which makes him look like a hero, but the wife also works and doesn’t get anything – so his pickers and factory workers are making a little more than half the minimum wage, when it’s all said and done. He would rather not have this documented.”

“And you’re going to write that in your dissertation?” Virgil asked.

“I am.”

“Okay. I can see why you might be headed for an ass-kicking,” Virgil said.

“See? Crazy shit,” Frankie said to Virgil. “You should introduce her to Lucas, since Lucas likes crazy

shit so much.”

“Who’s Lucas?” Sparkle asked. She’d turned to her sister and stood up in waist-deep water, her back to Virgil. He noticed that she had an extremely attractive back, tapering down to a narrow waist. Backs were largely unappreciated in women, Virgil thought, but not by him.

“Another cop,” Frankie said. “Actually, ex-cop. He’s the one who saved Michaela Bowden’s life down at the Iowa State Fair last week.”

“Really!” Sparkle said. “I would like to meet him.”

“Ah, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said a third time.

Father Bill had ducked his head under water, and had come up sputtering. “I don’t mean to be critical on such short acquaintance, but do you think you might find some way to employ vulgarity or obscenity, rather than profanity, at least when I’m around?” Father Bill asked Frankie. “A nice round ‘Oh, shit’ or ‘Fuck you’ is much easier to accept than your taking of the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Ah, Jesus,” Frankie said.

Virgil said quickly, “She means the Puerto Rican, not the Lord.”

The two women paddled up the swimming hole, where the creek came in, nagging at each other. Virgil stayed at the bottom end of the pool, with Bill, and Bill apologized for their abrupt entrance, saying “Once Sparkle starts to roll, there’s not much you can do about it.”

“Is her name really Sparkle?”

“No, but it’s what everybody calls her,” Bill said. “Somebody at Hanratty’s told me that her birth name was Wanda.”

They looked after the women, who’d gotten to the top of the pool, where the water was shallow. They floated there, still arguing, then Frankie stood up and dove forward. Bill’s eyebrows went up as she did it, and he said, “Oh, my. When the Good Lord was passing out breasts, it looks like Frankie went through the line more than once.”

Virgil said, “Yeah, well...I guess.”

Bill: “You’re embarrassed because I’m a priest and I’m interested in women?”

Virgil said, in his quotation voice, “Kiss and rekiss your wife. Let her love and be loved. You are fortunate in having overcome, by an honorable marriage, that celibacy in which one is a prey to devouring fires or unclean ideas. The unhappy state of a single person, male or female, reveals to me each hour of the day so many horrors, that nothing sounds in my ear as bad as the name of monk or nun or priest. A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting.”

“Really,” said Bill, sounding pleased. “Who said that?”

“Martin Luther. In a letter to a friend.”

“Luther. I don’t know much of Luther, other than he had horns, a forked tale and cloven hooves instead of feet. But he said that? You’re the religious sort?”

“Not so much – at least, I’m not that big a believer in institutions,” Virgil said. “My old man is a Lutheran minister over in Marshall. He used to soak me in that stuff and some of it stuck.”

“Good for him, good for him,” Bill said. “You’ll have to send me a citation for that letter, so I can read it all. Martin Luther, who would have thought?”

“Is this relationship with Sparkle...a long-term thing?” Virgil asked.

“No, no, it isn’t. I’ve spent time with her the last two summers, but of course, the other nine months I’m celibate and she doesn’t put up with that.”

“That seems very strange to me,” Virgil said.

“It seems fairly strange to me, too, but I find both sides of the equation to be rewarding,” Bill said. “Of course, I may go to hell.”

“No offense, but I don’t think the Church gets to decide who goes to hell,” Virgil said.

“I’m not offended,” Bill said cheerfully. “In fact, I agree. Don’t tell the Church I said that.”

The two women came paddling back and Frankie hooked an arm around Virgil's sun-pinked neck and said, "Sparkle's going to be here for a while. You keep telling me you're going to get a queen-sized or a king-sized bed, and this would be a good time to do to do it, because I'm going to be sleeping over a couple times a week."

"I can do that," Virgil said. "That old bed is shot anyway."

Frankie said to Bill, "You can go ahead and fuck Sparkle, but I don't want her squealing and screaming and all that – keep it quiet. I got kids."

Bill said to Sparkle, "Maybe we ought to find another place."

"No, no, no...this is convenient and I like hanging out with my nephews," Sparkle said. "Another thing is that Castro's goons won't find me out here. Besides, if you tie me up and gag me, nobody'll hear a thing."

They all looked at Bill who said, "Sometimes I have to struggle to keep my head from exploding."

"That's called the Sparkle effect," Frankie said.

The four of them paddled around for a while, until, from the bank of the swimming hole, a phone began playing the Theme from Jaws. Honus stood up and woofed at it, then lay back down, and Frankie said, "Uh, oh."

Sparkle: "What's that?"

"The priority number from the BCA," Virgil said. "It usually means the shit has hit the fan, somewhere. I gotta take it."

He'd hoped the other two would leave before he had to get out of the water, but all eyes were on him as he manfully waded out of the swimming hole and sat on the bank, fumbled the phone out of his jeans.

Jon Duncan calling. "Jon, what's up?"

"We need you up here," Duncan said. "Right away, this afternoon."

"What happened?"

"That whole thing down in Iowa, at the state fair last week, has upset the apple cart," Duncan said. "You know our fair starts this week, there're gonna be more politicians up here, campaigning. We're worried about copy-cats."

Virgil groaned. "Man, don't make me work the state fair."

"No, no, we got that covered," Duncan said. "But everybody's committed now at the fair, and we've got a new problem. A big one."

"What's the problem?"

"Somebody stole the Amur tigers from the zoo last night," Duncan said. "Apparently shot them with a tranquilizer gun and hauled them out of there. Since it's a state zoo, it's our problem."

"What? Tigers?"

"Yeah. Somebody stole the tigers...two Amur tigers. Pride of the zoo. Listen, man, you've got to get up here," Duncan said. "There's gonna be a media shitstorm starting tonight on the evening news. We gotta get the tigers back: and we gotta get them back right now. And alive."

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Whenever you hear the sky rumble, that usually means a storm. In Virgil Flowers' case, make that two. The exceptional new thriller from the writer whose books are "pure reading pleasure" (Booklist).

The first storm comes from, of all places, the Minnesota zoo. Two large, and very rare, Amur tigers have vanished from their cage, and authorities are worried sick that they've been stolen for their body parts. Traditional Chinese medicine prizes those parts for home remedies, and people will do extreme things to get what they need. Some of them are a great deal more extreme than others—as Virgil is about to find out.

Then there's the homefront. Virgil's relationship with his girlfriend Frankie has been getting kind of serious, but when Frankie's sister Sparkle moves in for the summer, the situation gets a lot more complicated. For one thing, her research into migrant workers is about to bring her up against some very violent people who emphatically do not want to be researched. For another...she thinks Virgil's kind of cute.

"You mess around with Sparkle," Frankie told Virgil, "you could get yourself stabbed."

"She carries a knife?"

"No, but I do."

Forget a storm—this one's a tornado.

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Features

- Escape Clause (A Virgil Flowers Novel)

Review

PRAISE FOR THE VIRGIL FLOWERS SERIES

"Another brainy thriller from a prolific author, Deadline fulfills readers' expectations of Sandford's fiction: tense, smart and character-driven." —Richmond Times-Dispatch

"Sandford's best Flowers book to date. This book is the most fun I have had reading in a long time." —The Huffington Post

“The biggest joys of this series are Flowers himself (his boss is Lucas Davenport from Sandford’s Prey novels), the case of eccentric supporting characters, and the humorous dialogue.” —Shelf Awareness

“Pure reading pleasure.” —Booklist

“Sandford keeps one last surprise up his sleeve, and it’s a doozy. Exhilaratingly professional work by both Virgil and his creator.” —Kirkus Reviews

“Rich characters [and] the descriptions of small-town life, politics and corruption and the concurrent trails of action make for a fast and entertaining read.” —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

About the Author

John Sandford is the pseudonym for the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist John Camp. He is the author of twenty-six Prey novels, most recently *Extreme Prey*; four Kidd novels; nine Virgil Flowers novels; three YA novels coauthored with his wife, Michele Cook; and three stand-alones, most recently *Saturn Run*.

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Chapter One

Peck popped a Xanax, screwed the cap back on the pill tube, peered over the top of the bush and through the chain link fence, and in a hoarse whisper, asked, “You see the other one?”

The big man with the rifle whispered, “Right by that tree, above the first one. She’s looking down at him.”

“Get her.”

The big man rested the muzzle of the rifle in the V of one of the chain links, pulled the trigger: the rifle made a “pop” sound, not much louder than a handclap. They waited, staring into the darkness, then Peck said, “Ah, you dumb shit, you missed her. You missed her. She should be down, but she’s not. She’s moving.”

“Might have hit that brush, deflected the shot...”

“She’s moving out in the open. Reload,” Peck said.

“I’m doing it, get off my back, will ya?”

“Can you see her now?” Peck asked. “She’s getting curious about why the guy’s just lying there.”

Pop.

“Got her. Saw it hit,” the big man said.

“Sure she’s down? We don’t want to make a mistake.”

“She’s going down now...” the big man whispered, “I’m pretty sure.”

Peck could smell the nicotine and tar on the other man’s breath. The big guy was addicted to Akhtamar Black Flames, and almost always had one stuck to his lower lip; but not now. Peck reached out and slapped him on the back of the head and said, “I don’t want to hear that pretty sure. You know what happens if you’re wrong? We’re dead men.”

“You fuckin’ slap me again and I’ll stick the gun butt up your ass and twist it sideways.”

A small man, crouched on the other side of the rifleman, “I saw them get hit. I saw it, man. Both of them. But who knows if it was enough?”

They all went silent for a moment, squinting into the dark. Two bodies lay in the short grass, unmoving. The fence was twenty feet high and stouter than a normal chain link; a prison fence. With no sign of movement on the other side, Peck said, “Hamlet: cut the fence.”

“What if they’re faking?” The small guy had half-circles under his eyes, so dark they looked like broken blue poker chips.

“You’re the one who said they got hit,” Peck said. The soapy touch of Xanax was slipping into his

brain.

The small guy said, "Maybe we oughta split. I'm not feeling so sure about this."

"We're here. It's done. Cut the fuckin' fence," Peck said.

Hamlet's side-cutters made a grunt sound as he snipped each piece of wire. Grunt-grunt-grunt. They'd come well-equipped: they wore rubber kitchen gloves and black clothing and trucker hats and, in addition to the gun, had brought a roll of black duct tape they'd use to put the fence back together when they left.

Hamlet was cutting a wide oval in the fence, leaving it hinged on one side. He'd gotten halfway around the oval when the big man, Hayk, hissed and touched his brother's arm and whispered, "Someone's coming."

They sank into the brush and Hayk moved the muzzle of the rifle around until it pointed out at the perimeter road. Twenty seconds later, a man in a gray uniform ambled along the road, looking at nothing in particular, talking to himself.

When he was directly opposite them, forty feet away, they heard him say, "I told him not to give her the money. She'll blow it on herself. That's what she'll do, and you know it. It won't get to your mom. She doesn't care about your mom..."

Peck realized that the security guard was wearing an ear piece and was talking into a cell phone. He lost the thread of what the man was saying as he disappeared around the curve of the frontage road. When the guard was well out of earshot, Hamlet whispered, "I think he had a gun."

"No, he didn't – I checked that out," Peck said.

"Not in the middle of the night."

"The guards are not armed," Peck said.

Hayk said, "Ham, keep cutting. We're almost there."

Hamlet went back to cutting and, two minutes later, pulled open the cut curve of fencing, like a gate.

Peck said, "Go on. Crawl through there."

"Why don't you crawl there?" Hamlet asked.

Peck had no immediate answer for that, and the Xanax now had a good grip on him, so he said, "All right, I will. Hold the fence." Hamlet pulled the fence further back. When Peck was through, he turned to Hayk and said, "Give me the gun."

"Not loaded."

"That's okay, I'm gonna use it as a poker."

Hayk handed him the gun and Peck crawled fifteen feet to the first body and poked it with the gun's muzzle. No reaction. That was a good thing. The other body was ten feet further on. He poked that one, too, got no response.

He turned around and whispered, "We're good."

"Told ja," Hamlet said, too loud.

Peck whispered, "Shut up, you fuckin' moron. Get the dollies in here."

Hayk pushed the dollies through the hole in the fence and rolled them over to the bodies. The dollies were the kind used by garden shops, with a flat bed and wide soft wheels.

"Goddamn, heavier than hell," Hayk said, as they lifted the first body onto a dolly. They couldn't see much further than fifteen or twenty feet away, and the moon didn't help: it sat right on the western horizon and splashed a silvery light off the trees around them. The contrast made it hard to discern shapes and movement.

"Gonna have to push them through the fence one at a time, right out to the perimeter," Peck said. Despite the Xanax, he was sweating heavily, not from the hot summer night, but from fear. He could smell the stink of it on himself.

They loaded the second body on the second dolly and pushed them one at a time through the fence.

Then Peck and Hayk dragged the dollies through the brush to the edge of the perimeter road, while Hamlet pulled the fence back into its original configuration and taped some of the cut ends together with strips of the black duct tape. Five quick repairs and the fence looked like new, in the night, anyway.

When Hamlet joined the others out at the perimeter road, Peck said, "I'm going to scout. When you see the laser, bring them."

They nodded and he moved slowly along the edge of the perimeter road, where he could quickly step into the brush if he needed to. Peck had planned the whole operation and he knew there were only a couple of night guards. From that point-of-view, having a guard pass by only minutes before was a good thing, if a little unnerving. That meant the other guard was a half mile away, and the one they'd seen probably wouldn't be back around for an hour or more.

The perimeter road curved gently to Peck's right. When he'd gotten to the exit point, and had seen nobody, he stepped out to the road's edge, took a laser pointer from his chest pocket, aimed it back toward Hayk and Hamlet, and played the red light-dot across their hiding place.

A minute later, in the ambient light from the parking lot, he saw them move out onto the road, pulling the dollies with their motionless loads. They moved slowly at first, and then more urgently, and finally began to trot.

The tires were almost, but not quite, silent; there was no one but Peck to hear them. When Hayk and Hamlet came up, Peck led them across the road to another chain link fence, which they'd already cut. They rolled the dollies through the fence, down a mild slope to the edge of a grassy yard, with a darkened house eighty feet away. They waited there while Hamlet repaired the second fence, this time with silver duct tape. A scummy pond lay off to their left, home to any number of green-and-black frogs. Earlier in the summer, when they were making scouting trips, the frogs had been croaking their froggy asses off. Now that Peck could use the covering noise, they were resolutely silent.

Hamlet finished with the fence, and they eased the dollies across the yard to the back door of the garage, pushed the door open and pulled the dollies inside and closed the door. Hayk took a flashlight out of a cargo pocket and turned it on.

The van was ready, cargo doors open. They rolled the dollies up a handicapped ramp into the back of the van, closed the doors. Hamlet and Hayk got into the van, Hayk as the wheelman, while Peck went to the door into the house, stepped inside and looked out a kitchen window at the street.

He was looking out at a suburban neighborhood, a bunch of three-bedroom houses where everybody worked day jobs and the kids went to school: the houses were almost all dark, and the street was empty.

He hurried back to the garage, pulling the house door closed behind himself, and pushed the wall switch for the garage door opener. The garage door went up, but no light came on, because Peck had thought of everything: they'd loosened the garage light. Hayk drove the van out of the garage, Peck pushed the wall switch again and the door started down.

There was an ankle-high infra-red safety light that beamed across the door opening, to keep the door from closing on children who might be standing beneath it. Peck stepped carefully over it – he really had groomed the plan, he thought, with nothing left to chance – went to the van, and climbed into a back seat.

Hayk rolled it down to the street, took a right, and Hamlet said, "Made it."

Chapter Two

The cloudless sky was blue, of course, but the pale blue that tended almost to green, if you were lying naked in a Minnesota swimming hole on a hot summer day, looking up through the branches of the creek-side cottonwoods, thinking about nothing much, except the prospect of lunch.

Virgil Flowers was doing that, bathed in the cool spring water and the scent of fresh-mown hay. Frankie Nobles's oldest son was windrowing the teddered hay, riding a '70s International Harvester tractor,

the all-original diesel engine clattering up and down the eighty-acre field on the other side of the crooked line of cottonwoods.

Virgil usually managed to evade the whole haying process, pleading the exigencies of law enforcement, but with this last cut of the summer, Frankie had her eye on him. All her farm equipment was marginal, and though a neighbor would be over with his modern baler and wagon, two-thirds of the bales – the small rectangular ones – would be unloaded in the barnyard.

From Virgil's point of view, there was one good thing about this – the neighbor would keep a third of the hay for his trouble. The bad thing was, somebody would have to load the other two-thirds of the bales on Frankie's ancient elevator, and somebody would have to stack it in the sweltering, wasp-infested barn loft.

"Why," Virgil asked, "are barn lofts always infested with wasps?"

"Because that's life," Frankie said, back-floating past him on a pair of pink plastic water-wings. She was unencumbered by clothing. They'd have the swimming hole to themselves until the tractor stopped running, and then the boys would take it over. For the time being, their privacy was assured by a sign at the beginning of the path through the woods, that said, Occupied, with newcomers required to call out before entering. "In the hay-lofts of life, there are always a few wasps."

"I'm allergic to wasps," Virgil ventured. He was a tall blond man, his long hair now plastered like a yellow bowl over his head.

"You're allergic to haying," Frankie said.

"I can't even believe you bother with it," Virgil said. "You have to give a third of the hay to Carl, to pay for his time and baling equipment. Whatever hay you manage to keep and sell, the feds and state take half the money. What's the point?"

"I feed the hay to my cattle," she said. "We eat the cattle. There are no taxes."

"You don't have any cattle," Virgil said.

"The feds and state don't know that." She was another blond, short and partially slender.

"Please don't tell me that," Virgil said. "Your goddamn tax returns must read like a mystery novel."

"Shoulda seen my mortgage application," Frankie said. "One of those ninja deals – no income, no job. Worked out for me, though."

Honus, a big yellow dog, lay soaking wet on the bank, in a spot of sunshine. He liked to swim, but he also liked to lie wet in the sun.

Frankie kicked past and Virgil ducked under water and floated up between her legs. "You have a very attractive pussy," he said.

"I've been told that," Frankie said. "I've been thinking of entering it in the state fair."

"I could be a judge," Virgil offered.

"You certainly have the necessary expertise," she said.

"Speaking of state fairs...Lucas should have been killed," Virgil said, floating back a bit. "I can't believe the stories coming out of Iowa. I talked to him about it last night, he's up to his ass in bureaucrats, like nothing he's ever seen. He said he's been interviewed a half-dozen times by the FBI. The goddamn Purdys almost blew up the presidential election. Would have, if he hadn't been there."

"Lucas is a crazy man," Frankie said. "He chases crazy people. That's what he does, and he likes it. Anyway, that's the Iowa state fair. I'd enter the Minnesota state fair."

"Probably do better, as far as getting a ribbon," Virgil said. Frankie's knees folded over his shoulders. "Lucas said the Iowa blondes are really spectacular."

Frankie said, "Wait a minute, are you sayin' that I'm not spec..."

She stopped and they turned their faces toward the path. Somebody was scuffling down through the trees, in violation of the "Occupied" sign. Honus stood up and barked, two, three times, and Virgil and Frankie dropped their feet to the rocky bottom of the swimming hole, and Frankie called out: "Hey! Who's there?"

The scuffling continued for a few more seconds, then a tall, slender, wide-shouldered blonde emerged on the path and chirped, “Hi, Frank.”

Frankie said, “Sparkle! What are you doing here?”

“I’m about to go swimming,” she said. There was more scuffling behind her, and a heavy-set man who probably thought he looked like Ernest Hemingway, with a Hemingway beard and Hemingway gold-rimmed glasses, stepped out of the woods. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a schematic drawing of a host and chalice, and beneath that, the words, “Get Real. Be Catholic,” plus cargo shorts and plastic flipflops.

He looked down at them and said, “Hello, there.”

Sparkle pulled her top off – she was small-breasted and didn’t wear a brassiere – then her shorts and underpants and jumped into the swimming hole. When she surfaced, Frankie snarled, “You really, really aren’t invited.”

“Oh, shut up,” Sparkle said. She looked at Virgil. “You must be the famous Virgil fuckin’ Flowers.”

Virgil said, “Yeah. Who are you?”

Sparkle frowned at Frankie and said, “You’ve never told him?”

Frankie looked like she was working up a full-blown snit. “No. Why should I?”

Sparkle turned back to Virgil and said, “I’m Frankie’s baby sister.”

Virgil said to Frankie, “You have a baby sister?”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said.

“Careful,” Sparkle said. “You don’t want to piss off Father Bill.”

They all looked at the heavy-set man, who had removed his t-shirt, glasses and watch, and was now stepping out of his shorts, to reveal a dark brown pelt, speckled with gray, that would have done credit to a cinnamon bear. “That’s me,” he said. He flopped into the swimming hole, came up sputtering, and said, “Gosh. Nobody told me it’d be this cold.”

“What’s the Father Bill stuff?” Frankie asked.

“I’m a priest,” Bill said, shaking his head like a wet dog. “Part-time, anyway.”

“He’s a priest nine months of the year, and a bartender and libertine the other three,” Sparkle said.

“I work over at the Hanrattys’ Resort during the summer, tending bar,” Bill said. “I’m a fill-in priest for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis the other nine.”

“Must be nice for you,” Frankie said.

“It’s convenient all the way around,” Bill said. He had a mild, low-pitched voice that came out as a growl. “The Hanrattys are always hard-up for seasonal help, and the bishop gets a fill-in guy and only has to pay him for nine months.”

“And you get laid,” Frankie said.

“A fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“Hey! I’m a fringe benefit?” Now Sparkle was clouding up, or faking it, pushing out her lower lip. Virgil hadn’t seen the family resemblance before: Sparkle was tall and slender, Frankie was short and busty. They clouded up exactly the same way.

“Okay, a major fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“That’s better.”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said again. To Sparkle: “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I thought I’d stop by and see my beloved sister – and I’m also doing the last bit of research for my dissertation.” She rolled over on her back and paddled past Virgil, a not uninteresting sight.. “I’m interviewing migrants at the Castro canning factory. I thought Bill and I could share your spare bedroom.”

Frankie scrutinized her for a couple of heartbeats, then asked, “Does old man Castro know about this?”

“I haven’t made what you’d call appointments, no,” Sparkle said.

“You’re going to get your ass kicked,” Frankie said. “He’s a mean old sonofabitch. When it’s about to happen, give me a call. I want to come and watch.”

“I was hoping Virgil could have a chat with the line manager over there...you know, about prisons

and stuff.”

“You don’t be dragging Virgil into this,” Frankie said.

“What’s your problem, Frankie? Virgil’s a cop, it’s a part of his job,” Sparkle said.

“He investigates after the ass-kicking, not before,” Frankie said.

“What’s this all about?” Virgil asked. “Why is...Sparkle?...going to get her ass kicked?”

Sparkle, back-floating between the cop and the priest, explained: she was working on her Ph.D dissertation about seasonal migrant labor, both the social and economic aspects, at the University of Minnesota. She’d spent two years among the vegetable-growing fields of southern Minnesota and was now moving upstream to the factories. When she had incorporated the factory material, she’d have her doctorate.

“Why would that get your ass kicked?” Virgil asked.

“Because old man Castro has a deal with this village down in Mexico,” Sparkle said. She dropped her feet to the bottom of the pool. “They provide him couples to pick the cucumbers and work in his pickle factory. He pays the man a buck or two above the minimum wage, which makes him look like a hero, but the wife also works and doesn’t get anything – so his pickers and factory workers are making a little more than half the minimum wage, when it’s all said and done. He would rather not have this documented.”

“And you’re going to write that in your dissertation?” Virgil asked.

“I am.”

“Okay. I can see why you might be headed for an ass-kicking,” Virgil said.

“See? Crazy shit,” Frankie said to Virgil. “You should introduce her to Lucas, since Lucas likes crazy shit so much.”

“Who’s Lucas?” Sparkle asked. She’d turned to her sister and stood up in waist-deep water, her back to Virgil. He noticed that she had an extremely attractive back, tapering down to a narrow waist. Backs were largely unappreciated in women, Virgil thought, but not by him.

“Another cop,” Frankie said. “Actually, ex-cop. He’s the one who saved Michaela Bowden’s life down at the Iowa State Fair last week.”

“Really!” Sparkle said. “I would like to meet him.”

“Ah, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said a third time.

Father Bill had ducked his head under water, and had come up sputtering. “I don’t mean to be critical on such short acquaintance, but do you think you might find some way to employ vulgarity or obscenity, rather than profanity, at least when I’m around?” Father Bill asked Frankie. “A nice round ‘Oh, shit’ or ‘Fuck you’ is much easier to accept than your taking of the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Ah, Jesus,” Frankie said.

Virgil said quickly, “She means the Puerto Rican, not the Lord.”

The two women paddled up the swimming hole, where the creek came in, nagging at each other. Virgil stayed at the bottom end of the pool, with Bill, and Bill apologized for their abrupt entrance, saying “Once Sparkle starts to roll, there’s not much you can do about it.”

“Is her name really Sparkle?”

“No, but it’s what everybody calls her,” Bill said. “Somebody at Hanratty’s told me that her birth name was Wanda.”

They looked after the women, who’d gotten to the top of the pool, where the water was shallow. They floated there, still arguing, then Frankie stood up and dove forward. Bill’s eyebrows went up as she did it, and he said, “Oh, my. When the Good Lord was passing out breasts, it looks like Frankie went through the line more than once.”

Virgil said, “Yeah, well...I guess.”

Bill: “You’re embarrassed because I’m a priest and I’m interested in women?”

Virgil said, in his quotation voice, “Kiss and rekiss your wife. Let her love and be loved. You are fortunate in having overcome, by an honorable marriage, that celibacy in which one is a prey to devouring

fires or unclean ideas. The unhappy state of a single person, male or female, reveals to me each hour of the day so many horrors, that nothing sounds in my ear as bad as the name of monk or nun or priest. A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting.”

“Really,” said Bill, sounding pleased. “Who said that?”

“Martin Luther. In a letter to a friend.”

“Luther. I don’t know much of Luther, other than he had horns, a forked tale and cloven hooves instead of feet. But he said that? You’re the religious sort?”

“Not so much – at least, I’m not that big a believer in institutions,” Virgil said. “My old man is a Lutheran minister over in Marshall. He used to soak me in that stuff and some of it stuck.”

“Good for him, good for him,” Bill said. “You’ll have to send me a citation for that letter, so I can read it all. Martin Luther, who would have thought?”

“Is this relationship with Sparkle... a long-term thing?” Virgil asked.

“No, no, it isn’t. I’ve spent time with her the last two summers, but of course, the other nine months I’m celibate and she doesn’t put up with that.”

“That seems very strange to me,” Virgil said.

“It seems fairly strange to me, too, but I find both sides of the equation to be rewarding,” Bill said. “Of course, I may go to hell.”

“No offense, but I don’t think the Church gets to decide who goes to hell,” Virgil said.

“I’m not offended,” Bill said cheerfully. “In fact, I agree. Don’t tell the Church I said that.”

The two women came paddling back and Frankie hooked an arm around Virgil’s sun-pinked neck and said, “Sparkle’s going to be here for a while. You keep telling me you’re going to get a queen-sized or a king-sized bed, and this would be a good time to do to do it, because I’m going to be sleeping over a couple times a week.”

“I can do that,” Virgil said. “That old bed is shot anyway.”

Frankie said to Bill, “You can go ahead and fuck Sparkle, but I don’t want her squealing and screaming and all that – keep it quiet. I got kids.”

Bill said to Sparkle, “Maybe we ought to find another place.”

“No, no, no...this is convenient and I like hanging out with my nephews,” Sparkle said. “Another thing is that Castro’s goons won’t find me out here. Besides, if you tie me up and gag me, nobody’ll hear a thing.”

They all looked at Bill who said, “Sometimes I have to struggle to keep my head from exploding.”

“That’s called the Sparkle effect,” Frankie said.

The four of them paddled around for a while, until, from the bank of the swimming hole, a phone began playing the Theme from Jaws. Honus stood up and woofed at it, then lay back down, and Frankie said, “Uh, oh.”

Sparkle: “What’s that?”

“The priority number from the BCA,” Virgil said. “It usually means the shit has hit the fan, somewhere. I gotta take it.”

He’d hoped the other two would leave before he had to get out of the water, but all eyes were on him as he manfully waded out of the swimming hole and sat on the bank, fumbled the phone out of his jeans.

Jon Duncan calling. “Jon, what’s up?”

“We need you up here,” Duncan said. “Right away, this afternoon.”

“What happened?”

“That whole thing down in Iowa, at the state fair last week, has upset the apple cart,” Duncan said. “You know our fair starts this week, there’re gonna be more politicians up here, campaigning. We’re worried about copy-cats.”

Virgil groaned. “Man, don’t make me work the state fair.”

“No, no, we got that covered,” Duncan said. “But everybody’s committed now at the fair, and we’ve got a new problem. A big one.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Somebody stole the Amur tigers from the zoo last night,” Duncan said. “Apparently shot them with a tranquilizer gun and hauled them out of there. Since it’s a state zoo, it’s our problem.”

“What? Tigers?”

“Yeah. Somebody stole the tigers...two Amur tigers. Pride of the zoo. Listen, man, you’ve got to get up here,” Duncan said. “There’s gonna be a media shitstorm starting tonight on the evening news. We gotta get the tigers back: and we gotta get them back right now. And alive.”

Most helpful customer reviews

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Dig in those claws instead of padding around

By Paper or Kindle

I enjoyed this a lot, but saw a lot of flaws in it which I couldn't overlook. The enjoyable parts involve the presence of Virgil Flowers, an investigator who is pretty much the antithesis of the gun-slinging stereotype, a tiger with a lot of sinister personality, and the Simonians, a bizarre clan who somehow reminded me of brothers from SNL. The flaws were everywhere. A secondary plot, in which Frankie's sister goes undercover, is not well developed. Neither is Frankie's personality, and I don't get the attraction between her and Virgil, which has already dragged on for several books. The author has stated in an online interview that he felt he made a big mistake in marrying off Lucas Davenport, protagonist of his other series. I think he's making a similar mistake in keeping Virgil tied to Frankie. There's another character in this book who doesn't make much sense: a part-time priest who is having a part-time affair with Frankie's sister. Anyway, the bad guys are so inept, it's a wonder they accomplish anything, but that was part of the enjoyable dog and pony - er, tiger - tale. Mostly, I found myself rooting for Katya. She's a tiger par excellence!

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Worth reading

By jreflog

A good book but not his greatest. maybe I just waited for it so long that I expected more. Virgil lost some of his dry subtle wit. Funniest line in the book was the cop telling Virgil "you couldn't hit the side of a barn from the inside". I did laugh at that one. The standard characters were well drawn ,as usual, but some of the new stuff was a little off the wall. Sparkle, rare tigers in Minnesota, Bill the preacher, c'mon man.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

I really like the Virgil Flowers character but this book somehow loses ...

By Matthew Gutbrod

I have been a Sandford fan from the beginning. I really like the Virgil Flowers character but this book somehow loses the Flowers charm from prior books. I loved how Sandford use to weave his fishing and outdoor writing and his nightly prayers and thoughts of his father. Those components were all missing and the result was a flatter character which left the book missing some flavor. Virgil has much more depth than Davenport and therefore was a more likeable character. It's really too bad.

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“The biggest joys of this series are Flowers himself (his boss is Lucas Davenport from Sandford’s Prey novels), the case of eccentric supporting characters, and the humorous dialogue.” —Shelf Awareness

“Pure reading pleasure.” —Booklist

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Chapter One

Peck popped a Xanax, screwed the cap back on the pill tube, peered over the top of the bush and through the chain link fence, and in a hoarse whisper, asked, “You see the other one?”

The big man with the rifle whispered, “Right by that tree, above the first one. She’s looking down at him.”

“Get her.”

The big man rested the muzzle of the rifle in the V of one of the chain links, pulled the trigger: the rifle made a “pop” sound, not much louder than a handclap. They waited, staring into the darkness, then Peck said, “Ah, you dumb shit, you missed her. You missed her. She should be down, but she’s not. She’s moving.”

“Might have hit that brush, deflected the shot...”

“She’s moving out in the open. Reload,” Peck said.

“I’m doing it, get off my back, will ya?”

“Can you see her now?” Peck asked. “She’s getting curious about why the guy’s just lying there.”

Pop.

“Got her. Saw it hit,” the big man said.

“Sure she’s down? We don’t want to make a mistake.”

“She’s going down now...” the big man whispered, “I’m pretty sure.”

Peck could smell the nicotine and tar on the other man’s breath. The big guy was addicted to Akhtamar Black Flames, and almost always had one stuck to his lower lip; but not now. Peck reached out and slapped him on the back of the head and said, “I don’t want to hear that pretty sure. You know what happens if you’re wrong? We’re dead men.”

“You fuckin’ slap me again and I’ll stick the gun butt up your ass and twist it sideways.”

A small man, crouched on the other side of the rifleman, “I saw them get hit. I saw it, man. Both of them. But who knows if it was enough?”

They all went silent for a moment, squinting into the dark. Two bodies lay in the short grass, unmoving. The fence was twenty feet high and stouter than a normal chain link; a prison fence. With no sign of movement on the other side, Peck said, “Hamlet: cut the fence.”

“What if they’re faking?” The small guy had half-circles under his eyes, so dark they looked like broken blue poker chips.

“You’re the one who said they got hit,” Peck said. The soapy touch of Xanax was slipping into his brain.

The small guy said, “Maybe we oughta split. I’m not feeling so sure about this.”

“We’re here. It’s done. Cut the fuckin’ fence,” Peck said.

Hamlet’s side-cutters made a grunt sound as he snipped each piece of wire. Grunt-grunt-grunt. They’d come well-equipped: they wore rubber kitchen gloves and black clothing and trucker hats and, in addition to the gun, had brought a roll of black duct tape they’d use to put the fence back together when they left.

Hamlet was cutting a wide oval in the fence, leaving it hinged on one side. He’d gotten halfway around the oval when the big man, Hayk, hissed and touched his brother’s arm and whispered, “Someone’s coming.”

They sank into the brush and Hayk moved the muzzle of the rifle around until it pointed out at the perimeter road. Twenty seconds later, a man in a gray uniform ambled along the road, looking at nothing in particular, talking to himself.

When he was directly opposite them, forty feet away, they heard him say, “I told him not to give her the money. She’ll blow it on herself. That’s what she’ll do, and you know it. It won’t get to your mom. She doesn’t care about your mom...”

Peck realized that the security guard was wearing an ear piece and was talking into a cell phone. He lost the thread of what the man was saying as he disappeared around the curve of the frontage road. When the guard was well out of earshot, Hamlet whispered, “I think he had a gun.”

“No, he didn’t – I checked that out,” Peck said.

“Not in the middle of the night.”

“The guards are not armed,” Peck said.

Hayk said, “Ham, keep cutting. We’re almost there.”

Hamlet went back to cutting and, two minutes later, pulled open the cut curve of fencing, like a gate.

Peck said, "Go on. Crawl through there."

"Why don't you crawl there?" Hamlet asked.

Peck had no immediate answer for that, and the Xanax now had a good grip on him, so he said, "All right, I will. Hold the fence." Hamlet pulled the fence further back. When Peck was through, he turned to Hayk and said, "Give me the gun."

"Not loaded."

"That's okay, I'm gonna use it as a poker."

Hayk handed him the gun and Peck crawled fifteen feet to the first body and poked it with the gun's muzzle. No reaction. That was a good thing. The other body was ten feet further on. He poked that one, too, got no response.

He turned around and whispered, "We're good."

"Told ja," Hamlet said, too loud.

Peck whispered, "Shut up, you fuckin' moron. Get the dollies in here."

Hayk pushed the dollies through the hole in the fence and rolled them over to the bodies. The dollies were the kind used by garden shops, with a flat bed and wide soft wheels.

"Goddamn, heavier than hell," Hayk said, as they lifted the first body onto a dolly. They couldn't see much further than fifteen or twenty feet away, and the moon didn't help: it sat right on the western horizon and splashed a silvery light off the trees around them. The contrast made it hard to discern shapes and movement.

"Gonna have to push them through the fence one at a time, right out to the perimeter," Peck said. Despite the Xanax, he was sweating heavily, not from the hot summer night, but from fear. He could smell the stink of it on himself.

They loaded the second body on the second dolly and pushed them one at a time through the fence. Then Peck and Hayk dragged the dollies through the brush to the edge of the perimeter road, while Hamlet pulled the fence back into its original configuration and taped some of the cut ends together with strips of the black duct tape. Five quick repairs and the fence looked like new, in the night, anyway.

When Hamlet joined the others out at the perimeter road, Peck said, "I'm going to scout. When you see the laser, bring them."

They nodded and he moved slowly along the edge of the perimeter road, where he could quickly step into the brush if he needed to. Peck had planned the whole operation and he knew there were only a couple of night guards. From that point-of-view, having a guard pass by only minutes before was a good thing, if a little unnerving. That meant the other guard was a half mile away, and the one they'd seen probably wouldn't be back around for an hour or more.

The perimeter road curved gently to Peck's right. When he'd gotten to the exit point, and had seen nobody, he stepped out to the road's edge, took a laser pointer from his chest pocket, aimed it back toward Hayk and Hamlet, and played the red light-dot across their hiding place.

A minute later, in the ambient light from the parking lot, he saw them move out onto the road, pulling the dollies with their motionless loads. They moved slowly at first, and then more urgently, and finally began to trot.

The tires were almost, but not quite, silent; there was no one but Peck to hear them. When Hayk and Hamlet came up, Peck led them across the road to another chain link fence, which they'd already cut. They rolled the dollies through the fence, down a mild slope to the edge of a grassy yard, with a darkened house eighty feet away. They waited there while Hamlet repaired the second fence, this time with silver duct tape. A scummy pond lay off to their left, home to any number of green-and-black frogs. Earlier in the summer, when they were making scouting trips, the frogs had been croaking their froggy asses off. Now that Peck could use the covering noise, they were resolutely silent.

Hamlet finished with the fence, and they eased the dollies across the yard to the back door of the garage, pushed the door open and pulled the dollies inside and closed the door. Hayk took a flashlight out of a cargo pocket and turned it on.

The van was ready, cargo doors open. They rolled the dollies up a handicapped ramp into the back of the van, closed the doors. Hamlet and Hayk got into the van, Hayk as the wheelman, while Peck went to the door into the house, stepped inside and looked out a kitchen window at the street.

He was looking out at a suburban neighborhood, a bunch of three-bedroom houses where everybody worked day jobs and the kids went to school: the houses were almost all dark, and the street was empty.

He hurried back to the garage, pulling the house door closed behind himself, and pushed the wall switch for the garage door opener. The garage door went up, but no light came on, because Peck had thought of everything: they'd loosened the garage light. Hayk drove the van out of the garage, Peck pushed the wall switch again and the door started down.

There was an ankle-high infra-red safety light that beamed across the door opening, to keep the door from closing on children who might be standing beneath it. Peck stepped carefully over it – he really had groomed the plan, he thought, with nothing left to chance – went to the van, and climbed into a back seat.

Hayk rolled it down to the street, took a right, and Hamlet said, "Made it."

Chapter Two

The cloudless sky was blue, of course, but the pale blue that tended almost to green, if you were lying naked in a Minnesota swimming hole on a hot summer day, looking up through the branches of the creek-side cottonwoods, thinking about nothing much, except the prospect of lunch.

Virgil Flowers was doing that, bathed in the cool spring water and the scent of fresh-mown hay. Frankie Nobles's oldest son was windrowing the teddered hay, riding a '70s International Harvester tractor, the all-original diesel engine clattering up and down the eighty-acre field on the other side of the crooked line of cottonwoods.

Virgil usually managed to evade the whole haying process, pleading the exigencies of law enforcement, but with this last cut of the summer, Frankie had her eye on him. All her farm equipment was marginal, and though a neighbor would be over with his modern baler and wagon, two-thirds of the bales – the small rectangular ones – would be unloaded in the barnyard.

From Virgil's point of view, there was one good thing about this – the neighbor would keep a third of the hay for his trouble. The bad thing was, somebody would have to load the other two-thirds of the bales on Frankie's ancient elevator, and somebody would have to stack it in the sweltering, wasp-infested barn loft.

"Why," Virgil asked, "are barn lofts always infested with wasps?"

"Because that's life," Frankie said, back-floating past him on a pair of pink plastic water-wings. She was unencumbered by clothing. They'd have the swimming hole to themselves until the tractor stopped running, and then the boys would take it over. For the time being, their privacy was assured by a sign at the beginning of the path through the woods, that said, Occupied, with newcomers required to call out before entering. "In the hay-lofts of life, there are always a few wasps."

"I'm allergic to wasps," Virgil ventured. He was a tall blond man, his long hair now plastered like a yellow bowl over his head.

"You're allergic to haying," Frankie said.

"I can't even believe you bother with it," Virgil said. "You have to give a third of the hay to Carl, to pay for his time and baling equipment. Whatever hay you manage to keep and sell, the feds and state take half the money. What's the point?"

"I feed the hay to my cattle," she said. "We eat the cattle. There are no taxes."

"You don't have any cattle," Virgil said.

"The feds and state don't know that." She was another blond, short and partially slender.

“Please don’t tell me that,” Virgil said. “Your goddamn tax returns must read like a mystery novel.”

“Shoulda seen my mortgage application,” Frankie said. “One of those ninja deals – no income, no job. Worked out for me, though.”

Honus, a big yellow dog, lay soaking wet on the bank, in a spot of sunshine. He liked to swim, but he also liked to lie wet in the sun.

Frankie kicked past and Virgil ducked under water and floated up between her legs. “You have a very attractive pussy,” he said.

“I’ve been told that,” Frankie said. “I’ve been thinking of entering it in the state fair.”

“I could be a judge,” Virgil offered.

“You certainly have the necessary expertise,” she said.

“Speaking of state fairs...Lucas should have been killed,” Virgil said, floating back a bit. “I can’t believe the stories coming out of Iowa. I talked to him about it last night, he’s up to his ass in bureaucrats, like nothing he’s ever seen. He said he’s been interviewed a half-dozen times by the FBI. The goddamn Purdys almost blew up the presidential election. Would have, if he hadn’t been there.”

“Lucas is a crazy man,” Frankie said. “He chases crazy people. That’s what he does, and he likes it. Anyway, that’s the Iowa state fair. I’d enter the Minnesota state fair.”

“Probably do better, as far as getting a ribbon,” Virgil said. Frankie’s knees folded over his shoulders. “Lucas said the Iowa blondes are really spectacular.”

Frankie said, “Wait a minute, are you sayin’ that I’m not spec...”

She stopped and they turned their faces toward the path. Somebody was scuffling down through the trees, in violation of the “Occupied” sign. Honus stood up and barked, two, three times, and Virgil and Frankie dropped their feet to the rocky bottom of the swimming hole, and Frankie called out: “Hey! Who’s there?”

The scuffling continued for a few more seconds, then a tall, slender, wide-shouldered blonde emerged on the path and chirped, “Hi, Frank.”

Frankie said, “Sparkle! What are you doing here?”

“I’m about to go swimming,” she said. There was more scuffling behind her, and a heavy-set man who probably thought he looked like Ernest Hemingway, with a Hemingway beard and Hemingway gold-rimmed glasses, stepped out of the woods. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a schematic drawing of a host and chalice, and beneath that, the words, “Get Real. Be Catholic,” plus cargo shorts and plastic flipflops.

He looked down at them and said, “Hello, there.”

Sparkle pulled her top off – she was small-breasted and didn’t wear a brassiere – then her shorts and underpants and jumped into the swimming hole. When she surfaced, Frankie snarled, “You really, really aren’t invited.”

“Oh, shut up,” Sparkle said. She looked at Virgil. “You must be the famous Virgil fuckin’ Flowers.”

Virgil said, “Yeah. Who are you?”

Sparkle frowned at Frankie and said, “You’ve never told him?”

Frankie looked like she was working up a full-blown snit. “No. Why should I?”

Sparkle turned back to Virgil and said, “I’m Frankie’s baby sister.”

Virgil said to Frankie, “You have a baby sister?”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said.

“Careful,” Sparkle said. “You don’t want to piss off Father Bill.”

They all looked at the heavy-set man, who had removed his t-shirt, glasses and watch, and was now stepping out of his shorts, to reveal a dark brown pelt, speckled with gray, that would have done credit to a cinnamon bear. “That’s me,” he said. He flopped into the swimming hole, came up sputtering, and said, “Gosh. Nobody told me it’d be this cold.”

“What’s the Father Bill stuff?” Frankie asked.

“I’m a priest,” Bill said, shaking his head like a wet dog. “Part-time, anyway.”

“He’s a priest nine months of the year, and a bartender and libertine the other three,” Sparkle said.

“I work over at the Hanrattys’ Resort during the summer, tending bar,” Bill said. “I’m a fill-in priest for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis the other nine.”

“Must be nice for you,” Frankie said.

“It’s convenient all the way around,” Bill said. He had a mild, low-pitched voice that came out as a growl. “The Hanrattys are always hard-up for seasonal help, and the bishop gets a fill-in guy and only has to pay him for nine months.”

“And you get laid,” Frankie said.

“A fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“Hey! I’m a fringe benefit?” Now Sparkle was clouding up, or faking it, pushing out her lower lip. Virgil hadn’t seen the family resemblance before: Sparkle was tall and slender, Frankie was short and busty. They clouded up exactly the same way.

“Okay, a major fringe benefit,” Bill said.

“That’s better.”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said again. To Sparkle: “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I thought I’d stop by and see my beloved sister – and I’m also doing the last bit of research for my dissertation.” She rolled over on her back and paddled past Virgil, a not uninteresting sight. “I’m interviewing migrants at the Castro canning factory. I thought Bill and I could share your spare bedroom.”

Frankie scrutinized her for a couple of heartbeats, then asked, “Does old man Castro know about this?”

“I haven’t made what you’d call appointments, no,” Sparkle said.

“You’re going to get your ass kicked,” Frankie said. “He’s a mean old sonofabitch. When it’s about to happen, give me a call. I want to come and watch.”

“I was hoping Virgil could have a chat with the line manager over there...you know, about prisons and stuff.”

“You don’t be dragging Virgil into this,” Frankie said.

“What’s your problem, Frankie? Virgil’s a cop, it’s a part of his job,” Sparkle said.

“He investigates after the ass-kicking, not before,” Frankie said.

“What’s this all about?” Virgil asked. “Why is...Sparkle?...going to get her ass kicked?”

Sparkle, back-floating between the cop and the priest, explained: she was working on her Ph.D dissertation about seasonal migrant labor, both the social and economic aspects, at the University of Minnesota. She’d spent two years among the vegetable-growing fields of southern Minnesota and was now moving upstream to the factories. When she had incorporated the factory material, she’d have her doctorate.

“Why would that get your ass kicked?” Virgil asked.

“Because old man Castro has a deal with this village down in Mexico,” Sparkle said. She dropped her feet to the bottom of the pool. “They provide him couples to pick the cucumbers and work in his pickle factory. He pays the man a buck or two above the minimum wage, which makes him look like a hero, but the wife also works and doesn’t get anything – so his pickers and factory workers are making a little more than half the minimum wage, when it’s all said and done. He would rather not have this documented.”

“And you’re going to write that in your dissertation?” Virgil asked.

“I am.”

“Okay. I can see why you might be headed for an ass-kicking,” Virgil said.

“See? Crazy shit,” Frankie said to Virgil. “You should introduce her to Lucas, since Lucas likes crazy shit so much.”

“Who’s Lucas?” Sparkle asked. She’d turned to her sister and stood up in waist-deep water, her back to Virgil. He noticed that she had an extremely attractive back, tapering down to a narrow waist. Backs were largely unappreciated in women, Virgil thought, but not by him.

“Another cop,” Frankie said. “Actually, ex-cop. He’s the one who saved Michaela Bowden’s life down at the Iowa State Fair last week.”

“Really!” Sparkle said. “I would like to meet him.”

“Ah, for Christ’s sakes,” Frankie said a third time.

Father Bill had ducked his head under water, and had come up sputtering. “I don’t mean to be critical on such short acquaintance, but do you think you might find some way to employ vulgarity or obscenity, rather than profanity, at least when I’m around?” Father Bill asked Frankie. “A nice round ‘Oh, shit’ or ‘Fuck you’ is much easier to accept than your taking of the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Ah, Jesus,” Frankie said.

Virgil said quickly, “She means the Puerto Rican, not the Lord.”

The two women paddled up the swimming hole, where the creek came in, nagging at each other. Virgil stayed at the bottom end of the pool, with Bill, and Bill apologized for their abrupt entrance, saying “Once Sparkle starts to roll, there’s not much you can do about it.”

“Is her name really Sparkle?”

“No, but it’s what everybody calls her,” Bill said. “Somebody at Hanratty’s told me that her birth name was Wanda.”

They looked after the women, who’d gotten to the top of the pool, where the water was shallow. They floated there, still arguing, then Frankie stood up and dove forward. Bill’s eyebrows went up as she did it, and he said, “Oh, my. When the Good Lord was passing out breasts, it looks like Frankie went through the line more than once.”

Virgil said, “Yeah, well...I guess.”

Bill: “You’re embarrassed because I’m a priest and I’m interested in women?”

Virgil said, in his quotation voice, “Kiss and rekiss your wife. Let her love and be loved. You are fortunate in having overcome, by an honorable marriage, that celibacy in which one is a prey to devouring fires or unclean ideas. The unhappy state of a single person, male or female, reveals to me each hour of the day so many horrors, that nothing sounds in my ear as bad as the name of monk or nun or priest. A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting.”

“Really,” said Bill, sounding pleased. “Who said that?”

“Martin Luther. In a letter to a friend.”

“Luther. I don’t know much of Luther, other than he had horns, a forked tale and cloven hooves instead of feet. But he said that? You’re the religious sort?”

“Not so much – at least, I’m not that big a believer in institutions,” Virgil said. “My old man is a Lutheran minister over in Marshall. He used to soak me in that stuff and some of it stuck.”

“Good for him, good for him,” Bill said. “You’ll have to send me a citation for that letter, so I can read it all. Martin Luther, who would have thought?”

“Is this relationship with Sparkle...a long-term thing?” Virgil asked.

“No, no, it isn’t. I’ve spent time with her the last two summers, but of course, the other nine months I’m celibate and she doesn’t put up with that.”

“That seems very strange to me,” Virgil said.

“It seems fairly strange to me, too, but I find both sides of the equation to be rewarding,” Bill said. “Of course, I may go to hell.”

“No offense, but I don’t think the Church gets to decide who goes to hell,” Virgil said.

“I’m not offended,” Bill said cheerfully. “In fact, I agree. Don’t tell the Church I said that.”

The two women came paddling back and Frankie hooked an arm around Virgil’s sun-pinked neck and said, “Sparkle’s going to be here for a while. You keep telling me you’re going to get a queen-sized or a king-sized bed, and this would be a good time to do to do it, because I’m going to be sleeping over a couple times a week.”

“I can do that,” Virgil said. “That old bed is shot anyway.”

Frankie said to Bill, “You can go ahead and fuck Sparkle, but I don’t want her squealing and screaming and all that – keep it quiet. I got kids.”

Bill said to Sparkle, “Maybe we ought to find another place.”

“No, no, no...this is convenient and I like hanging out with my nephews,” Sparkle said. “Another thing is that Castro’s goons won’t find me out here. Besides, if you tie me up and gag me, nobody’ll hear a thing.”

They all looked at Bill who said, “Sometimes I have to struggle to keep my head from exploding.”

“That’s called the Sparkle effect,” Frankie said.

The four of them paddled around for a while, until, from the bank of the swimming hole, a phone began playing the Theme from Jaws. Honus stood up and woofed at it, then lay back down, and Frankie said, “Uh, oh.”

Sparkle: “What’s that?”

“The priority number from the BCA,” Virgil said. “It usually means the shit has hit the fan, somewhere. I gotta take it.”

He’d hoped the other two would leave before he had to get out of the water, but all eyes were on him as he manfully waded out of the swimming hole and sat on the bank, fumbled the phone out of his jeans.

Jon Duncan calling. “Jon, what’s up?”

“We need you up here,” Duncan said. “Right away, this afternoon.”

“What happened?”

“That whole thing down in Iowa, at the state fair last week, has upset the apple cart,” Duncan said. “You know our fair starts this week, there’re gonna be more politicians up here, campaigning. We’re worried about copy-cats.”

Virgil groaned. “Man, don’t make me work the state fair.”

“No, no, we got that covered,” Duncan said. “But everybody’s committed now at the fair, and we’ve got a new problem. A big one.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Somebody stole the Amur tigers from the zoo last night,” Duncan said. “Apparently shot them with a tranquilizer gun and hauled them out of there. Since it’s a state zoo, it’s our problem.”

“What? Tigers?”

“Yeah. Somebody stole the tigers...two Amur tigers. Pride of the zoo. Listen, man, you’ve got to get up here,” Duncan said. “There’s gonna be a media shitstorm starting tonight on the evening news. We gotta get the tigers back: and we gotta get them back right now. And alive.”

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