

JOHN
SANDFORD



MORTAL
PREY

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Rules of Prey

Shadow Prey

Eyes of Prey

Silent Prey

Winter Prey

Night Prey

Mind Prey

Sudden Prey

The Night Crew

Secret Prey

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KIDD NOVELS

The Fool's Run

The Empress File

The Devil's Code

MORTAL PREY

JOHN SANDFORD

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THE THOUGHT POPPED INTO HER HEAD as she lay in the soft-washed yellowed sheets in the hospital bed. The thought popped in between the gas pains and muscle spasms, through the pungent odor of alcohol swabs, and if she'd read the thought in a book, she might have smiled at it.

She wasn't smiling at anything now.

She stared past the IV drip bag at the whitewashed plaster ceiling and tried not to groan when the pains came, knowing that they would end; tried not to look at the hard-eyed Mexicano at the end of the bed, his hand never far from the pistol that lay under the newspaper on the arm of his chair. Tried not to think about Paulo.

Tried not to think about anything, but sometimes the thoughts popped up: tall, wiry Paulo in his ruffled tuxedo shirt, his jacket on the chair, a glass of red wine in one hand, his other hand, balled in fist, on his hip, looking at himself in the full-length mirror on the back of his bedroom door, pretending to be a matador. Paulo with the children's book *Father Christmas*, sitting naked at her kitchen table with a glass of milk and a milk mustache, delighted by the grumpy Santa Claus. Paulo asleep next to her, his face pale and trusting in the day's first light, the soft light that came in over the gulf just before sunrise.

But the thought that might have made her smile, if it was in a book, was:

Just like the fuckin' Godfather.

LIKE THIS: AN Italian restaurant called Gino's, with the full Italian-cliché stage setting—sienna orange walls, bottles of Chianti with straw wrappers, red-and-white checked tablecloths, baskets of hot crust bread as soon as you sat down, the room smelling of sugar and wheat, olives and peppers, and black oily coffee. A few rickety tables outside faced the Plaza de Arboles and the fifties tourist-coordinated stucco church across the way, San Fernando de Something-or-Other. The church belfry contained a loudspeaker that played a full, slow bell version of the Singing Nun's "Dominique," more or less at noon, depending on whose turn it was to drop the needle on the aging vinyl bell-record.

Paulo took her to lunch almost every day, picking her up at the hotel where she worked as a bookkeeper. They'd eat Mexican one day, California or French the next, Italian twice a week. He picked her up about noon, so on most days she could hear, near or far, the recorded bells of San Fernando's.

Gino's was the favored spot. Despite the clichéd Italian stage-setting, there was an actual Gino cooking at Gino's, and the food was terrific. Paulo would pick her up in a black BMW 740iL, his business car, with his smooth-faced business driver. They'd hook up with friends, eat a long Caribbean lunch and laugh and argue and talk politics and cars and boats and sex, and at two o'clock or so, they all head back to work.

A pattern: not predictable to the minute, but predictable enough.

ISRAEL COEN SAT up in the choir loft at the back of the church with his rifle, a scoped Remington Model 700 in .30-06. He'd sighted it in along a dirt track west of town, zeroed at exactly sixty yards, the distance he'd be shooting across the Plaza de Arboles. There was no problem making the shot. If all you wanted was that Izzy Coen make a sixty-yard shot with a scoped Remington 700 you could

you wanted was that Izzy could make a sixty-yard shot with a scoped Remington 700, you could specify which shirt button you wanted the slug to punch through.

Not that everything was perfect. The moron who'd bought the gun apparently thought that bigger was better, so Izzy would be shooting at sixty yards through an eight-power scope, and about all he could see was a shirt button. He would have preferred no magnification at all, or an adjustable two-to-six-power scope, to give him a little room around the crosshairs. But he didn't have that, and would have to make do.

The problem with the scope was exacerbated by the humidity in the loft. Not only was the temperature somewhere in the 120s, he thought, but the humidity must have been 95 percent. He'd sweated through his shirt at his armpits and across his chest, and the sweat beaded on his cheeks and forehead and arms. When he put the rifle to his cheek, the scope fogged over in a matter of seconds. He had a bottle of springwater with him, and that helped keep his body cool enough to function, but there was nothing he could do about the fogging eyepiece. The shot would have to be a quick one.

No matter. He'd scouted the play for three days, he knew what the conditions would be, and he was ready, up high with a rifle, yellow vinyl kitchen gloves protecting against the inadvertent fingerprint, the jeans and thin long-sleeved shirt meant to guard against DNA traces. Izzy was good.

He'd been in the loft for an hour and ten minutes when he saw the 740iL ease around the corner. He had two identical Motorola walkietalkies sitting next to his feet. Izzy believed in redundancy. He picked up the first walkie-talkie, pushed the transmit button, and asked, "Hear me?"

"Yes."

"Come now."

"One minute."

TEN OF THEM had been sitting in the back of Gino's, the talk running down, a friend leaving and then another, with his new girlfriend, who'd been brought around for approval. Then Paulo looked at his watch and said to Rinker, "We better get back."

"Just a minute," she said. "Turn this way." She turned his chin in her hand, dipped a napkin into a glass of water, and used the wet cloth to wipe a nearly invisible smear of red sauce from his lower lip.

"I was saving that for later," he protested.

"I couldn't send you back that way," she said. "Your mother would kill me."

"My mother," he said, rolling his black eyes.

THEY WALKED OUT of the Italian restaurant—*Just like the fuckin' Godfather*—and the black BMW stopped beyond the balustrade that separated the restaurant's patio from the Plaza. They walked past an American who sat at a circular table in his Hawaiian shirt and wide-brimmed flat hat, peering into a guidebook—all the details as clear and sharp three days later, in the hospital, as the moment when it happened—and the driver started to get out and Paulo called, "I got it, I got it," and Rinker reached for the door handle, but Paulo beat her to it, stepping in front of her in that last little quarter-second of life....

The shot sounded like a firecracker, but the driver knew it wasn't. The driver was in his pocket and Rinker, suddenly feeling ill—not in pain, yet, but just ill, and for some inexplicable reason, falling—

went to the ground, Paulo on top of her. She didn't understand, even as a roaring, ripping sound enveloped her, and she rolled and Paulo looked down at her, but his eyes were already out of control and he opened his mouth and his blood gushed onto her face and into her mouth. She began screaming

as the roaring sound resumed

as the roaring sound resumed.

She rolled and pushed Paulo down on the cobbles and turned his head to keep him from drowning in his own blood, and began screaming at the driver, “Paulo, Paulo, Paulo...”

The driver looked at her, everything slow-moving. She saw the boxy black-steel weapon in his hand, a gun like she hadn’t seen before. She saw his mouth open as he shouted something, then he looked back over the car and then back down at Paulo. Then he was standing over them, and he lifted Paulo and put him on the backseat, and lifted her, and put her in the passenger seat, and in seconds they were flying across the Plaza, the hospital three minutes away, no more.

She looked over the seat, into Paulo’s open eyes; but Paulo wasn’t there anymore.

Paulo had gone. She could taste his blood in her mouth, crusting around her teeth, but Paulo had left the building.

IZZY COHEN SAID, “Goddamnit,” and he wasn’t sure it’d gone right. The scope had blocked too much and he ran the bolt and lifted the rifle for a second shot, the bodies right there, and he saw the driver doing something, and then as Izzy lifted the rifle, the driver opened up and the front of the church powdered around him and Izzy thought, *Jeez...*

An Uzi, he thought, or a gun just like it. Izzy rolled away from the window as the glass blew inward, picked up the two walkietalkies, and scrambled to the far corner of the loft and the steel spiral stair, the bullets flying around him like bees. He dove down the stair and punched through the back door, where a yellow Volkswagen Beetle was waiting with its engine running. Izzy threw the gun in the back, climbed in, and slammed the door. The driver accelerated away from the church’s back door and shouted, “What was that? What was that gun?”

“Fuck if I know,” Izzy said. He was pulling off the latex gloves, shaking glass out of his hair. Blood on his hand—he dabbed at his cheek: just a nick. “A fuckin’ Uzi, maybe.”

“Uzi? What is this Uzi?”

“Israeli gun, it’s a machine gun...”

“I know what IS a fuckin’ Uzi,” the driver shouted. “*WHY* is this fuckin’ Uzi? Why is this?”

“I don’t know,” Izzy said. “Just get us back to the plane and maybe we can find out.”

THE AIRSTRIP WAS a one-lane dirt path cut out of a piece of scraggly jungle twenty kilometers west of the city. On the way, the driver got on his cell phone and made a call, shouting in Spanish over the pounding of the Volkswagen.

“Find out anything?” Izzy asked when he rang off.

“I call now, maybe find out something later,” the driver said. He was a little man who wore a plain pink short-sleeved dress shirt with khaki slacks and brown sandals. His English was usually excellent, but deteriorated under stress.

A couple of kilometers east of the airstrip, they stopped and the driver led the way through a copse of trees to a water-filled hole in the ground. Izzy wiped the Remington and threw it in the hole and tossed the box of shells in after it. “Hope it doesn’t dry up,” he said, looking at the ripples on the black water.

The driver shook his head. “There’s no bottom,” he said. “The hole goes all the way to hell.” The phone rang on the way back to the car and the driver answered it, spoke for a minute, and then clicked off with a nervous sideways glance at Izzy.

“What?”

“Two dead” the driver said. “One bullet?”

TWO DEAD, THE DRIVER SAID. ONE BULLET.
“One shot,” Izzy said with satisfaction. “What was that machine gun?”

The driver shrugged. “Bodyguard, maybe. Nobody knows.”

THE AIRSTRIP TERMINAL WAS a tin-roofed, concrete block building, surrounded by ragged palmettos, with an incongruous rooster-shaped weather vane perched on top. What might have been a more professional windsock hung limply from a pole beside the building, except that the windsock was shaped like a six-foot-long orange trout, and carried the legend “West Yellowstone, Montana.” A Honda generator chugged away in a locked steel box behind the building, putting out the thin stink of burnt gasoline. Finger-sized lizards climbed over walls, poles, and tree trunks, searching for bugs, of which there were many. Everything about the place looked as tired as the windsock. Even the trees. Even the lizards.

From the trip in, Izzy knew the generator ran an ancient air conditioner and an even older dusty-red Coca-Cola cooler inside the building, where the owner sat with a stack of *Playboy* magazines, a radio, and a can of Raid for the biting flies.

“I’ll call again,” the driver said. “You check on the plane.”

When Izzy had gone inside, the driver, now sweating as heavily as the American, dug a revolver out from under the front seat of the Volkswagen, swung the cylinder out and checked it, closed the cylinder, and put the gun under his belt at the small of his back.

Izzy and the driver had known each other for a few years, and there existed the possibility that the driver’s name was on a list somewhere; that somebody knew who was driving Israel Coen around Cancún. But the driver doubted it. Nobody would want to know the details of a thing like this, and Izzy wouldn’t want anyone to know.

Only two people had seen the driver’s face and Izzy’s in the same place: Izzy himself, and the airport manager.

The driver walked into the airport building and pulled the door shut. The building had four windows, and they all looked the same way, out at the strip. And it was cool inside. Izzy was talking to the airport manager, who sat with a Coca-Cola at a metal desk, directly in front of the air conditioner.

“Is he coming?” the driver asked.

“He’s twenty minutes out,” Izzy said, and the airport manager nodded.

The driver yawned. He had twenty minutes. Not much time. “Nice trip,” he said to Izzy. He tipped his head at the door, as though he wanted to speak privately. “Hope your business went well.”

“Let me get my bag,” Izzy said. He stepped toward the door, and the driver pulled it open with his left hand and held it. Izzy stepped out, the driver right behind him, his right hand swinging up with the revolver. When it was an inch behind Izzy’s head, he pulled the trigger and Izzy’s face exploded in blood and he went down. The driver looked at the body for a moment, not quite believing what he’d done, then stepped back inside. The airport manager was half out of his chair, body cocked, and the driver shook his head at him.

“Too bad,” he said, with real regret.

“We’ve known each other for a long time,” the airport manager said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why is...Let me say a prayer.”

“No time,” the driver said. “Today we killed Raul Mejia’s baby boy.”

He shot the airport manager in the heart, and again in the head to make sure. Back outside, he shot Izzy twice more, the shots sounding distant in his own ears, as if they’d come from over a hill. He dragged the body inside the airport building and dumped it beside the airport manager’s. He took

dragged the body inside the airport building and dumped it beside the airport manager's. He took Izzy's wallet and all of his cash, a gold ring with a big red stone and the inscription "University of Connecticut, 1986," and every scrap of paper he could find on him. He also found the padlock for the door on the manager's desk, and the key to the generator box in the manager's pocket. He went outside, padlocked the door behind himself, killed the generator. There was a black patch of bloody dirt where Izzy's head had landed. He scuffed more dirt over it, got back in his Volkswagen, and pulled away.

Raul Mejia's baby boy.

The driver would have said a prayer for himself, if he could have remembered any.

RINKER DIDN'T KNOW the names of the players. When she woke up, she was in the hospital's critical care unit, three empty beds with monitoring equipment, and her own bed. Anthony and Dominic, Paulo's brothers, were sitting at the foot of the bed. She couldn't quite make out their faces until Anthony stood up and stepped close. Her mouth was as dry as a saltine cracker: "Paulo?"

Anthony shook his head. Rinker turned her face away, opened her mouth to cry, but nothing came out. Tears began running down her face, and Anthony took her hand.

"He was...he was dead when they got here.... We, uh, you have been in surgery. We need to know, did you see the man who shot you?"

Rinker wagged her head weakly. "I didn't see anything. I just fell down, I didn't know I was shot. Paulo fell on top of me, I tried to turn his head, he was bleeding..."

More tears, and Dominic was turning his straw hat in his hands, pulling the brim through his fingers in a circular motion, like a man measuring yards of cloth.

"We are trying to find out who did this—the police are helping," Anthony said. "We, uh...You will be all right. The bullet went through Paulo and fell apart, and the core went into you, in your stomach. They operated for two hours, and you will be all right."

She nodded, but her hand twitched toward her stomach.

"I think I'm, I might have been, I think..." she began, looking at Anthony and then Dominic, who had stepped up beside his brother.

Dominic now shook his head. "You have lost the baby."

"Oh, God."

Dominic reached out and touched her covered leg. He was tough as a ball bearing, but he had tears rolling down his cheeks. He said, "We'll find them. This won't pass."

She turned her head away and drifted. When she came back, they'd gone.

SHE WAS IN the hospital for a week: missed Paulo's funeral, slept through a visit by Paulo's father. On the fourth day, they had her up and walking, but they wouldn't let her go until she had produced a solid bowel movement. After that painful experience, she was wheeled out to one of the family's black BMWs and was driven to the Mejia family compound in Mérida. Paulo's father, rolling his own wheelchair though the dark, tiled hallways, met her with an arm around her shoulder and a kiss on the cheek.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. I don't understand it yet. We've been asking everywhere, but there is no word of anything. Some people who might, in theory, have reason to be angry with us from years ago have let it be known that they were not involved, and have offered to help find those who were."

"You can believe them?" she asked

YOU CAN BELIEVE THEM: SHE ASKED.

“Perhaps. We continue to look.... There was a strange circumstance the day Paulo was killed.”

He hesitated, as if puzzling over it, then continued. “Two men were killed at an airstrip not far from here. Shot to death. One was the airstrip manager and the other was an American. There was no indication that they were involved with Paulo’s assassination. With that strip, there is always the question of unauthorized landings”—he meant drug smuggling—“but still, it is a strange coincidence. The American was identified through fingerprints. He was not involved in trade, in”—he made a figure eight in the air with his fingers, meaning *drugs*—“but he served time in prison and was believed connected to American organized crime, to the Mafia. A minor person, he was not important. We are asking more questions of our police, and our police are talking with the Americans. We will find out more, sooner or later.”

“When you find them,” Rinker said through her teeth, her cold eyes only inches from the old man’s, “when you find them, kill them.”

His eyes held hers for a moment, doing an assessment of the woman he knew as Cassie McLain. They didn’t know each other well, but the old man knew that Paulo’s involvement with her was more than casual; knew she’d been pregnant with one of his own grandchildren, this tidy blond American with the perfect Spanish. After the moment, he nodded. “Something will be done,” he said.

“This dead American at the airstrip,” she said, at the end of the audience. “Do you even know where he was from?”

“That we know,” he said. He closed his eyes for a minute, parsing the information in his head. He smelled lightly of garlic, and had fuzzy ears, like a gentle Yoda. There was a legend that in his early years he’d had an informer hung upside down by his ankles, and had then lit a fire under his head. According to the legend, the informer stopped screaming only when his skull exploded. Now Mejia opened his eyes and said, “He lived in a town in Missouri, called Normandy Lake. A woman who lived there told the Missouri police that he’d gone to Cancún on vacation. She said she would come for the body, but she didn’t come. When the police went back to the house, she had gone. She’d packed all her personal belongings and had gone away.”

“That’s crazy,” Rinker said, shaking her head. But her brain was moving now, cutting through the glue that had held her since the shooting, and she was touched by a cool tongue of fear. After a moment, she said, “I don’t want to go home. I’m a little frightened. If it would be all right, I would like to go to the ranch until I can walk. Then I think I will go back to the States.”

“You are welcome to stay as long as you wish,” the old man said. He smiled at her. “You may stay forever, if you wish. The friend of my baby.”

She smiled back. “Thank you, Papa, but Cancún...” She made the same figure eight in the air as he had. “Cancún is Paulo. I think it would be better to go away when I am well.”

One of the old man’s bodyguards wheeled her back out to the BMW, and as the car pulled away, she looked at the driver’s shoulders and the back of his head and realized that she now knew more about what happened at Gino’s than the old man did.

SHE KNEW THAT the bullet had been aimed not at Paulo, but at her.

If the old man found out that his baby boy had been killed because of Rinker, and that Rinker had never told them of the danger—she hadn’t expected it, hadn’t believed it could happen—then maybe

the old man’s anger would be directed at her.

She shivered at the thought, but not too much, because Rinker was as cold as the old man. Instead of worrying, she began planning. She couldn’t do anything until she got her strength back, which might take some time. She’d benefited from the report put out by the Mejia family and the Mexican

might take some time. She'd benefited from the report put out by the Mejia family and the Mexican police that she'd been killed along with Paulo—at the time, they'd done it simply to protect her from a possible cleanup attempt if it turned out that she'd seen the shooter.

The story would serve her well enough. The St. Louis goombahs didn't have anything going in Mexico, as far as she knew, and the only information they would have gotten would have come from the newspapers.

On the other hand, with the old man pushing his drug-world contacts, sooner or later the truth would come out. By that time, she had to have made her move.

Before she talked to the old man, she hadn't had anything to do; now she'd be busy. As Cassie McLain, she'd retired, and was living on her investments. As Clara Rinker, she had to move money, retrieve documents, talk to old acquaintances across the border.

She had to be healthy to do it all.

RINKER SPENT A MONTH at the old man's ranch, living in a bedroom in the main house, with an armed watcher to follow her around. The middle brother, Dominic, visited every third day, arriving at noon as regular as clockwork, to bring her up to date on the family's investigation.

All the time at the ranch, she waited for her image of Paulo to fade. It never did. To the very end of her stay, she could smell him, she could taste the salt on his skin, she still expected to see him standing in the kitchen, listening to *futbol* on a cheap radio, his white grin and black tousled hair and his weekend bottle of American-style Corona...

BY THE SECOND week on the ranch, bored but still weak, feeling more and more pressure to move while remaining determined not to move until she was solid, she began talking with her watcher. His name was Jaime, a short, hard man with a deeply burned face and brushy mustache. He was good-natured enough, and went everywhere with a pistol in his pocket and an M-16 in the back of his truck.

Rinker said, "Show me about the M-16."

After a little talk, and perfunctory protests by Jaime, he hauled two chairs out to a nearby gully, set up a target range, and showed her how to fire the M-16. She did well with the weapon and he became interested—he was a gunman, deeply involved with the tools of his profession—and brought out other guns. A scoped, bolt-action Weatherby sporting rifle, a pump .22, a lever-action treinta-treinta, and a shotgun.

They spent two or three hours a day shooting: stationary targets, bouncing tires, and, with the .22 they'd shoot at clay pigeons thrown straight away. The clays were almost impossible to hit—at the end, she might hit one or two out of ten, learning to time her shots to the top of the target's arc.

As they shot, Jaime talked about rifle bullets and loads, wind drift and heat mirages, uphill and downhill shooting, do-it-yourself accurizing. He liked working with her because she was serious about it, and attractive. An athlete, he thought, though she didn't really work at it, like some gym queens he knew in Cancún—trim, smart, and pretty in a blond gringo way.

And she knew about men. He might have put a hand on her, himself, if she hadn't been in mourning, and mourning for the son of Raul Mejia. He remained always the professional.

"There is no way that you can carry or keep a long gun for self-protection," he told her. "With a handgun, you have it always by your hand, like the name says. With a rifle, which is very good if you have it in your hand, well, it will be in the bedroom and you will be in the kitchen when they come for you. Or you will be sitting in the latrine with your pants around your ankles and a *Playboy* in your hands—maybe not you but me anyway—and the rifle will be leaning against a tree and that's when

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