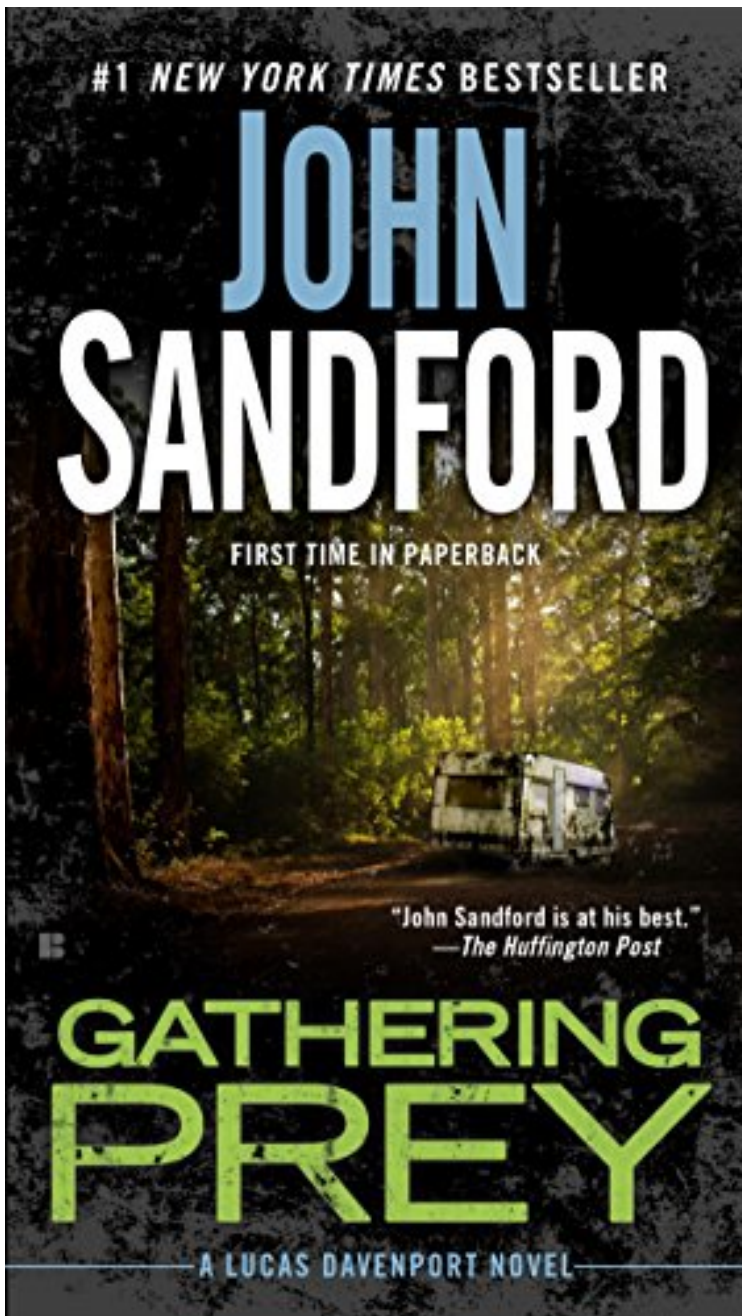


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## Gathering Prey: Prey



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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA terrifying Lucas Davenport thrillerfrom #1 New York Timesbestselling author and Pulitzer Prizewinner John Sandford.They call them Travelers. They move from city to city, panhandling, committing no crimesthey just like to stay on the move. And now somebody is killing them.Lucas Davenports adopted daughter, Letty, is home from college when she gets a phone call from a woman

Traveler shed befriended in San Francisco. The woman thinks somebody's killing her friends, she's afraid she knows who it is, and now her male companion has gone missing. She's hiding out in North Dakota, and she doesn't know what to do. Letty tells Lucas she's going to get her, and, though he suspects Letty's getting played, he volunteers to go with her. When he hears the woman's story, though, he begins to think there's something in it. Little does he know. In the days to come, he will embark upon an odyssey through a subculture unlike any he has ever seen, a trip that will not only put the two of them in danger but just may change the course of his life. From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait Chapter One Skye and Henry stood on a corner of Union Square on a fading San Francisco afternoon in early June, the occasional odor of popcorn swirling through, trying to busk up a few dollars. Skye saw the devil go by in his black 85 T-top, crooked smile, ponytail, twisty little braids in his beard. His skinny blond girlfriend sat beside him, tats running across her bare shoulders like grapevines, front teeth filed to tiny sharp points. Skye turned away, a chill running down her back. Henry was strumming on a fifty-dollar acoustic guitar he'd bought at a pawn shop. Skye played her harmonica and kept time with a half-tambourine strapped to one foot, jangling out into the evening, doing their version of St. James Infirmary, Henry banging between chords and struggling through, When I die, bury me in a high-topped Stetson hat... He did not sound like any kind of black blues singer from the Mississippi Delta. He sounded like a white punk from Johnson City, Texas, which he was. Skye was stocky with high cheekbones and green eyes. She wore an earth-colored loose knit wrap over a Sixties olive-drab Army shirt, corporals stripes still on the sleeves, and gray cargo pants over combat boots. Her hair was apricot-colored and tangled, with a scraggly braid hanging down her back. Henry was a tall apple-cheeked man/boy with a perpetually smiley face, dressed in a navy blue Mao jacket, buttoned to the throat, and matching slacks, and high-topped sneakers. Their packs sat against the wall of the building behind them, big, capable nylon bags, with a peeled-pine walking stick attached to one side of hers. Put a ten-piece jazz band on my tail-gate to raise hell as we roll along... They both smelled bad. They washed themselves every morning in public bathrooms, but that didn't eliminate the musty stink of their clothes. A laundromat cost money, which they didn't have at the moment. A cigar box on the sidewalk held five dollar bills and a handful of change. They'd put in two of the dollar bills themselves, to encourage contributions, to suggest that their music might be worth listening to. They weren't the worst of the buskers on the square, but they were not nearly the best, and in terms of volume, they couldn't compete with the horn players. As Henry wound down through the song, his shaky baritone breaking from time to time, Skye noticed the young woman leaning on a fire hydrant, watching them. Was she with the devil? She was the kind he went for. Thin but hot. Not blonde, though. The devil went for blondes. The young woman casually dressed in a loose, multi-colored blouse, jeans, and sneakers, each of those separate components suggested money: the blouse looked as though it might be real silk, the jeans fit perfectly, and even the sneakers suggested a secret sneaker store, one that only rich people knew about. Her dark hair had been styled by somebody with talent. Skye thought, Maybe with the devil but if not, maybe good for a five? Even a ten? A ten would buy dinner and a cup of coffee in the morning... Henry gave up on the St. James Infirmary, said, Fuck this. We ain't doing no good. Don't have enough cash to eat. Let's give it another ten minutes. How about that Keb Mo thing? Don't know the words yet... He looked around the square. We should have gone up to the park. Can't fight these fuckin' horns. The young woman, who'd been leaning against the fire hydrant, ambled up to them. She smiled and nodded to Henry, but spoke to Skye. I don't give money to buskers... or panhandlers... because I'm afraid they'll spend it on dope. I got better things to do with it. Well, thank you very fucking much, Skye said. Her voice was harshed by smoke and a good bit of that had been weed. You're a traveler, the woman said, showing no offense. You know about us? Enough to pick you out, the woman said. My name's Letty. What's yours? Skye. My friend is Henry. Skye was calculating: This woman was either with the devil, or... she could be worked. And Skye was hungry. Let's go up to the park, Henry said. Hang on, Skye said. Back to the young woman: If you won't give us money, could you get us a bite? There's a McDonald's a couple blocks from here, Letty said. I'll buy you as much as you can eat. Them's the magic words, Henry said, suddenly enthusiastic, his pink face going even pinker. The two travelers shouldered their packs and Henry carried his guitar case and they started down Geary, walking toward Market Street, weaving through the tourists. Where are you coming from and where are you going? Letty asked. Skye said, We were in Santa Monica for the winter, then we started up here a couple weeks ago, when June Gloom got to L.A. Planning to be here for a couple of weeks, get some money, then go on up to Eugene, and maybe Seattle. Henry said to Skye, I could have sworn I saw Pilot go by a few minutes ago. I heard they were traveling this summer. We stay away from that asshole, Skye said. He's the devil. Is not, Henry said. He's cool. He's not cool, Henry. He's

a crazy motherfucker. Been in movies, man, Henry said. He said he might be able to get me a part. Skye grabbed his shirt sleeve, turning him: Henry. Hell kill you. Ah, bullshit. Henry started walking again and they could see the McDonalds sign beyond him. He looked back at the two women. You dont know a chance when you see one, Skye. He could get me a part. Id like to be in a movie. Id really like that. Why? So you know youre alive? Youre alive, Henry. Lets try to keep it that way. Henry shut up and they got to the McDonalds. Inside, the two travelers loaded up on calories: Henry ordered a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese, large fries, chocolate shake. Letty said, Get a couple burgers, if you want. You serious? Henry asked. Go ahead. They did two sandwiches, two fries, and a shake for each of them. Letty got a fish sandwich and Diet Coke. When theyd spread out at a table, Letty asked Skye, So...you feel safe when youre on the road? Yeah, Im pretty safe, Skye said. She took a big bite of the first burger and said, Im usually with somebody. Which helps. When Im alone, getting ready to move, Ill find a festival, or something like that, where there are a lot of people. You can ask around, find somebody going in your direction. Check up on him. Or her. Sometimes, when I got the money, Ill ride the dog. One time, I met this guy in San Antonio, he was a dope dealer but, you know, he was okay. He bought me a ticket on the train to Los Angeles. More than three hundred dollars. And he didnt want anything for it. They usually want something for it? Letty asked. Oh, sometimes they think they might get something...but they dont, Skye said. If theyre the kind of guy whos going to push it, I can usually figure that out ahead of time and I dont go. Ever make a mistake? Letty asked. Skye grinned at her, showing her yellow teeth, and said, Youre kinda snoopy, arent you? Letty smiled back and said, I used to work at a TV news station. Skye bobbed her head and took another bite of the sandwich. Eventually she said, I made a couple of mistakes. Whatd you do about it? Letty asked. Nothing. What could I do? I would have killed them, Letty said. Henry was examining the side of his sandwich, and his eyes cut over to her and he said, Easy to say, not so easy to do. Not that hard, Letty said. Skye and Letty locked eyes for a few seconds, then Skye said, Jesus. She swallowed and said, Youre with Pilot, arent you? What? Henry brightened up: Hey, really? Youre with Pilot? I dont know who Pilot is, Letty said. Im a student. At Stanford. Im meeting friends in fifteen minutes, back at the square. Were on a last shopping trip before summer vacation. Skye looked at her for another moment and then said, Yeah. I can see that. You dont know Pilot? He likes college girls. Or at least, college-girl types. No. Who is he? Hes an asshole, Skye said. Maybe the biggest asshole in California. Travels around with his disciples, he calls them. Fucks them all, men and women alike. Does not, Henry said. Nothing queer about Pilot. You hang with him, youll find out, little pink cheeks, Skye said. She reached out and pinched his cheek. And Im not talking about these cheeks, either. Fuck you, Skye. He didnt sound like he meant it, though. Biggest asshole in California would put him in the running for the national title, Letty said. Whatd he do? Skye looked at her steadily for a moment, then said, Might be a little more than college girl would want to know, she said. Letty said, Im not the standard-issue college girl. Whats he do? Besides being hot for Henry? Shut up, Henry said. Hot for Henry we ought to write a song, Skye said to Henry. Henry knew the two women were teasing, and said again, Shut up, and, You want all them fries? Yes, I do, Skye said. So: Pilot. Pilot has these people he calls disciples, and they steal for him, the men do, and the women give him their paychecks and sometimes he sells them, the women. He peddles dope to TV people and sometimes these TV guys need to hustle a deal or hustle up some money, and Pilots women will go over and do whatever the money-men want. Nasty, Letty said. Thats not even the bad stuff, Skye said. There are probably twenty guys in Hollywood doing that. Pilots like one of those cult guys. He says the end of the worlds coming he calls it the Fall and the only thing thatll be left are the outlaws. Like him and the disciples, and the dope gangs and bikers and Juggalos and the skinheads and like that. He believes that the groups need to bind themselves together with blood. By killing people. We both heard that hes killed people. That the whole gang has. All bullshit, Henry said. The women ignored him and Letty asked, Why dont you call the cops? Nothing to call them about, Skye said. We say, We heard hes killed someone. They go, Who? We dont know. When? We dont know that, either. Who told you? We dont know. Some street guy. The cops say, Uh-huh, well get right on it and hang up. Letty said, Huh. Skye: Hed snatch you off the street in a minute. Letty showed some teeth in what wasnt exactly a smile. Hed get his throat cut. Henry swallowed a smile and said, Yeah, right. Pilot eat you right up Letty stared at him until he turned his eyes away. Skye squinted at her: Whered you get that mean streak? I grew up dirt poor out on the prairie in northern Minnesota, Letty said. My old man dumped us and my mom was a drunk. I kept us going by trapping muskrats and coons, wandering around in the snow with a bunch of leg-hold traps and a .22. Mustve killed a thousand rats with that gun. Pilots just another rat to me. Bet you had to trap a lot of coons to get into Stanford, Skye said. Letty smiled again, and said, Well, my mom got murdered

and the cop who was investigating, he and his wife adopted me. Theyre my real mom and dad. It was like winning the lottery. Skye: For real? For real, Letty said. Skye said, Huh. How about your real pop? Never really knew him, Letty said. Hes a shadow way back there. He never...messed with you, or anything? No, nothing like that, Letty said. Sorry about your mom, Skye said. Yeah, thanks. She...couldnt deal with it. With anything. Skye nodded. My mom is like that. She didnt get murdered or anything as far as I know, shes still living in her old trailer. What about your dad? Hes probably still around, too. Probably messing with my little sister, if she hasnt taken off already. Letty didnt ask the obvious question; the little sister comment made it unnecessary. Skye felt that and bent the conversation in another direction. Whats that little teeny watch youre wearing? she asked, poking a finger at the red band around Lettys wrist. Ah, its one of those athlete things. Not a watch. Tells you how many steps youve taken in a day, and how high your heart rate got, and all of that. Skye held up a wrist. A piece of dark brown, elaborately braided leather was wrapped around it, and she said, My bracelet doesnt tell me anything. Yours has more magic, Letty said. Wanna trade? Lettys eyebrows went up. Are you serious? It isnt important to you? Nah. I buy the leather in craft shops, we go in and ask if theyve got any scraps, and I make these up, then we sell them, when we can. Even up, Letty said. She peeled the band off her wrist, and Skye did it with hers, and they traded. If this Pilot guy is such an asshole, why does Henry like him so much? Letty asked. Henry: Hes a movie guy. Skye turned on him: You know, I dont usually think youre stupid, but youre stupid about Pilot. He tells you he was on TV and you believe him. If hes on TV, whys he driving around in a piece-of-shit Pontiac? That thing is fifteen years older than you are, Henry Its a cool car, man Its a piece of shit. Skye turned back to Letty. We made the mistake of hanging round with some of the disciples for a while. If youre on the street, down in L.A., if youre around the beaches, youll run into them. If you hate him so much, whyd you hang with them? Letty asked. They share, Henry said. Skye nodded. They do. Thats one thing about them. Theyll feed you if youre willing to listen to Pilot talk about the Fall. You get hungry enough, youll listen. Huh. I would have been curious to meet him, Letty said. Skye said, Not unless youre crazier than you look. Im not kiddin you: he is an evil motherfucker. They talked for a few minutes more, then Letty checked the time on her cell phone. Ive got to go. Wheres your home? Skye asked. Still Minnesota. Really? Maybe Ill see you there. Henry and I are gonna hit the motorcycle rally in Sturgis, the bikers are usually good for something. Problem is, Pilots going there, too. To Sturgis, to sell dope. Thats what he told a friend of ours, anyway. Letty took a miniature legal pad out of her shoulder bag, and scribbled a phone number on the page, with her first name only. If you make it to Minneapolis, give me a call, Ill buy you another cheeseburger, she said. She took a fifty out of her purse, folded it to the same dimensions as the note and pushed it across the table. Emergency money. Thanks. I mean really, thanks. Skye took it and asked, Do you really think you could kill somebody? Letty nodded: I have. Skye cocked her head: Really? Really. Believe me, Skye, when its you or them, you tend to choose them. And not feel bad about it. Skye said, If you say so. If we get there, Ill call. In fact, I might come there just to get the sandwiches. Ill look for you, Letty said, and she slid out of the booth and added, Take it easy, Henry. And if you get in the shower with the devil, dont pick up the soap. Skye laughed and Henry nodded, his mouth too full to reply. When Letty was gone, he swallowed and said, Man, this turned out good. That killing stuff, though, I mean, what a bunch of bullshit. I dont think it was, Skye said. After a moment, You werent looking in her eyes. Skye and Henry spent June in San Francisco, then Eugene, and the Fourth of July in Seattle. Later that month they caught a ride to Spokane and made a little money before the cops started hassling them. They got lucky at a truck-stop and a trucker hauled them all the way to Billings, Montana. In Billings they took a big risk or Henry did, but if thered been trouble, they both would have gone to jail. The trucker dropped them off on the edge of I-90, a few blocks before hed have to turn off to his terminal. They wouldnt want to see me giving people a ride, he told them, and they thanked him, and he went on his way. It was nearly ten oclock at night, and they found themselves in an industrial area on the edge of town, with some farm fields and brushy areas mixed in. Three hundred yards away, a dark building stood under a dozen orange security lights, which illuminated a bunch of farm equipment tractors, trailers, combines, as well as a few bulldozers and graders. They went that way, walking along the frontage road, because it seemed to be more toward the center of town. As they were walking along, a man pulled into the parking lot of the farm-equipment dealership, got out, locked his car the car was small and swoopy and expensive-looking. The man went to a glass door on the side of the building, unlocked it, went inside. They continued to walk along the frontage road, moving slowly in the dark, and were fifty yards away when the man came back out of the building. Hed left a light on inside and they could see he was now wearing shorts and a t-shirt. He took off running, or jogging, away from them, along the frontage road, moving fast. Henry

said, Take my pack. What? Get off the road and take my pack. Get back in the weeds, he said. Wait for me. What? He didnt say anything else, but wrenched the walking stick off her pack and ran toward the building. Skye watched him cross the parking lot, crouch by the door, and a minute later, heard the distant sound of breaking glass. Henry disappeared inside, and a minute later, crawled back out, and ran toward her. As he came up, he said, breathlessly, Cmon we got to go. We got to go. Whatd you get? Got his billfold. Oh, Jesus, Henry. They jogged until Henry got a stitch in his side, and then they walked for a while, swerving off the frontage road whenever a car came along, going down in the ditch, crouching, catching their breath, then running some more. They were a mile south when they heard sirens and saw the flashing lights of the cop cars back the way theyd come. They kept going, another mile, and another, and then a cop car went by on the frontage road, as they lay in some weeds in the ditch. When the cop was gone, they ran some more, the best they could, nearly panicked, until after midnight, when Skye couldnt go any further. She told Henry, and they swerved off into a farm field, dark as pitch, and eventually stumbled into a copse of trees. They spread out their bags, broke out a flashlight, and looked in the wallet. Eight hundred and forty dollars. They couldnt believe it: more money than theyd ever had at one time. Theyll be coming for us, Henry said. Theyll be all over us. I never thought itd be this big. So we hide out, Skye said. Maybe right here. Tomorrow night, we start walking again. Which way? She pointed back the way theyd come with the trucker. There were some diners back there, some gas stations. We find some broken-ass guy with out-of-state plates, going through. Give him fifty dollars for gas. And were gone, Henry said. Thats what they did. They buried the stolen wallet in the field, and on the next night, found a ride that took them back through the city, and then south and east. On the fourth of August, a hot day, a trucker with an eagle feather in his hair dropped them off in Sturgis, South Dakota. Right in the middle of the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally; thousands of bikers, mostly old guys with beards and full-sleeve tattoos and hefty old ladies who looked like theyd be more comfortable making Jello salads with little pink marshmallows. And there were a few people like themselves. Travelers. Theyd been there two days when Skye saw the devil, loafing through town in his black Pontiac with the gold firebird decal on the hood, the blonde still riding shotgun. Henry saw him, too. Henry was wandering through the Sturgis marketplace in the gathering dusk, looking at tattoos, thinking about getting one, something small and stylish; looking at chaps, the leather jackets, the Harley accessories. Henry was a traveler, but wouldnt always be one. When his traveling days ended, he thought, maybe hed get a Harley. Really, though, he liked the looks of another bike, might be Italian. He was checking out a tall, muscular man dressed all in black leather and silver, with wrap-around black shades and a harsh black goatee Henry liked the look, but realistically, he wouldnt get a goatee like that in this lifetime; he barely had blond fuzz when a woman slipped in behind Henry and licked his ear. He tensed and turned and there was Kristen, she of the filed teeth. She was wearing a leather bikini bottom and a strip of black duct tape across her breasts, little bumps where her nipples pushed against the tape, and black high-heeled boots. She had a silver ring through one wing of her nose, and a bead through her tongue. Her body was a riot of tattooed Wonder Woman comic art. She said, Well, well, well. Our Henry. Pilates been looking for you. He talked to the producer and he thinks they have a slot for you in the mini-series. Think you could do a cowboy? Henry didnt know how to answer and didnt know where to look. He backed a step away, blushing but said, Well, shoot, I grew up in Johnson City, Texas. I guess I could do a cowboy. Were out scouting locations, right now. You know what that is? Yup, I do. Hed once talked to a location scout in Pasadena, California. Well, fine. Me and Ellen are meeting up at the Conoco at eight oclock. Be there. You got one chance. Okay? Okay. I dont know where Skye is. We dont want Skye. Skye is a pain in the ass. Shes so negative, you know what I mean? You bring Skye, Pilate will say forget it. Henry swallowed, scratched his nose, glanced over at the black leather guy, who winked at him. He turned back to Kristen and said, Ill be there. She stepped right up to him, pushing her breasts into his chest. He tried to step back again but she grabbed his package and squeezed, a little, and said, Men Ellen are looking forward to it. Then she turned and ambled off, her hips swinging off the pinpoints of the boot heels. Ellen looked like either a mean schoolteacher or a mean prison guard, Henry thought, when he met them at the Conoco an hour later. He thought it was her hair: short, tightly curled, her ears sticking out like semaphore signals. He was having second thoughts about going off with them, but the idea of being in a movie: a movie. Hed be somebody. Ellen was gassing up a Subaru station wagon when Henry wandered up, and Kristen came out of the Conoco carrying two grocery bags, heavy enough that the muscles stood out in her forearms. Shed changed into jeans in the cool of the evening, but still had the black duct tape across her breasts. They got in the Subaru, Henry in the back, with his pack and the grocery sacks, the women in the front. Ellen started the car, and then Kristen, in the passenger seat,

threw her arm around Ellens shoulder, and the two women kissed, a long, sloppy French kiss, with Kristens eyes cutting to Henry in the back, who looked away. After ten seconds or so, Ellen turned away, put the car in gear, and they headed out through town, past the roaming bikers, country people in trucks, out of the built-up area, and into the hills. Where are we going? Henry asked, ten minutes out. There were no lights along the road they were on. Ellen said, Got a camp out here. The movies set out in the wilderness. The thing is, you cant have shit like road signs and telephone wires when youre shooting a cowboy movie. You gotta get way out in the countryside. They drove along for another few minutes then Henry asked Kristen a question that had been bothering him a bit: Arent you a little cold? Mmm, yeah, you know. Theres a shirt right behind you, in the back, toss that to me, will you? Henry turned in his seat, looked over the back, saw the shirt, got it, and handed it to her. She ripped the tape between her breasts and peeled it off, then turned to Ellen and said, What do you think? We get back to camp, and Ill suck them right off your body. You wanna help? Kristen asked Henry. Uh, I dont know, he said. You dont know? What the fuck does that mean? I think hes queer, Ellen said. Kristen nodded, Yeah, he looks queer. Not queer, Henry said, turning to look out at the night. He really wished hed stayed with Skye. Hes queer, Kristen said. She pulled on the shirt and buttoned it. Maybe he could blow Raleigh. Henry shrank away into a corner of the seat. Why dont you guys let me out. I can walk back from here. Oh, fuck that. Pilate wants to talk to you about the movie. We told him you were coming, and if we dont bring you up here, hell kick our asses. The road had started out bad and had gotten worse, gone from gravel to rutted dirt. Ellen slowed, slowed some more, and Kristen said, Theres the rock. An orange rock, looking like a pumpkin, sat on the edge of the road. Ellen took a right and started climbing a hill. The headlights no longer showed any road at all, although here and there, Henry could see tire tracks. They topped the hill and off to the left, and higher, he saw a sparkle of lights coming down through a stand of trees, and as they got closer, an oversized campfire. Here we be, Kristen said. Ellen pushed the Subaru past a circle of cars, and the groups RV, and stopped. The two women got out, collected the grocery bags, and Henry, toting his pack, followed behind them, through some trees and between a couple of older cars, toward a campfire whose flames were reaching to head-height. He looked up, and saw the entire Milky Way, right there, on top of him. He staggered a little, looking straight up as he walked. The stars looked like the lights of L.A., from up on top of the Santa Monica Mountains. Got him, Ellen called, as they walked into the firelight. Henry could see fifteen or twenty people sitting on camp chairs and stools around the fire, and then Pilate stood up and called, Everybody say, Yay, for Henry the traveler. The people around the campfire all shouted, Yay, and Pilate came over and wrapped his arm around Henrys shoulders and said, Glad you could come. Hey Raleigh, come over here and say, Hi. Bell, come over here. Three or four men came over, and wrapped up Henry, tighter, really tight, and he tried to laugh or smile and at the same time push them off, and then Pilate said, Take him down, gentle, and the whole mass of them collapsed on the ground, and somebody said, Give me the tape, and Henry tried to fight them then, but his arms were pinned, and he tried to bite, but there was a hand on his forehead, pushing him back, and then somebody rolled a strip of tape over his eyes and they turned him and rolled him and in the end, he was helpless, his hands taped behind him, his feet taped at the ankles, his legs at the knees, another strip around his mouth so he couldnt scream. He could still hear. He flopped around on the ground, hit the back of his head on a tree root, and everybody laughed and then Pilate said, Shred him. Somebody had a knife or a razor, and they cut his clothes off him, until he was buck naked except for the tape and then Pilate said, Kristen I got them, she said. She clanked something together. Steel. Henry was dragged for a while, rough, over rocks and tree roots and spiky brush, and then somebody said, Gonna cut the tape, hold his arms. For a few seconds, Henry thought they were going to cut him loose, and he stopped struggling while somebody he couldnt see cut the tape around his wrists. Two or three people had hold of each arm, and he fought them, but couldnt get free, and they pushed him up against the rough bark of a pine tree and Pilate said, Higher, get them really high. Henrys tormenters levered his arms overhead, his back against the bark, and a woman said, I cant reach that high, and a man said, Givem to me. They nailed him to the tree. Drove big spikes through his wrists, just below the heel of his hands. Henry screamed and screamed and screamed and not much got out, because of the tape over his mouth. Then he fainted. He came to, what might have been a half-minute later, his hands over his head, his entire body electric with pain. A woman said, a rough excitement riding her voice, Look at this kid. Really. Look at this. He fainted again. *Revue de presse* Praise for Johns Sandford and *Gathering Prey*

If you havent read Sandford yet, you have been missing one of the great summer-read novelists of all time. Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly* An edge-of-your-seat read. *Bookreporter.com* A testament to Sandford's amazing career and readers are going to love it. Sandford tells this story with the energy of a

speeding bullet. This is his freshest, most thrilling story ever. He is a master of this game, and Gathering Prey proves he still reigns supreme. The Huffington Post