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*Présentation de l'éditeur* Lucas Davenport investigates an unsettling series of murders in this classic novel in the #1 New York Times bestselling series—and this one is John Sandford “at the top of his game” (New York Post)... In life she was a high-profile model. In death she is the focus of a media firestorm that's demanding action from Lucas Davenport. One of his own men is a suspect in her murder. But when a series of bizarre, seemingly unrelated slayings rock the city, Davenport suspects a connection that runs deeper than anyone had imagined—one that leads to an ingenious killer more ruthless than anyone had feared... **FEATURING A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR.**comPenzler Pick, June 2000: *Easy Prey* is the 11th mystery to feature Lucas Davenport, who began his career back in *Rules of Prey* as a maverick homicide detective reminiscent of "Dirty Harry" Callahan. He did things his way and was often at odds with his superiors in the Minneapolis Police Department. Since those early days, Davenport has mellowed a little, and his background as a computer game-designing, Porsche-driving womanizer has been somewhat reduced. Possibly age has become a factor, or it may be the fact that Davenport has been deputy chief since the sixth book in the series, *Night Prey*. The character may have changed, but the writing has remained consistently taut: the bad guys creepy, the mysteries suspenseful. In this newest episode, Davenport is called to a house after an A-list party has taken place there. Alie'e Maison, a top model, has been found strangled, and evidence shows that she ingested drugs and recently made love--most probably to a woman. Before Lucas leaves the house, things get even more complicated: a second body is found stuffed in a closet with a deep dent in the skull. In addition, one of Lucas's own men had been at the party and is now a suspect. As always, Lucas's own life is not exempt from complications. An ex-lover comes back into his world--a woman he has never been able to forget--and she has secrets of her own. Also making an appearance this time out is a childhood friend to whom he turns for advice about women and life. Sister Mary Joseph, born Elle Kruger, is a professor of psychology and one of the computer brains who helps Lucas design his software. He calls her Nun the Wiser, and he often turns to her for spiritual as well as more concrete advice. Lucas is going to need all the help he can get to unravel his case as secrets pile upon secrets and the ground constantly shifts under his feet. *Easy Prey* is another powerful link in this chain of muscular, exciting thrillers by one of the most distinguished practitioners in the field. --Otto Penzler **EXTRAIT** **ONE** **WHEN THE FIRST MAN WOKE UP THAT MORNING**, he wasn't thinking about killing anyone. He woke up with a head full of blues, a brain that was too big for his skull, and a bladder about to burst. He lay with his eyes closed, breathing across a tongue that tasted like burnt chicken feathers. The blues rolled in through the bedroom door. Coming down hard. He had been flying on cocaine for three days, getting everything done, everything. Then last night, coming down, he'd stopped at a liquor store for a bottle of Stolichnaya. His bleeding brain retained a picture of himself lifting the bottle off the shelf, and another picture of an argument with the counterman, who didn't want to break a hundred-dollar bill. By that time, the coke high had become unsustainable; and the Stoli had been a bad idea. There was no smooth landing after a three-day toot, but the vodka turned a wheels-up belly landing into a full crash-and-burn. Now he'd pay. If you peeled open his skull and dumped it, he thought, his brain would look like a coagulated lump of Campbell's bean soup. He cracked his eyes, lifted his head, and looked at the clock. A few minutes past seven. He'd gotten four hours of sleep. Par for the course with coke, and the Stoli hadn't helped. If he'd stayed down for ten hours, or twelve—he needed about sixteen to catch up—he might have been past the worst of it. Now he was just gonna have to suck it up. He turned to his left, where a woman, a dishwasher blonde, lay facedown in her pillow. He could only see about half of her head; the rest was buried by a red fleece blanket. She lay without moving, like a dead woman—but no such luck. He closed his eyes again, and there was nothing left in the world but the blues music bumping in from the next room, from the all-blues channel, nine-hundred-and-something on the TV dial. Must've left it on last night. . . .Gotta move, he thought. Gotta pee. Gotta take twenty aspirins and go down to Country Kitchen and get some pancakes and link sausages. . . .The man didn't wake up thinking

about murder. He woke up thinking about his head and his bladder and a stack of pancakes. Funny how things work out. That night, when he killed two people, he was a little shocked. -Green-eyed Alie'e Maison stood in the hulk of a rust-colored Mississippi River barge. She was wrapped in a designer dress that looked like froth over a reef in the Caribbean Sea—an ankle-length dress the exact faded-jade color of her eyes, low-cut and sheer, hugging her hips, flaring at her ankles. She was large-eyed, barefoot, elfin, fleeing down a pale yellow two-by-twelve-inch pine plank, which stretched like a line of fire out of the purple gloom of the barge's interior. Behind her, a huge man in a sleeveless white T-shirt, filthy Sears work pants, and ten-inch work boots blew sparks off a piece of wrought iron with an acetylene torch. He was wearing a black dome-shaped welding helmet, and acrid gray smoke curled around his heavy, tense legs. The blank robotic faceplate, in combination with his hairy arms, the dirty shirt, the smoke, and the squat legs, gave him the grotesque crouching power of a gargoyle. A fantasy at three thousand dollars an hour. And not quite right. - "That's no fucking good. NO FUCKING GOOD!" Amnon Plain moved through the bank of strobes, his thick black hair falling over his forehead, his narrow glasses glittering in the set lights, his voice cutting like a piece of broken glass: "Alie'e, you're freezing up at the line. I want you blowing out of the place. I want you moving faster when you come up to the line, not slower. You're slowing down. And I want you to look pissed. You look annoyed, you look petulant—" "I am annoyed—I'm freezing," Alie'e snapped. "I've got goose bumps the size of oranges." Plain turned to an assistant: "Larry, move the heater into the back. You gotta get some heat on her." "We'll get the fumes," Larry said, arms akimbo, a deliberately effeminate pose. Larry wasn't gay, just ironic. "We'll deal with the fucking fumes. Huh? Okay? We'll deal with the fucking fumes." "You gotta do something. I'm really cold," Alie'e said. She clasped her arms around herself and shivered for effect. A man dressed in black walked out from behind the lights, peeling off his cashmere sport coat. He was tall, thin, his over-the-shoulder brunette hair worn loose and back. He had a thick hammered-silver loop earring in his left ear and a dark soul-patch under his lower lip. "Take this until they're ready again," he said to Alie'e. She huddled in the coat. Turning away from them, Plain rolled his eyes. "Larry—move the fuckin' heater." Larry shrugged and began wheeling the propane heater farther into the barge. If they all died of carbon monoxide poisoning, it wouldn't be his fault. Plain turned back to Alie'e. "Jax, take a hike, and take your coat with you. . . ." "Hey—" the man in black said, but nobody was looking at him, or paying attention. Plain continued: "Alie'e, I want you pissed. Don't do that thing with your lips. You're sticking your lips out, like this." Plain pursed his lips. "That's a pout. I don't want a pout. Do it like this. . . ." He grimaced, and Alie'e tried to imitate him. This was one of her talents: the ability to imitate expression, the way a dancer could imitate motion. "That's better," Plain said to Alie'e. "But make your mouth longer, turn it down, and get it set that way while you're moving. Do it again." She did it again, making the changes. "That's good, but now you need some mouth." He turned back to the line of lights and the small crowd gathered behind them—an account executive, a creative director, a makeup artist, a hairdresser, a couture rep, a second photo assistant, and Alie'es parents, Lynn and Lil. Plain did not provide chairs, and the inside of the barge was not a place you'd want to sit down, not if your hand-tailored jeans cost four hundred and fifty dollars. To the makeup artist, Plain said, "Fix her mouth." And to the second assistant: "Jimmy, where's the fucking Polaroid? You got the Polaroid?" Jimmy was fanning a six-by-seven-centimeter Polaroid color print, which was used to check exposure. He glanced at the print and said, "It's coming up." Behind him, the creative director whispered to the account executive, "Says 'fuck' a lot," and the account executive muttered, "They all do." Plain peered at the Polaroid, looked up at an overhead softbox. "Move that box. About two feet to the right, that way." Jimmy moved it, and Plain looked around. "Everybody ready? Alie'e, remember the line. Clark, are you ready?" The welder said, "Yeah, I'm ready. Was that enough sparks?" "Sparks were fine, sparks were good," Plain said. "You're the only fucking professional working here this morning." He looked back at Alie'e. "Now, don't fucking pout—blow right through the line. . . ." -Alie'e waited patiently until her mouth was fixed, staring blankly past the makeup artist's ear as a bit of color was patched into the left corner of her lower lip; Jax said into her ear, "Love you. You're doing great, you look great." Alie'e barely heard him. She was seeing herself walking the plank, the vision of herself that came from Plain's mind. When her mouth was done, she stepped back to her starting mark. Jax got out of the way, and when Plain said, "Go," Alie'e got her expression right, started down the plank with a lanky, hip-swinging stride, and blew past the exposure line, the green dress swirling about her hips, the orange-yellow welder's sparks flashing in the background. The stink and smoke of the burning metal curled around her as Plain, standing behind the camera, fired the bank of strobes. "Better," Plain said, stepping toward her. "A little fuckin' better." -They'd been working for two hours in the belly of the grain barge. The barge was a gift: a pilot on the Greek-owned Mississippi towboat *Treponema* had driven it into a protective abutment around a bridge piling. The damaged barge had been floated to the

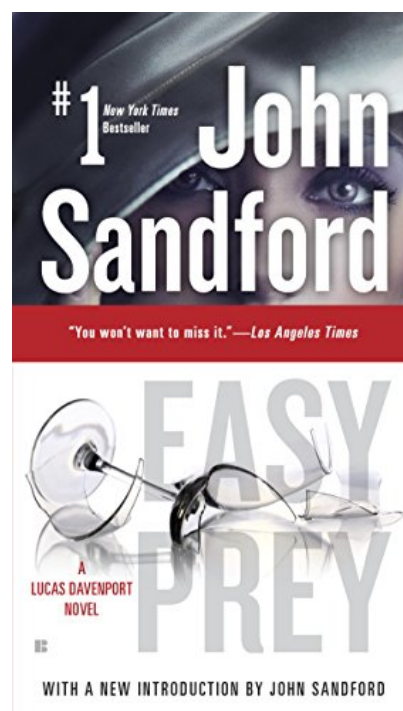
Anshiser repair yard in St. Paul, where welders cut away the buckled hull plates and prepared to burn on new ones. Plain spotted the disemboweled hulk while scouting for photo locations. He made a deal with Archer Daniels Midland, the barge owner: Delay repairs for a week, and ADM would make Vogue. The people who ran ADM couldn't think of a good reason why the company would worry about Vogue, but their publicity ladies were wetting their pants, so they said okay and the deal was made.—They were still working with the green dress when a team from TV3 showed up, and they all took a break. Alie'e goofed around, for the camera, with Jax, showing a little skin, doing a long, slow, rolling tongue-kiss, which the camera crew asked them to redo twice, once as a silhouette. The interviewer for TV3, a square-jawed ex-jock with bleached teeth and a smile he'd perfected in his bathroom mirror, said, after the cameras shut down, "It's a slow day. I think we'll lead the news with this." Nobody asked why it was news: they all lived with cameras, and assumed that it was.—Two hours for four different shots, with and without fans, two rolls of high-saturation Fujichrome film for each of the shots. The Fuji would make the colors pop. Plain pronounced himself satisfied with the green dress, and they moved on. The next pose involved a torn T-shirt and a pair of male-look women's briefs, complete with the vented front. Alie'e and Jax moved against the far hull and a little shadow, and Alie'e turned her back to the photo crowd and peeled off the green dress. She'd been nude beneath the dress; anything else would ruin the line. She was aware of her nudity but not self-conscious about it, as she had been at first. Her first jobs had been as one model in a group, and they usually changed all at once; she was simply one naked woman among several. By the time she started up the ladder to stardom, to individual attention, she'd become as conditioned to public nudity as a striptease dancer. Even more than that. She'd worked in Europe, with the Germans, and total nudity wasn't uncommon in fashion work. She remembered the first time she'd had her pubic hair brushed out, fluffed up. The brusher had been a thirty-something guy who'd squatted in front of her, smoking a cigarette while he brushed her, and then did a quick trim with a pair of barber scissors, all with the emotional neutrality of a postman sorting letters. Then the photographer came over to take a look, suggested a couple of extra snips. Her body might as well have been an apple. . . . You want privacy? You turn your back. . . .—Alie'e Maison— "Ah-Lee-Ay May-Sone"—had been born Sharon Olson in Burnt River, Minnesota. Until she was seventeen, she'd lived with her parents and her brother, Tom, in a robin's-egg-blue rambler just off Highway 54, fourteen miles south of the Canadian line. She was a beautiful baby. She won a beautiful-baby prize when she was a year old—she'd been born just before Halloween, and her costume was a pumpkin that her mother made on her Singer. A year later, Sharon toddled away with a statewide beautiful-toddler trophy. In that one, she'd been dressed as a lightning bug, in a suit of black and gold. Dance and comportment lessons began when she was three, singing lessons when she was four. At five, she won the North Central Tap-Fairies contest for children five and younger. That was the pattern: Miss Junior North Country, International Miss Snow (International Falls and Fort Frances, Canada), Miss Border Lakes. She sang and danced through her school days. Miss Minnesota and even—her parents, Lynn and Lil, barely dared to dream it—Miss America was possible. Until she was fourteen, anyway. When the breast genes were passed out in heaven, Alie'e had been in line for an extra helping of eyes instead. That became obvious in junior high when her friends began to complain about bra straps cutting into their necks. Not Alie'e. As the Olsons' best friends, Ellen and Bud Benton, said—Bud said it, anyway— "Ain't no Miss Minnesota without the big bumpers, y'know." As it happened, the breasts didn't matter. In the summer of her sixteenth year, Lynn and Lil took her to a model agency in Minneapolis, and the agent liked what she saw. Alie'e had knife-edge cheekbones and those jade-green eyes. They came straight from God in a perfect package with white-blond hair, a flawless complexion, delicate fuck-me shoulder blades, and hips so narrow she'd have trouble giving birth to a baling wire. Between Minneapolis and New York, Sharon Olson vanished and Alie'e Maison stepped into her size-six dress. She was so famous that the second-most-famous person in Burnt River was a lawn-care service operator named Louis Friar. Friar, one night in tenth grade, nailed Alie'e in the short grass beside the first-base line of the American Legion baseball diamond on Bergholm Road, on an air mattress that he'd brought along for that express purpose. Louis never talked about it. He never even confirmed that it happened. He held the memory of the event in a beery reverence. Alie'e, on the other hand, talked to everyone; so everyone in Burnt River knew about it, and how, at the critical moment, Louis had cried out, "Oh God oh God oh God oh God," which was why everybody in town called him Reverend. Friar himself thought the nickname was based on his last name, as if the residents of Burnt River were universally fond of puns; nobody ever told him different. "You don't think they're getting too close to porno?" Lil now asked, under her breath to Lynn, as they watched Amnon Plain push their daughter around the set. "I don't want any goddamned porno." Lil had a thing about porno. "You know they're not going to do any porno," Lynn said placatingly. He was wearing black-on-black, with wraparound Blades. "They better not. That'll kill you in a minute." She

refocused. "Look at Jax. I think he's so good for her." Jax—he had no last name—was peering around the set through the viewfinder of a Nikon F5. He thought of himself as a photographer, although he hadn't yet taken many photographs. But how hard could it be? You look through the hole, you push the button. When Alie'e said, "You got anything?" Jax let the camera drop to his side, tipped his head, and they moved together against the hull of the barge. Jax took a plastic nose-drop bottle from his pocket and passed it to her. Alie'e unscrewed the top, slipped the end into a nostril, and squeezed the bottle once, twice. "Whoa, whoa," Jax muttered. "Not too much, it'll kill the eyes." If you had eyes as green and large as Alie'e's, you didn't want them dilated. Amnon Plain was moving lights around as his assistants refilled the camera backs with Kodachrome. Alie'e would be wearing a torn pale-blue T-shirt that was meant to show just a hint of rouged nipple within the tear, and the film had to hold the subtlety of the pink-against-blue. With the Kodachrome, the flare of the torch behind her wouldn't pop as it would on the Fuji, but that wasn't so important in this shot. Plain was juggling the color equities in his mind when Alie'e said, past his head, "Hello, Jael." Plain turned. His sister was standing in the gash in the barge's hull, just inside the line of lights. "What do you want?" he snapped. Jael Corbeau—she'd changed her name with her mother, after their parents split up—was light where Plain was dark, blond against Plain's deep brunette. Despite their coloring differences, they had faces that were astonishingly alike, wedge-shaped, edgy, big-eyed. Jael had once been a model herself; didn't need the money, found the life boring, and moved on. Although the two of them looked alike, there was a singular difference in their faces. Three long pale lines slashed across Jael's face: scars. She was a lovely woman to begin with, but the scars made her something else. Striking. Beautiful. Erotic. Exotic. Something. "I came to see Alie'e," she said sullenly. "See her someplace else," Plain said. "We're trying to work here." "Don't give me a hard time, Plain." "Get the fuck off my shoot," Plain said, walking toward her. All other talk stopped, and Clark, the welder, stood up, uncertainly, and pushed his mask back. Plain's voice vibrated with violence. From behind him, Alie'e said, "There's a party at Silly's tonight, nine o'clock." Jael had taken a step back, away from her brother. There was no fear in her, but she didn't doubt that Plain would physically throw her off the barge. He was bigger. "Silly's at nine," she said, and left. Plain watched her go, watched until she was out of sight, turned back to Alie'e, took a breath, saw Clark hovering in the background like a sumo wrestler. He turned to the couture rep and said, "I've got your key shot." The couture rep was a thin-faced German named Dieter Kopp. He had a stubble-cut skull, two-day beard, and gaunt, pale face; his cheeks were lightly pitted, as though he might once have suffered from smallpox. He was the only one not wearing jeans. Instead, he wore a pale gray Italian suit with an open-necked black dress shirt, and a gold tennis bracelet. Kopp didn't want to be in St. Paul, didn't want to be in America. He wanted to be in Vienna, or Berlin, but he was condemned to this: to sell seventy-dollar male-look underpants, complete with front vent, to American women. Like a good German, he would do what was necessary to carry out his orders; but at the moment, he was still vibrating with the possibility of violence against the striking blonde who'd just walked off the barge. He knew her face. She'd been a model, he knew that, but she'd been out of it for a few years. She looked better now; she was stunning, he thought. . . . "What?" he asked. He'd missed what Plain said to him. "I've got your key shot. We move Clark around back and we put Alie'e dead center—Alie'e, come over here." Alie'e walked toward them, along the plank, as Plain continued: "We light them separately and then jam them together with the long lens. Clark will look like the fuckin' moon coming over the horizon, and Alie'e will be there in the foreground." "We still need the nipple for the punch," said the German. "We could lose it with a long lens." "Gotta lose it anyway for the Americans," said the creative director, a man with a red beard and a bald, freckled head. "We can do it both ways," Plain said. "For the Europeans, we'll hold it. We'll stick a snoot over on the left and light it. Alie'e . . ." Alie'e stepped closer, and Plain slipped his fingers into the torn slit in the T-shirt and pulled it wider, to expose her nipple. "We'll have to tape this back, we'll have to bring it out a little more. Maybe touch it with a little more makeup." "Not too much. She's really pale, and too much would look artificial," the art director said nervously. "Artificial would be all right," Plain said. "What could be sexier than rouged nipples?" "In Germany, yes, I think," Kopp said. "In America . . ." "Sexy in America, too, but it'd be too much for the mainline magazines," Plain said. "For the American shot, we'll ice her nipple to bring it up, so you can see it through the T-shirt, put a little shading on the side to emphasize it, but we re-layer the rip so there's more coverage, and drop the snoot. But you'll still be able to feel it there—there'll be like a mental tit behind the T-shirt." "You're gonna ice me?" Alie'e asked. "You're gonna fucking ice me? It's twelve degrees in here." The German had closed his eyes. After a moment, he nodded. Plain had worked for eight years in Miami, where he'd developed a reputation for a decadent, sexually charged fashion art, juxtaposing outlandishly disparate characters in variations of the Beauty and the Beast theme. Anyone could do that, and many tried, but Plain had something different, something that nobody else could quite get.

Something straight out of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Like this shot. The German could see it in his mind's eye, now that all the characters were assembled in this ridiculous hulk, with the lights, the smell of the welder, the roaring propane heater . . . but never could have thought of it. This was why he traveled to Minneapolis and paid Plain as much as he did. Plain had vision. -They worked the rest of the morning: hard work, done over and over. Plain had a color card in his brain, and a drama chip. He knew what he was getting, and he pushed it. Shredded the T-shirt, exposed one breast completely. Clark watched from the background, a burning torch in his hand, his cement-block sausage lover's face fixed by the vision of the woman's body. Lynn and Lil watched from behind the lights: "You don't think that's getting toward the porno . . . ?" When they were done, and while Jax was collecting her dressing bags, one of Plain's assistants walked Alie'e back to a rented Lincoln Towncar. She recovered her purse and the stash of cocaine, caught a little dust under a fingernail, and inhaled. "What do you think of that Clark guy?" the assistant asked. Alie'e, whose eyes had been closed, the better to experience the rush, now opened one eye, cocked her head, and thought about it: "He's not bad, for a pickup." "What I meant was, he looked like he had a zucchini stuffed in his pants during that last sequence." Alie'e smiled her wan, coked-up smile and said, "Then it must have been a good sequence." -Dieter Kopp had seen it; so had Plain. "I was afraid I'd lose it." Plain laughed, brushing the hair back from his eyes. "I was over there wagging that snoot around, trying to get some light on him, hoping it wouldn't go away, hoping he wouldn't figure out what I was doing." "Not for the American magazines, I don't think?" Kopp said. But it was a question. "Oh, I think so," Plain said. "You couldn't say anything about it. You couldn't make it too obvious. But a little work on the computer, taking it up or down. We'll get it in. And people will notice. . . ." Kopp bobbed his head, flashed his thin, hard grin. At another time, he might've been driving a tank into Russia instead of selling underwear. But that was then, and this was now. He was in underwear. -They all went to the party that night, at Silly Hanson's home: Alie'e, Jax, Plain, Kopp, Corbeau, the photo assistants, Alie'e's parents, even Clark the welder. Alie'e looked spectacular. She wore the green dress from the photo shoot, and hung with Jael Corbeau and Catherine Kinsley, the heiress, the three women like the three fates in the Renaissance paintings, all tangled together. Techno-pop rolled from small black speakers spotted around Silly Hanson's public rooms and Alie'e images flashed across movie-aspect flat-screen monitors. The crowd danced and sweated and drank martinis and Rob Roys and came and went. Silly herself got drunk and physical with Dieter Kopp, who left thumb bruises on her breasts and ass. A gambler drifted through the crowd, and met a cop who was astonished to see him. And the killer was there. In the corner, watching.

Par John Sandford

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