



## Escape Clause

*John Sandford*

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Whenever you hear the sky rumble, that usually means a storm. In Virgil Flowers' case, make that two.

The first comes from, of all places, the Minnesota zoo. Two large Siberian tigers have vanished from their cage, and authorities are very concerned that they've been stolen for their organs. Traditional Chinese medicine prizes their parts for home remedies, and people will do extreme things to get--and keep--what they need. As Detective Flowers of the Minnesota Bureau of Apprehension 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, things get a lot more complicated. Sparkle has a roving eye, and it's fixed right on Virgil.

Forget a storm--this one's a tornado.

## Escape Clause Details

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Author : John Sandford

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## From Reader Review Escape Clause for online ebook

### Jim says

Another winner from John Sandford! Usually in a series there are some good books and then there are some that just aren't. So far I have enjoyed all of the books in this series. Virgil is just a "good ol' boy". Part of what makes this series so good is the wit and dialog. For example readers are probably aware that things have been getting serious between Virgil and his girlfriend, Frankie. In this story Frankie's sister, Sparkle, comes to visit and Virgil naturally observes that Sparkle is kind of attractive.

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

*"She carries a knife?"*

*"No, but I do."*

In this outing Virgil has double trouble. First off a pair of rare Amur tigers are missing from the Minnesota zoo. Since the zoo is state territory the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension is called in and the case is assigned to their top investigator. Virgil. The fear is that they have been stolen for their body parts used in traditional Chinese medicine. The pressure is intense from all sides, Virgil's new boss at BCA; the media; and the public. The more time that goes by the more likely the tigers will have been killed.

The other problem is on the homefront. Sparkle's visit isn't just social. She is working on an investigative report into migrant workers and there are some people who do not want Sparkle snooping around. Some violent people. Things really heat up when Frankie is mistakenly attacked. Virgil obviously can't be assigned this case but you know he is going to be closely involved.

There is a great cast of characters in this story. Sparkle and her priest / bartender boyfriend Father Bill, a homicidal animal rights activist, a criminal mastermind who pops Xanax like candy, and a half dozen brothers seeking vengeance and and you've got a great story. At times while reading the parts dealing with the missing tigers I was reminded of the Coen brothers movie "Fargo".

Not sure where the title figures in on this story but definitely recommend. Can't wait for the next Virgil Flowers book, Deep Freeze, which I see is due out in October 2017!

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### James Thane says

Minnesota BCI agent Virgil Flowers returns in another entertaining novel from John Sandford. Flowers is a laid-back guy who dresses in jeans and the tee shirts of obscure rock bands and who spends the bulk of his time investigating rural crime. He loves fishing and women, though not necessarily in that order, and is currently in a relationship with a woman named Frankie.

When two rare tigers are stolen from the Minnesota Zoo, Virgil is assigned to lead the investigation. Time is of the essence here, for the fear is that the animals will be killed and that their body parts will be harvested for the Asian market in non traditional medicinal supplements. At virtually the same moment, Frankie's sister, Sparkle, comes to spend the summer with Frankie while she finishes the research for her dissertation. The dissertation involves the exploitation of workers at a local canning factory, and when Sparkle attempts to interview employees of the factory, she quickly becomes the target of people who would rather that her investigation not be completed.

Virgil will have to devote some time to the problems that result from Sparkle's investigation, but the bulk of his time is consumed in the hunt for the tigers and the tigernappers. As usual in a Sandford novel, the point of view shifts back and forth between Virgil and the gang that has taken the tigers, and while there's a fair amount of violence in this book, there's also a great deal of the humor that readers have come to expect from a novel featuring "That F\*\*\*in' Flowers."

If I have any complaint about this book, it lies in the fact that Sandford seems to be straining just a bit too hard with the humor elements of the book, at the risk of becoming a bit too cute. Also, the subplot involving Sparkle's investigation didn't really add much to the book. Still, it's always fun to hang out with Virgil and this is a very entertaining way to lose a few hours. 3.5 rounded up to 4 stars.

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## Truman32 says

There are two things you can pretty much count on author John Sandford to do: 1.) write gripping engaging thrillers, and 2.) give them absolutely horrible and misleading titles.

And once again with **Escape Clause**, his newest entry in the Virgil Flowers detective series, Sandford has delivered on both counts.

As everyone knows, an escape clause is *a clause in a contract that specifies the conditions under which one party can be freed from an obligation*. That does not happen here. In fact, that would be horrible if it did. Who would want to go through three hundred pages of Flowers working with his attorney perusing some lengthy legal document? **Escape Clause** seems like something that hotshot newbie Brad in marketing decided to suggest to move a little more units.

A far more accurate title would be: **Virgil Flowers and the Case of the Filched Felines**.

In Sandford's new book, **Virgil Flowers and the Case of the Filched Felines**, pair of extremely endangered Siberian tigers has been stolen from the Minnesota zoo. A nefarious crew hired by Chinese mobster, Zhang Min has taken these stripy cats to harvest their organs, bones, and various body parts for natural medicines. These miscreants include the violent but slow-witted Hamlet brothers and the disgraced (for groping an unconscious patient) Dr. Winston Peck VI. It is up to Virgil Flowers of Minnesota's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension to track down these cats before they literally get ground to dust.

**Virgil Flowers and the Case of the Filched Felines** is classic Sandford—the story is riveting, the pressure building up as Peck starts to tie up any loose ends with murderous efficiency. We get the humorous workplace banter between cops—always awesome (I really hope this is how it works in real life), the small town interactions that make a simple rural existence appealing, and of course, more of Virgil Flowers being Virgil Flowers. What a great character to spend time with again.

The only thing that didn't seem to work was a slapdash side-story about Virgil's girlfriend's sister (doing a kind of vague investigative reporting on migrant workers) coming to stay for a while. Everything about this subplot seemed pasted on to make the book fill out some sort of contractual page allotment. Almost as if the publisher had some sort of... escape clause in their contract with Sandford that they could keep more royalties if he didn't submit 300 or more pages. Hmm, maybe that title is beginning to make more sense!

Well, mark **Virgil Flowers and the Case of the Filched Felines** as another strong entry into this series and a delight to read.

## **Kemper says**

*I received a free advance copy of this from NetGalley for review.*

I've heard of having a tiger by the tail, but this is ridiculous.

Two rare tigers have been stolen from a Minnesota zoo, and everyone fears that they have been taken to have their organs and bones harvested for 'medicines' that will fetch a fortune on the black market. Quirky cop Virgil Flowers is on the case, but can he find the tigers before they're killed and turned into expensive placebos for assholes?

As usual in a John Sandford novel we get the parallel story of what the bad guys are up to as Virgil hunts them, and things escalate with murder becoming part of the effort to cover their tracks. Virgil is also contending with a serious distraction caused by the sister of his girlfriend getting on the bad side of some thugs when she tries to expose the abuse of illegal immigrant workers at a factory.

As I've noted in my other reviews of Sandford books I consider him the best at the beach/airport reads that are always on the best sellers lists. This isn't ground breaking thriller/crime fiction, but it is exceptionally well done thriller/crime fiction. We get villains that aren't just the standard Insane McGenius serial killers. (Although Sandford did a few of those back when they weren't quite such a cliché.) The plotting is tight, the action is great, there's a real sense of tension and momentum built up, and he's developed a collection of likable characters who populate both this series and the *Prey* books. Virgil continues to be an interesting hero who sports vintage rock band t-shirts and frequently forgets to get his gun out of his truck. Overall, Sandford's books are incredibly entertaining without feeling like they're making you dumber by reading them.

So why only three stars here? Frankly, this one hit a personal pet peeve of mine. I just do not enjoy reading about animals in jeopardy or being mistreated. So I was constantly stressing about the fate of the tigers much more than I do when fictional human characters are in trouble. What? Don't judge me.

That's the only factor that kept me from calling it another 4 star thriller from Sandford that meets his usual standard of quality page-turning.

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## **Cindy Newton says**

I decided to kick off my 2017 reading with my old friend John Sandford. I figured that would allow me to start the year with a positive review, and I was right. Sandford never lets me down.

Virgil is a very different character from Davenport, not as hard-edged or ruthless, but his adventures are tense nail-biters, all the same. In this case, the fate of two rare tigers is hanging in the balance, so the ticking clock is a priority in solving the mystery and foiling the bad guys. I saw that some people were turned off by this book because it contained this threat to animals, and while I was desperately rooting for the tigers, I am not MORE bothered by cruelty to animals than I am by cruelty to humans. Since Sandford novels are rife with cruelty to humans, this didn't really faze me.

\*\*\* SPOILERS AHEAD \*\*\*

One thing that I noticed in this particular book was that coincidence played a big part. No less than three times did the antagonist avoid capture by Virgil by the simple expedient of arriving at a location and seeing Virgil before Virgil saw him. With luck like that, Peck should have been playing the lottery instead of stealing tigers! I foresaw Peck's fate about halfway through the book, so that was rather predictable.

I found the storyline with Sparkle and her part-time priest funny, and I admired her zeal for exposing the corruption of the plant-owners, but I was starting to get annoyed by the fact that everyone but her was paying the price for her goal. I was actually kinda glad when she got punched--finally, she takes the heat for her own actions! I mean, *no one* should be beat up for trying to expose lawbreaking and abuse, but Frankie wasn't involved in it at all and ends up in the hospital, then Ramona. The part that pissed me off was that Sparkle told Ramona that nothing would happen and she wouldn't be in any danger for helping her sneak in. Clearly, she knew that these people were dangerous and that Ramona was taking a risk--Sparkle should have been upfront with her about that, and let her then decide if she wanted to help her.

Those are minor issues--the book overall, as usual, is a solid good thriller. I recommend Sandford to anyone who enjoys excellently written crime thrillers with interesting, well-developed characters and taut, suspenseful plots. What more could you ask for?

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## Jean says

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (From The Tyger by William Blake)*

When two rare – endangered – Amur tigers are stolen from the Minnesota zoo, experts fear that the catnappers are tied to the illegal traditional Chinese medicine trade. Zoo officials are desperate knowing that their beloved tigers may soon be killed.

I was prepared to dislike Escape Clause. Animal abuse is repulsive to me. Later, when pythons are mentioned – those who know me know that I loathe snakes of any size – I was ready to cover my eyes and call it a day. But enter Virgil Flowers – yes, that Virgil Flowers, the BCA's fan-tabulous Flowers. How could I really dislike a book starring Virgil blooming Flowers?

As the blurb indicates, the case of the missing tigers is not the only storm on Virgil's horizon. Things at home in Mankato are raining down buckets of trouble too. His girlfriend Frankie's sister Sparkle shows up to do some research into local migrant workers, and that spells trouble with a capital T that rhymes with V that stands for Virgil. As in that's who's in the thick of it all. Virgil finds himself running all over the Twin Cities chasing down leads as he looks for the missing tigers. Things go from bad to worse. Then, when it all hits the fan at home, he's running back to Mankato some two hours away.

The criminals involved in the tiger caper are truly despicable creatures. The idea of killing these gorgeous animals for their body parts is almost sacrilegious to me. As I read, I kept hoping that somehow these cats would get loose and turn on their tormentors. Some of these men are not too bright. Others are greedy. One is greedy, addicted to Xanax, and sociopathic. Will they get away with their scheme, or will Virgil stop them in time to save the tigers, ensuring that the thieves get their just desserts? Perhaps the tigers will have the last laugh? Frankie is not laughing back in Mankato after she runs into some trouble. Can Virgil help fix that problem too?

Speaking of laughs, there are more than a few chuckles in this book. Virgil Flowers isn't exactly a textbook

cop. He doesn't look like one, and he doesn't act like one. Add in some kooky secondary characters and bizarre situations (for one, Sparkle's boyfriend is a Catholic priest), and it's a highly entertaining book. Tiger killing and murders aside - those parts are definitely not funny or even mysterious - because we know all along who's behind it. The enjoyment comes from watching Virgil try to track them down.

I offer my apologies to the late, great poet:  
Virgil, Virgil fearless Flowers,  
Working cases at all hours,  
In the city, at the zoo.  
Did he who made the cat make you?

My thanks go to NetGalley, Penguin Group/Putnam Publishing, and the author for providing me with an ARC in exchange for my unbiased, honest review.

4 stars

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### **Brenda says**

I'm a long-time fan of John Sandford's books and have read all of them except the YA series. The Virgil Flowers books are particular favorites because Virgil is just so lovable.

Virgil gets some pretty weird cases that at first seem simple, but they always go awry. His case in this book is to find two rare, endangered Amur tigers that were stolen from a zoo and then murders happen. Another case begins when Virgil's girlfriend, Frankie, is beaten by thugs mistaking her for her sister, who is interviewing illegal workers for her dissertation. Shrake and Jenkins, along with an assortment of sheriffs, deputies, and local police officers, assist Virgil. Catrin Mattson investigates Frankie's case, and I found her to

be an interesting character. I'd like to know more about her.

The usual banter and ribbing is apparent and that makes this book enjoyable. But Virgil's case was slow going, with driving here and there, calling people, talking to people. Nothing seemed to happen, and Virgil sat and thought about things. I wish there'd been more action. One of the bad guys was eating Xanax like candy, and I thought he'd OD before he got caught. It appears Virgil and Frankie are getting serious, and that's changed Virgil a little. It reminds me of when another of Sandford's characters, Lucas Davenport, got married.

While this may not be the best Virgil Flowers book, I enjoyed it and look forward to the next one.

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### **11811 (Eleven) says**

Same as his other books but with practical advice on how to steal a tiger. I stole three so far and totally got away with it.

3.5 stars.

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### **Monnie says**

Ah, man - I finished it. Now I'll have to wait for who knows how long (well, maybe the author has an inkling) for Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension agent Virgil Flowers to make his next appearance in print.

Sigh. You see, over many years of reading the previous books in the series (this, I believe, is the ninth) as well as the author's *Prey* series featuring Lucas Davenport, the two have made and stayed on my Top 10 list of all-time favorite leading men. But the free-wheeling, often irreverent Virgil beats the more reserved Lucas hands down in my book - except maybe in the 2011 TV movie "Certain Prey" starring hunky Mark Harmon as Davenport.

The point is this: opening this book, like all that preceded it, is like opening the door to welcome an old friend - and I'm always sorry when our visits come to an end.

Here, Virgil finds himself entwined in two concurrent plots, starting with the apparent theft of two rare Amur tigers from the Minnesota zoo. Tiger parts, it seems, are in great demand in traditional Chinese medicine, and the race is on to find them before they're chopped, ground and funneled into high-priced vials. Meantime, Virgil's girlfriend Frankie's sister Sparkle, visiting for the summer, has put herself in the crosshairs of some very nasty people as she tries to get the dirt on mistreatment of migrant workers to finish her doctoral dissertation. Because of his relationship with Frankie, Virgil can't be directly involved with the latter issue, although (as usual), the issue has a way of involving him.

There's no shortage of action that includes plenty of blood, guts, gore and bawdy language. And also as usual, Lucas makes the occasional appearance, if only by phone (he was Virgil's boss at the BCI before getting fed up with the bureaucracy and leaving, but the two remain in touch).

In the interests of full disclosure, I received an advance copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. So lest I be accused of being overenthusiastic in my opinion because of my prior relationship with Virgil (I wish), I'll nitpick a bit - starting with the man himself. He seems to have mellowed a bit here, almost to the point of threatening his good ol' bad boy reputation. But after all, he *is* getting older, and he appears to be happily settled down with girlfriend Frankie, so maybe that's an inevitable progression. The ending, too, kind of gnawed at me; it was tasty, but a bit hard to swallow.

The verdict? It's another solid entry in the Virgil Flowers series (and for those who may be concerned, it stands alone well). Highly recommended!

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### **Liz says**

Ok, all of John Sandford books are good, but the Virgil Flowers series are always the most fun. This one is no exception. How many times could I go between chuckling and ewwww? Not for the squeamish.

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### **Andrew Smith says**

It wasn't so long ago that Virgil Flowers was just a cameo player in Sandford's long running 'Prey' series, supporting the main character - Minnesota crime-stopper Lucas Davenport. But Flowers was always destined for bigger things. Like Cleve Purcell, James Lee Burke's crowd pleasing buddy to Dave Robicheaux, the Davenport books lose something when Flowers isn't there. He's a great counterpoint to the dapper and somewhat manic frontman; whereas Lucas is all sharp suits and flash cars, Virgil is cowboy boots and a dusty truck. Instead of confrontation he brings conciliation. So it was no real surprise when the author decided to let the long haired charmer have a book all to himself.

This is now his ninth solo adventure. This time around he's called in to track down two Amur tigers who've been stolen from the Minnesota zoo. Like (nearly) all of Sandford's thrillers, we know early on whodunit so it's really all about the chase. The question is, even if he can catch the perpetrators will he find the tigers alive? The structure is one you'll be used to if you've read this author's books before and there are familiar faces and some carry-over in respect of various background events, but this is just window dressing and shouldn't dissuade new readers from jumping right in.

There's a side story here about a sister of Virgil's girlfriend turning up to expose a factory's abuse of immigrant workers - it doesn't take up much space nor does it add anything to the overall package. But the further I got into the tiger chase the more I enjoyed it. The steps taken by police and criminals seem logical - if sometimes extreme - and there are one or two nifty wrinkles thrown in along the way. This is easy reading fiction in the way that Michael Connelly and Lee Child churn it out. And I don't mean to diminish these writers in any way, what I mean is that the structure is clean and linear: you always know what's going on and there is no confusing back and forth shunts in time or a myriad of characters to confuse you. It's simple, high quality entertainment. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

My thanks to NetGalley and Penguin Group Putnam for providing an early copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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## Skip says

Virgil is cavorting nude with Frankie in a swimming hole when he is called to help solve the case of a stolen pair of rare Amur tigers from the Minneapolis zoo. The possible culprits are animal rights activists or those seeking rare animal parts for cult medicines. The mastermind is eating Xanax like Halloween candy, while bumping off his partners, drawing the attention of their crazy brothers, who come seeking vengeance. The sideshow, involving Frankie's sister Sparkle, was a detraction, but was offset by bringing ex-victim, now BCA agent, Catrin Mattson, into the story. Virgil meticulously follows all of the leads, but misses the perpetrator initially. Like all Virgil Flowers novels, it's about the hunt and sidestories. Like Kemper, I took away a star because of the kidnap of an endangered species.

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## Mike French says

Another entertaining and enjoyable book in the Virgil Flowers series!

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## Lee says

I have read John Sandford's books over the years and have always enjoyed them, especially when Virgil Flowers is front and centre. Two rare and very large tigers have been stolen from Minnesota zoo and the belief is that they have been taken for their body parts which are extremely lucrative in the Chinese medicine market. The action starts right away and it isn't long before we know who we are dealing with. In some books this may spoil the storyline but Sandford has a way of making the chase so exciting that this perspective works. While this is happening Virgil and his girlfriend Frankie's relationship is suffering as Frankie's sister has arrived to assist Frankie in chasing down a factory where immigrant workers are being abused. Strong story with great characters, another winner. Thank you to Netgalley, the author and publisher for the chance to read this book in exchange for an honest review.

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## Michael says

This is just what the doctor ordered for an entertaining read to clear the mental palate from too much ostensibly gourmet fare of serious literature. Minnesota detective Virgil Flowers gets assigned to the case of theft of a couple of rare tigers from the Minneapolis Zoo. This is not his typical case, but all the regular police are busy with security of presidential aspirants campaigning at the Minnesota State Fair, as justified by the recent assassination attempt on the liberal candidate at the Iowa State Fair. The pressure is high to solve it fast because it appears likely the culprits will kill the beasts to processing their organs for the lucrative Chinese medicine market. Soon the chopped up body of a zoo worker is identified in a case thrown into a river, obviously a cover-up for the theft. Virgil's supervisor on the case is apoplectic:

*"Cut off his arms? Cut off his arms? ... Why do your cases always wind up like this?" Duncan asked, running a hand through his hair. "Why can't you have a straightforward missing-tigers case?"*

*..."Most of them are really straightforward."*

*"I can't remember one that was straightforward," Duncan said. "What about the one with the spies? What about the one with the dognapping that turned into a triple murder or something and you arrested the school board?"*

...”Not all of them, Virgil said. “One of them is still on the run.”

I love Virgil’s humor, his attention to the pleasures of fishing and rock music, and his dogged persistence in solving crimes by asking the right questions and creative listening. He always forgets to carry or load his gun, and always has to regret that. Unlike most crime fighting heroes, he has no dark past to compensate for, he does not suffer from alcohol and substance abuse, and has a healthy relationship with women. Here his serious relationship with Frankie gets a bit complicated when his beautiful sister Sparkle moves in for the summer and has no reservations about joining them nude in their hot-tub. But his protectiveness for Frankie gets extended to Sparkle in a topical side story of this tale when her political advocacy for migrant workers brings out some serious threats from America-first types.

As usual, Sandford shows the reader what the bad guys are up to in committing their crimes and countering Virgil’s moves. Here the kingpin, a Dr. Peck, makes for quite a colorful adversary, a man oppressed with the ignominy of bankruptcy and who has to boost his courage with Xanax. Beyond managing the complex operation of this money making scheme, he can be a man of action. As an example, there is a point where Virgil is getting too close for comfort, and in a booze and drug inspired response spends a few minutes reading up on Molotov cocktails on the internet and soon is heading to Virgil’s home to deliver a firebomb. At a point of self-reflection, our twisted doctor tries to diagnose himself and his genetic line of physicians:

*Were the Pecks psychopaths? He didn’t think so. Sociopaths, probably, since he had to admit he really didn’t feel much for his fellow human beings. He even had a hard time figuring out what it would be like feeling something for his fellow humans.*

Ironically, at one point Virgil has to protect Peck, whose notoriety in marketing medicines made from animal organs raises the ire of a rabid animal rights activist. The most thrilling scene of the book comes with him dealing with a high-speed highway chase and assault by her on Peck’s vehicle with automatic weapons.

A great one in the series for me. I see no great benefit from reading them in order, so feel free to pick this one if the subject incites your interest.

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