



# DICK FRANCIS & FELIX FRANCIS

'The Francis flair is  
clear for all to see'  
*Daily Mail*



# EVEN MONEY

[www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

Even Money  
by  
Dick Francis and Felix Francis

Copyright © Dick Francis, 2009

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from  
Even Money

To find out more please visit [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

## CHAPTER I

I sank deeper into depression as the Royal Ascot crowd enthusiastically cheered home another short-priced winning favourite. To be fair, it wasn't clinical depression – I knew all about that – but it was pretty demoralizing, just the same.

I asked myself yet again what I was doing here. I had never really enjoyed coming to Ascot, especially for these five days in June. It was usually much too hot to be wearing morning dress, or else it rained, and I would get soaked. I preferred the informality of my usual haunts, the smaller steeplechase tracks of the Midlands. But my grandfather, who had started the family business, had always used the fact that we stood at the Royal meeting as one of our major marketing tools. He claimed that it gave us some form of respectability, something he had always craved.

We were bookmakers. Pariahs of the racing world. Disliked by all, and positively hated by many, including large numbers of those whose very livelihood depended on gambling. I had discovered over the years that my clients were never my friends. Whereas city investors might develop a close relationship with their stockbrokers, punters never wanted to be seen socializing

with their bookies. Most of my regulars didn't even know my name, nor did they want to. I suppose that was fair. I didn't know most of their names either. We were simply participants in transactions where each of us was trying to bankrupt the other. I suppose it was a situation not really likely to engender mutual respect.

'Score on seven,' said a tall top-hatted young man thrusting a banknote towards me. I glanced up at our board to check the odds we were offering on horse number seven.

'Twenty pounds on number seven at eleven-to-two,' I said, taking his note and adding it to the wad of others in my left hand.

A small printer in front of me whirred and disgorged a ticket that I handed to the man. He snatched it from me and moved quickly away into the throng as if he didn't want to be seen fraternizing with the enemy. His place in front of me was taken by a short portly gentleman whose multicoloured waistcoat was fighting a losing battle against his expansive stomach. He was one of my regular Royal Ascot customers. I knew him only as AJ, but I had no idea what the AJ stood for.

'Hundred on Silverstone to win,' he wheezed at me, holding out some folded twenty-pound notes in his chubby fingers.

'Hundred on two at even money,' I said taking his cash and checking the amount. Another betting slip appeared out of the small printer as if by magic and I passed it over. 'Good luck, AJ,' I said to him, not really meaning it.

'Huh?' he said, somewhat surprised by my comment.

'Good luck,' I repeated.

'Thanks,' he wheezed, and departed.

In the good old days, when bookmaking was an art rather than a science, every transaction was written down in 'the

book' by an assistant. Nowadays, as in most things, it was on a computer that everything was recorded. The same computer that printed the betting slips.

It kept a running tally of all the bets that we had taken, and also constantly updated our profit or liability for every possible outcome of the race. Gone were the days when it was down to the gut reaction of the bookmaker to decide when and by how much to change the prices we displayed on our fancy electronic board. Now the computer decided. Bookmaking was no longer by instinct, it was by fractions.

When I had started working for my grandfather I had been his 'runner'. It had been my job to take cash from his hand and use it to back a horse with other bookmakers – a horse on which he had taken some large bets – in order to spread his risk. If the horse was beaten, he didn't make so much but, conversely, if it won, he didn't lose so much either. Now even that was done by computer, betting and laying horses on the internet exchanges, even during the actual running of the race. Somehow, the romance and the fun had disappeared.

Just as mobile phones have caused the demise of the tic-tac men, computer gambling was now killing off any bookmakers with personality who were prepared to back their hunches. And I wasn't at all sure if it was good for the punters, or for racing.

'Twenty pounds, horse two,' said another man taking the plunge.

'Twenty on two at evens,' I repeated, not so much for the man in front of me, more for Luca Mandini, my assistant, to enter the bet on his computer.

Luca was my magician, my internet whizz-kid with a razor-sharp mathematical brain who stood right behind me. His

fingers tapped his keyboard and the betting slip duly appeared from the printer.

Without Luca I was sure I would have given up by now, forced out by the relentless bully-boy tactics of the big book-making firms who did all they could to squeeze the profit out of the small independents. It was the same in the grocery trade, where the big supermarkets used their muscle to force the small shops to close. They didn't necessarily do it on purpose; they just did it in their never-ending drive for bottom-line figures to satisfy the expectations of some faceless group of shareholders. I was the sole shareholder in my business, and I felt the pain.

I lived in daily fear that Luca would be enticed away from me by some other outfit, maybe one of those big firms who, it seemed, would stop at nothing to put the likes of me out of business in their greedy quest to capture a larger share of the betting market.

I took the slip from the printer and handed it to the man standing patiently in front of me.

'Are you Teddy Talbot?' he asked.

'Who wants to know?' I asked him back while looking beyond for my next customer.

'I know your grandfather,' said the man, ignoring my question.

My grandfather's name had indeed been Teddy Talbot, and it was his name that was still prominently displayed above our prices board next to me. The slogan actually read TRUST TEDDY TALBOT, as if the extra word might somehow encourage punters to bet with us rather than the next man.

'My grandfather's dead,' I said, still looking beyond him and hoping that he would move away. He was disrupting my business.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘When did he die?’

I looked down at him from my lofty position on a foot-high metal platform. He was grey haired, in his late fifties or early sixties and wearing a cream linen suit over a light blue shirt that was open at the neck. I envied the coolness of his attire. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I’m busy. If you want to talk come back later – after the last. Now please move aside.’

‘Oh,’ he said again. ‘Sorry.’

He moved away, but only a short distance, from where he stood and watched me. I found it quite disconcerting.

‘Weighed in,’ announced someone over the public address system.

A lady in a straw hat came up and held out a slip to me. I took it from her. TRUST TEDDY TALBOT was printed across the top, as it was on all our betting slips. It was a winning ticket from the previous race, the first of rather too many. Nowadays, the potential win amount had to be printed on the slip so I scanned the details and paid her out for her win, tearing the slip in half and placing the bits into a hopper to my left. The transaction was wordless – no communication was necessary.

A line of winning-ticket holders was forming in front of me.

Betsy, Luca’s girlfriend, came and stood on my left. She paid out the winners while I took some of their winnings back as new bets on the next race. Luca scanned his screen and adjusted the prices on our board according to the bets I took and also the bets and lays he made on the internet gambling exchanges via his computer behind me. It was like a balancing act, comparing potential gains against potential losses, always trying to keep both possibilities within acceptable ranges.

It was my surname on our board and I was the handler of the punters’ cash but, in truth, it was Luca with his computer

who was the real bookmaker, betting on-line and setting our board prices to always try and keep our predicted return greater than one hundred per cent as indicated on his screen. Anything over a hundred per cent was called the overround and represented profit, less than a hundred indicated loss. Our aim was to keep the overround at about nine per cent, but all the mathematics relied on us taking bets in the correct proportions for our odds, something we tried to ensure by continually adjusting our prices. However, the punters didn't always cooperate with our plans, so Luca tried his best to compensate by betting and laying on the internet.

The computer was both our best friend and our worst enemy. We liked to think that it was our slave, doing the jobs we gave it more efficiently than we could have done them ourselves. But, in reality, the computer was the master, and we were its slaves. The analysis and figures on its screen controlled our decisions without question. Technology, rather than insight, was now the idol we worshipped.

And so our day progressed. I became hotter and hotter, both over and under the collar as the sun broke through the veil of cloud, while heavily backed short-priced winners continued to make it a great day for the punters while pushing down our percentage return into the red.

I didn't need to wear my stifling morning suit as our pitch wasn't actually in the Royal Enclosure. But we were close to the enclosure rail, in a prime position, and many of my clients wore the coveted name badges of those admitted to the inner sanctum. Besides, my grandfather had always worn formal dress at this meeting and, since my eighteenth birthday, he had insisted that I did so too. At least he hadn't decreed that we should have top hats as well.

I had never, in fact, applied to be admitted to the Royal Enclosure because there were no bookmaker pitches on that side of the fence. I did sometimes wonder if being a bookmaker would somehow disqualify one from admittance, like being a divorcee had once done.

Another favourite won the fifth race to huge cheers from the packed grandstands. I sighed audibly.

‘It’s not so bad,’ said Luca in my ear. ‘I had most of that covered.’

‘Good,’ I said over my shoulder.

The string of short-priced winners had forced us to try and limit our losses by adjusting down the offered prices on our board. Unlike in a shop, punters went in search of the highest prices as that represented a better return for their bets, provided, of course, they won. So lower prices meant that we didn’t do as much business. Even our regular clients tended to go elsewhere chasing the fractionally better odds offered by others – there was absolutely no loyalty amongst punters.

The man in the linen suit still stood about five yards away and watched.

‘Hold the fort,’ I said to Betsy. ‘I need a pee.’

‘Will do,’ she said.

I walked across to the man.

‘What exactly do you want?’ I demanded.

‘Nothing,’ he said defensively. ‘I was just watching.’

‘Why?’ I demanded again.

‘No reason,’ he said.

‘Then why don’t you go and watch someone else instead?’ I said forcefully.

‘I’m not doing any harm,’ he almost wailed.

‘Maybe not, but I don’t like it,’ I said. ‘So go away. Now.’

I walked past him and into the grandstand in search of the Gents.

When I returned, he'd gone.

'Thanks,' I said to Betsy as I again stood up on the platform.

'Come on,' I shouted at the small crowd in front of me. 'Who wants a wager?' I glanced up at the board. 'Eleven-to-four the field.'

There were a few takers but business was slow. As every race seemed to be a losing one from our point of view, it was probably just as well. At this rate, the more business we did, the more we lost.

However, there was some respite when the last race of the day was won by a twenty-to-one rank outsider, the favourite having been boxed in against the rails until it was too late.

'That saved our bacon,' said Luca with a broad grin.

'Saved your job, you mean,' I said, smiling back at him.

'In your dreams,' he replied.

In my nightmares, more like.

'So what's the total?' I asked him.

In the good old days it was easy to tell how we had done simply by the size of the wad of banknotes in my pocket, but these days we also had to consider our credit-card balance with the internet exchanges.

'Down fifteen hundred and sixty-two,' he said with certainty, consulting his machine.

'Could be worse,' I said, but I couldn't actually remember a previous first-day Tuesday at Royal Ascot when we had lost money.

'Sure could,' he said. 'If the favourite had won the last we would have been off another grand more, at least.'

I raised my eyebrows at him and he grinned. 'I didn't manage

to take as much of the favourite as I wanted on the exchanges. Damn internet link went down.'

'Just us or everyone?' I asked seriously.

'Dunno,' he said intrigued. 'I'll find out.'

Luca and I started to pack up our equipment as Betsy paid out the occasional winning ticket. Most of the racegoers were streaming for the exits to try to beat the traffic jams and, no doubt, there would be more winning tickets from the last race handed in the following day.

We kept a record on our computer of all the bets taken, both winning and losing, and it never ceased to amaze me how many of the winning tickets were never cashed. Presumably some were lost, and perhaps some inebriated punters didn't realize they were winners, but almost every day there were two or three winning bets that were never claimed. Sleepers, they were called, and they were like a cash bonus for us. But it was one we could never completely rely on. Our tickets didn't have an expiry date on them and, only the day before, I'd had to cash a sleeper from the Royal Ascot meeting of the previous year. Maybe it had been hiding for twelve months in the deep recesses of someone's morning-coat pocket, or tucked into the hatband of a topper, waiting quietly to be discovered and paid out.

The crowd had mostly dispersed to the car parks by the time Luca, Betsy and I had packed up the majority of our gear and loaded it onto our little wheeled trolley that ingeniously doubled up as a base for our computer during the racing. The betting ring was deserted save for the other bookmakers who, like us, were packing up amongst the detritus of a day's gambling: discarded newspapers, torn-up betting slips, crumpled coffee cups and half-eaten sandwiches.

‘Do you fancy a beer?’ Luca asked as I pulled one of the elastic straps over our equipment.

‘I’d love one,’ I said looking up at him. ‘But I can’t. I have to go and see Sophie.’

He nodded at me knowingly. ‘Some other time, then. Betsy and I are going to go and have one if that’s all right with you. We’re taking the train into town later to go to the party in the park.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘You go on. I’ll pack up the rest of the stuff.’

‘Can you manage?’ he asked.

He knew I could. I did it all the time. But this little exchange was his way of not taking it completely for granted.

I smiled at him. ‘No problem,’ I said waving a dismissing hand at them. ‘Go on. I’ll see you both in the morning. Usual time.’

‘OK,’ said Luca. ‘Thanks.’

Luca and Betsy went off together, leaving me standing alone next to the tarpaulin-covered equipment trolley. I watched them go, Betsy hand in hand beside her young man. At one point they stopped and embraced before disappearing out of my sight into the grandstand. Just another happy couple on their way, I assumed, to the bandstand bar, where there was usually an impromptu drinking party after each day’s racing.

I sighed.

I supposed I must have been that happy once. But it had been a long time ago. What, I wondered, had happened to all the happy times? Had they deserted me for ever?

I wiped my brow with the sleeve of my jacket and thought about how I would absolutely adore a nice cooling beer. I wanted to change my mind and go to find the other two, but I knew that it would end up being more trouble than it was worth. It always was.

I sighed again and stacked the last few of our equipment boxes onto the trolley, then fixed the rest of the elastic cords across the green tarpaulin. I took hold of the handle and released the brakes from the wheels. As I had told Luca, I could just about manage it alone, although it was always easier with two, especially up the concrete slope towards the tunnel through the grandstand. I tugged hard on the handle.

‘Do you want a hand with that?’ a voice shouted from behind me.

I stopped pulling and turned round. It was the man in the cream linen suit. He was about fifteen yards away leaning up against the metal fence between the betting ring and the Royal Enclosure. I hadn’t noticed him as we’d packed up and I wondered how long he’d been there watching me.

‘Who’s offering?’ I called back to him.

‘I knew your grandfather,’ he said again while walking over to me.

‘You said,’ I replied.

But lots of people knew my grandfather and nearly all of them hadn’t liked him. He had been a typically belligerent bookie who had treated both his customers and his fellow bookmakers with almost the same degree of contempt that they clearly held for him. He had been what many might have called ‘a character’ on the racecourse, standing out in all weathers at an age when most men would be content to put their feet up in retirement. Yes, indeed, lots of people had known my grandfather, but he’d had precious few friends, if any.

‘When did he die?’ asked the man, taking hold of one side of the handle.

We pulled the trolley together in silence up the slope to the grandstand and stopped on the flat of the concourse. I turned

and looked at my helper. His grey hair was accentuated by the deeply tanned skin of his face. I reckoned it wasn't an English summer tan.

'Seven years ago,' I said.

'What did he die from?' he asked. I could detect a slight accent in his voice but I couldn't quite place it.

'Nothing, really,' I said. 'Just old age.' And bloody mindedness, I thought. It was as if he had decided that he'd had his allocated stretch in this world and it was time to go to the next. He had returned from Cheltenham races and had seemingly switched off inside on the Friday, and then he had expired on the Sunday evening. The post-mortem pathologist couldn't say why he'd died. All his bits had apparently been working quite well and his brain had been sharp. I was sure he had simply willed himself to death.

'But he wasn't very old,' said the man.

'Seventy-eight,' I said. 'And two days.'

'That's not old,' said the man, 'not these days.'

'It was old enough for him,' I said.

The man looked at me quizzically.

'My grandfather decided that his time was up so he lay down and died.'

'You're kidding?' he said.

'Nope,' I said. 'Absolutely serious.'

'Silly old bugger,' he said, almost under his breath.

'Exactly how well did you know my grandfather?' I asked him.

'I'm his son,' he said.

I stared at him with an open mouth.

'So you must be my uncle,' I said.

'No,' he said, staring back. 'I'm your father.'

## CHAPTER 2

‘But you can’t be my father,’ I said, nonplussed.

‘I can,’ he said with certainty, ‘and I am.’

‘My father’s dead,’ I said.

‘How do you know?’ he asked. ‘Did you see him die?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I just . . . know. My parents died in a car crash.’

‘Is that what your grandfather told you?’

My legs felt detached from my body. I was thirty-seven years old and I had believed for as long as I could remember that I was fatherless. And motherless too. An orphan. I had been raised by my grandparents who had told me that both my parents had died when I was a baby. Why would they lie?

‘But I’ve seen a photo,’ I said.

‘Of what?’ he asked.

‘Of my parents,’ I said.

‘So you recognize me then?’

‘No,’ I said. But the photo was very small and at least thirty-seven years old, so would I actually recognize him now?

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Is there anywhere we could go and sit down?’

\*

In the end I did have that beer.

We sat at a table near the bar overlooking the pre-parade ring while the man in the cream linen suit told me who I was.

I wasn't sure what to believe. I couldn't understand why my grandparents would have lied to me but, equally, why would this stranger suddenly appear and lie to me now? It made no sense.

'Your mother and I were in a road accident,' he told me. He looked down. 'And then she died.' He paused for a long time as if wondering whether to carry on.

I sat there in silence looking at him. I didn't feel any real emotion, just confusion.

'Why?' I asked.

'Why what?' he said.

'Why have you come here today to tell me this?' I began to feel angry that he had chosen to disrupt my life in this way. 'Why didn't you stay away?' I raised my voice at him. 'Why didn't you stay away as you have done for the past thirty-seven years?'

'Because I wanted to see you,' he said. 'You are my son.'

'No, I'm not,' I shouted at him.

There were a few others enjoying a quick drink before making their way home, and they were looking in our direction.

'You are,' he said quietly, 'whether you like it or not.'

'But how can you be so sure?' I was clutching at imaginary straws.

'Edward, don't be stupid,' he said, picking at his fingers.

It was the first time he had used my name and it sounded odd. I had been christened Edward, but I'd been known as Ned all my life. Not even my grandfather had called me Edward, except, that was, when he was cross with me or I had done something naughty as a child.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked him.

‘Peter,’ he said. ‘Peter James Talbot.’

My father’s name was indeed Peter James Talbot. It said so in green ink on both my birth certificate and his. I knew by heart every element of those documents. Over the years the handwritten details on those papers had somehow been the only tangible link to my parents, that and the small creased and fading photograph that I still carried with me everywhere.

I removed my wallet from my pocket and passed the photo over to him.

‘Blackpool,’ he said with confidence, studying the image. ‘This was taken in Blackpool. We were there for the illuminations in November. Tricia, your mother, was about three months pregnant. With you.’

I took the photo back and looked again closely at the young man standing next to a dark green Ford Cortina, as I had done hundreds of times before. I glanced up at the man in front of me and then back down at the picture. I couldn’t say for sure that they were the same person but, equally, I couldn’t say they weren’t.

‘It is me, I assure you,’ he said. ‘That was my first car. I was nineteen when that picture was taken.’

‘How old was my mother?’ I asked.

‘Seventeen, I think,’ he said. ‘Yes, she must have been just seventeen. I tried to teach her to drive on that trip.’

‘You started young.’

‘Yes . . . well.’ He seemed embarrassed. ‘You weren’t actually planned, as such. More of a surprise.’

‘Oh, thanks,’ I replied somewhat sarcastically. ‘Were you married?’ I asked.

‘Not when that picture was taken, no.’

‘How about when I was born?’ I wasn’t sure that I wanted to know.

‘Oh yes,’ he said with certainty. ‘We were by then.’

Strangely, I was relieved that I was legitimate and not a bastard. But did it really matter? Yes, I decided, it did. It meant that there had been commitment between my parents, maybe even love. They cared, or at least, they had then.

‘Why did you leave?’ I asked him. It was the big question.

He didn’t answer immediately but sat quite still, looking at me.

‘Shame, I suppose,’ he said eventually. ‘After your mother died, I couldn’t cope with having a baby and no wife. So I ran away.’

‘Where to?’ I asked.

‘Australia,’ he said. ‘Eventually. First I signed onto a Liberian-registered cargo ship in Liverpool docks. I went all over the world for a while. I got off one day in Melbourne and just stayed there.’

‘So why come back now?’

‘It seemed like a good idea,’ he said.

It wasn’t.

‘What did you expect?’ I asked. ‘Did you think I would just welcome you with open arms after all this time? I thought you were dead.’ I looked him. ‘I think it might be better for me if you were.’

He looked back at me with doleful eyes. Perhaps I had been a bit hard.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it would definitely have been better if you hadn’t come back.’

‘But I wanted to see you,’ he said.

‘Why?’ I demanded loudly. ‘You haven’t wanted to for the last thirty-seven years.’

‘Thirty-six,’ he said.

I threw my hands up in frustration. ‘That’s even worse,’ I said. ‘It means you deserted me when I was a year old. How could a father do that?’ I was getting angry again. So far my own life had not been blessed with children, but it was not from a lack of longing.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

I wasn’t sure it was enough.

‘So what made you want to see me now?’ I said. ‘You can’t just have decided suddenly after all this time.’ He sat there in front of me in silence. ‘You didn’t even know that your own father was dead. And what about your mother? You haven’t asked me about her.’

‘It was only you I wanted to see,’ he said.

‘But why now?’ I asked him again.

‘I’ve been thinking about it for some time,’ he said.

‘Don’t try and tell me you had a fit of conscience after all these years,’ I scoffed at him with an ironic laugh.

‘Edward,’ he said somewhat sternly, ‘it doesn’t befit you to be so caustic.’

The laughter died in my throat. ‘You have no right to tell me how to behave,’ I replied with equal sternness. ‘You forfeited that right when you walked away.’ He looked down like a scalded cat. ‘So what do you want?’ I asked him. ‘I’ve got no money.’

His head came up again quickly. ‘I don’t want your money,’ he said.

‘What, then?’ I asked. ‘Don’t expect me to give you any love.’

‘Are you happy?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Deliriously,’ I lied. ‘I leap out of bed each morning with joy in my heart, delighting at the miracle of a new day.’

‘Are you married?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, giving no more details. ‘Are you?’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Not any more. But I have been. Twice – three times if you count your mother.’

I thought I probably would count my mother.

‘Widowed twice and divorced once,’ he said with a wry smile. ‘In that order.’

‘Children?’ I asked. ‘Other than me.’

‘Two,’ he said. ‘Both girls.’

I had sisters. Half-sisters, anyway.

‘How old are they?’

‘Both in their twenties now, late twenties, I suppose. I haven’t seen them for, oh, fifteen years.’

‘You seem to have made a habit of deserting your children.’

‘Yes,’ he said wistfully. ‘It appears I have.’

‘Why didn’t you leave me alone, and go and find *them*?’

‘But I know where they are,’ he said. ‘They won’t see me, not the other way round. They blame me for their mother’s death.’

‘Did she die in a car crash too?’ I said with a touch of cruelty in my voice.

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘Maureen killed herself.’ He paused and I sat still, watching him. ‘I was made bankrupt and she swallowed enough tablets to kill a horse. I came home from the court to find bailiffs sitting in the driveway and my wife lying dead in the house.’

His life was like a soap-opera, I thought. Disaster and sorrow had been a constant companion.

‘Why were you made bankrupt?’ I asked.

‘Gambling debts,’ he said.

‘Gambling debts!’ I was astounded. ‘And you the son of a bookmaker.’

‘It was being a bookie that got me into trouble,’ he said. ‘Obviously I hadn’t learned enough standing at my father’s side. I was a bad bookie.’

‘I thought gambling debts couldn’t be enforced in a court.’

‘Maybe not technically, but I had borrowed against everything and I couldn’t afford the repayments. Lost the lot. Every single thing, including the girls, who went off to live with their aunt. I never saw them again.’

‘Are you still bankrupt?’ I asked.

‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘That was years ago. I’ve been doing fine recently.’

‘As what?’ I said.

‘Business,’ he said unhelpfully. ‘My business.’

One of the bar staff in a white shirt and black trousers came over to us.

‘Sorry, we’re closing,’ he said. ‘Can you drink up, please?’

I looked at my watch. It was well past six o’clock already. I stood up and drank down the last of my beer.

‘Can we go somewhere to continue talking?’ my father asked.

I thought about Sophie. I had promised I would go and see her straight after the races.

‘I have to go to my wife,’ I said.

‘Can’t she wait?’ he implored. ‘Call her. Or I could come with you.’

‘No,’ I said, rather too quickly.

‘Why not?’ he persisted. ‘She’s my daughter-in-law.’

‘No,’ I said decisively. ‘I need time to get used to this first.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘But call her and say you’ve been held up and will be home later.’

I thought again about Sophie, my wife. She wasn’t at home. She would be sitting in front of the television in her room watching the news as she always did at six o’clock. I knew she would be there because she wasn’t allowed not to be.

Sophie’s room was locked, from the outside.

Sophie Talbot had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983 and detained for the past five months in secure accommodation. It wasn’t actually a prison, it was a hospital, a low-risk mental hospital, but it was a prison to her. And this wasn’t the first time. In all, my wife had spent more than half the previous ten years in one mental institution or another. And, in spite of their care and treatment, her condition had progressively deteriorated. What the future held was anyone’s guess.

‘How about a pub somewhere?’ my father said, interrupting my thoughts.

I needed to be at the hospital by nine at the latest. I looked at my watch.

‘I have about an hour, maximum,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll have to go.’

‘Fine,’ he said.

‘Do you have a car?’ I asked him.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Came on the train from Waterloo.’

‘Where are you staying?’ I asked.

‘Some seedy little hotel in Sussex Gardens,’ he said. ‘Guest house, really. Near Paddington station.’

‘Right,’ I said, deciding. ‘I’ll drive you somewhere for a drink then I’ll drop you at the railway station in Maidenhead and you can get the train back to London.’

‘Great,’ he said, smiling.

‘Come on, then.’

Together we pulled the trolley out through the racecourse main gate and across the busy road.

‘What sort of business are you in now?’ I asked him as we hauled our load through the deep gravel at the entrance to the car park.

‘This and that,’ he said.

‘Bookmaking?’ I persisted.

‘Sometimes,’ he said. ‘But mostly not.’

He seemed determined to be vague and evasive.

‘Is it legal?’ I asked.

‘Sometimes,’ he repeated.

‘But mostly not?’ I asked, echoing his previous answer.

He just smiled at me and pulled harder on the trolley.

‘Are you going to go back to Australia?’ I asked, changing the subject.

‘Expect so,’ he said. ‘But I’m just lying low for a while.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

He just smiled again. Perhaps it’s better, I thought, if I don’t know why.

I had parked my car, my trusty twelve-year-old Volvo 940 estate, at the back of car park number two, behind the owners’ and trainers’ area. As always, I’d had to pay for my parking. The racecourses gave bookmakers nothing.

Bookmakers’ pitches had once been held on a basis of seniority and long-standing, as they still were in Ireland. However, in Britain, pitch positions had been offered for sale and, once bought, remained the property of the bookie, to keep or sell on if he wished. Whoever owned number one had the first choice of where to stand in the betting ring, number two had second

choice, and so on. My number was eight, bought by my grandfather about twenty years ago for a king's ransom. I stood not quite at the best position, but good enough.

A bookmaker's badge fee, paid by me to the racecourse to be allowed to stand on any day at the races, was set at five times the public-entry cost. So if a racegoer paid forty pounds each day to get into the betting ring, as they did at Royal Ascot, then the badge fee was set at two hundred. Plus, of course, the regular entrance cost for Betsy and Luca to get in. On any day at the Royal meeting I was many hundreds out of pocket before I even took my first bet.

There were controversial plans for the old system to be thrown out in 2012 and for pitches to be auctioned by each racecourse to the highest bidder. The bookmakers objected to what they saw as the stealing of their property, and they believed that the racecourses were greedy, while everyone else thought the reverse was true.

The downtrodden bookie, the man that all and sundry love to hate. 'You never see a poor bookie,' people always say with a degree of loathing. That's because poor bookies rapidly go out of business. You never see a poor lawyer either. But, there again, all and sundry love to hate them too.

'How long are you staying?' I asked my father.

'A while,' he replied unhelpfully.

If he was going to be like this, I thought, then there was no purpose in going to a pub to talk. And I could use the time to go and spend longer with Sophie.

'Look,' I said. 'Perhaps it's better if you go straight back to London now. There's little point in going for a drink if you are going to ignore all my questions.'

'I want to talk about the past, not the future,' he said.

‘Well, I don’t.’

We were still pulling the trolley towards my car, passing through a gap in the hedge to the back of car park two when I heard running footsteps behind us. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of someone coming straight at me. In one continuous move he ran straight up onto the tarpaulin-covered trolley and kicked me square in the face.

Shit, I thought as I fell to the ground, I’m being robbed.

Didn’t this idiot know that it had been a dreadful day for the bookies? There was precious little left to steal. He would have done better to rob me on my way into the course this morning when I’d had a few grand of readies in my pockets.

I was down on all fours with my head hanging between my shoulders. I could feel on my face the warmth of fresh blood and I could see it running in a bright red rivulet from my chin to the earth beneath, where it was soaking into the grass.

I was half expecting another blow to my head or even a boot in my guts. My arms didn’t seem to be working too well but I managed to manoeuvre my right hand into my deep trouser pocket where I had put the envelope containing the small wad of remaining banknotes. Experience had taught me that it was better to give up the money early rather than to lie there taking a beating only to have the cash taken later anyway.

I pulled the envelope out of my pocket and threw it on the grass.

‘That’s all I have.’ I could taste the saltiness of the blood in my mouth as I spoke.

I rolled over onto my side. I didn’t really want to see my attacker’s face. Experience had also taught me that a positive identification usually leads to a further kicking. However, I needn’t have worried. The young man, and I was sure from his

strength and agility that he was a young man, was wearing a scarf around his face and the hood of his dark grey sweatshirt was pulled up over his head. Identification would have been impossible even if he had been facing towards me. Instead he was facing half away, standing in front of my father.

‘Here,’ I shouted at him. ‘Take it and leave us be.’

He turned his head slightly towards me then turned back to face my father.

‘Where’s the money?’ he hissed at him.

‘There,’ I said pointing at the envelope.

The man ignored me.

‘Go to hell,’ my father said to him, lashing out with his foot and catching the man in the groin.

‘You bastard,’ hissed the man with anger.

The man appeared to punch my father twice rapidly in the stomach.

‘Where’s the bloody money?’ hissed our attacker once again.

This time my father said nothing. He merely sat down heavily on the ground with his back up against the hedge.

‘Leave him be,’ I shouted at the hooded figure. ‘It’s there,’ I said, once again pointing at the white envelope on the grass. The man simply ignored me again and turned back to my father, so I screamed at the top of my voice, ‘Help! Help! Help!’

Car park two was mostly deserted but there were still some after-racing parties taking place in the owners’ and trainers’ area. Heads turned our way and three or four brave souls took a few steps in our direction. No doubt, I thought ironically, they would probably come and help with the beating if they knew the victim was a bookmaker.

The man took one look over his shoulder at the approaching group and was off, running between the few remaining cars

before disappearing over the wooden fence on the far side of the car park. I sat on the grass and watched him go. He never once looked back.

The envelope of money still sat on the grass next to me. Not much of a thief, I mused. I leaned over, picked up the envelope and thrust it back into the deep recess of my pocket. I struggled to my feet, cursing at the green grass stains that had appeared on the knees of my trousers.

Three of the waistcoated revellers, still clutching their champagne glasses, had arrived.

‘Are you all right?’ asked one. ‘That’s quite a cut on your face.’

I could still feel the blood, now running down my neck.

‘I think I’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘Thanks to you. We were mugged but he didn’t get away with anything.’ I took a couple of steps over to my father. ‘Are you OK . . . Dad?’ I asked him. The sound of the word, Dad, was strange to my ears.

He looked up at me with frightened eyes.

‘What is it?’ I asked urgently, taking another couple of steps towards him.

He was clutching his abdomen and now he moved his hand away. The cream linen jacket was rapidly turning bright red. My father hadn’t been punched in the stomach by the young man, he’d been stabbed.