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Damage

A Dick Francis Novel

Written by Felix Francis

Published by Michael Joseph

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DAMAGE

A Dick Francis Novel

by

FELIX FRANCIS

MICHAEL JOSEPH
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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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In May 2013, Lord Tim Bell was the winning bidder in a fund-raising auction to have a character written into this novel. He chose to have his friend and business partner, Piers Pottinger, included as the character but I have managed to incorporate them both.

1

'I've had the test results and the news isn't good.'

I couldn't get the words out of my head.

I was sitting in the shadows at the back of a race-card kiosk near the north entrance to Cheltenham racecourse, scanning the faces of the crowd as they flooded through the turnstiles.

I was looking out for any one of the fifty or so individuals who were banned from British racecourses but my mind kept drifting back to the telephone conversation I'd had that morning with my sister.

'I've had the test results and the news isn't good.'

'In what way?' I asked with rising dread.

'It's cancer,' she said quietly.

I'd feared so but had hoped desperately that I was wrong.

I waited silently. She'd go on if she wanted to.

'It's all a bit of a bugger.' She sighed audibly down the line. 'I've got to have an op next Monday and then some chemo.'

'What's the op for?'

'To remove my gall bladder. That's where the cancer is.'

'Can you live without it?'

She laughed. 'The gall bladder or the cancer?'

'Both.'

'I hope so.' The laughter evaporated from her voice. 'Time will tell. Things don't appear very rosy at the moment. I may have only a few months left.'

Oh God, I thought. What does one do when given that scenario? Do you try and carry on as normal or attempt to cram as much into the remaining time as possible? In reality, I suspected that treatment and feeling ill would take over everything. Not very rosy indeed.

I realized that I hadn't been paying attention to the flow of humanity passing by in front of me.

Concentrate, I said to myself, and went back to studying faces.

It was Champion Hurdle Day, the first of the annual Cheltenham Steeplechasing Festival and, in spite of the inclement weather, a crowd of over fifty thousand was expected to cram into the Gloucestershire racecourse. Everyone had an umbrella or a rain-hat of some kind – ideal conditions for the unwelcome few to hide amongst the masses.

I knew by sight all those who had racecourse-banning orders but I was on the lookout for one particular individual that our intelligence branch had suggested might come to Cheltenham that day.

A large man walked up to the kiosk to buy a racecard, standing there while he hunted for change in his pockets. I shifted my position to see past him, looking over the head of the racecard seller who sat directly in front of me.

It was a role I was used to.

My name was Jeff Hinkley and I was employed as a covert investigator for the British Horseracing Authority. Hence I spent much of my time half hidden, scanning faces, watching out for those who had no place in racing. Not that being banned from entering racecourses ever stopped them trying.

Cancer of the gall bladder.

How could Faye, my big sister, have cancer of the gall bladder?

Faye was forty-two, twelve years my senior, and she had acted like a mother to me after our real mum had died when I was eight.

I wondered if cancer was hereditary.

Our mum had died of it but I didn't know exactly where it had been in her body. It was something that wasn't talked about either before or after her death.

I spotted a face in the crowd.

Nick Ledder, an ex jock, banned from all racecourses for three years for attempting to bribe another young jockey to lose. I watched as he scanned his ticket and hurried through the turnstile with his coat collar turned up against the icy wind, and a tweed cap pulled down over his forehead. It was his eyes that I spotted. It was always the eyes.

But his was not the face I was really looking for.

Nick Ledder was a small-time crook of limited intelligence who hadn't been able to resist taking a handful of readies to try and fix a race, and he had paid a heavy price for his folly. He was hopeful of getting his

riding licence back early but he'd hardly endear himself to the stewards by sneaking into Cheltenham while he was still banned.

I let him go by, I could always find him later, and went back to scanning other faces.

I thought about gall bladders. What did they do if you could live without one?

'Jeff, are you there?' said a voice in my earpiece.

'Here, Nigel,' I replied via the microphone I wore on my left wrist.

'Any sign?'

'No,' I said. 'Nick Ledder's here. I saw him. I'll deal with him later.'

'Bloody fool.'

'How about you?'

'Nothing as yet.'

Nigel Green was a colleague of mine in the BHA Integrity Service. He was watching the south entrance. Two other BHA staff were covering the remaining ways in but Nigel and I reckoned that our target would most likely use either the north or south entrance where the crowds were bigger – that was if he came at all.

I continued to study faces and tried to keep my mind off gall bladders and chemotherapy. How could she have cancer?

My task would have been easier if I had known none of the people funnelling through the turnstiles. Then I would just have had to look for someone familiar. As it was, I knew about a quarter of those passing

in front of me: owners, trainers, jockeys, as well as other regular racegoers I had seen many times before. One of the reasons I had a job with the Integrity Service was because I had an uncanny knack of remembering faces, and of putting names to them.

I watched as Duncan Johnson, a top steeplechase trainer, made his way into the racecourse followed closely and rather indiscreetly by a young woman twenty years his junior with whom he was currently having an affair. Mrs Johnson, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen. She would probably be at home in Lambourn waiting expectantly for James Sutton, a young stable lad from the village, who would come and spend the afternoon in bed with her, enjoying the racing on Channel 4 and other things, just as they did on most Saturdays.

It was amazing what one could discover simply by frequenting the Lambourn pubs, and keeping one's eyes and ears open. Snooping was a major part of my job but I'd learned to be discreet and inconspicuous, asking very few questions myself while encouraging others to ask for me.

Duncan Johnson drifted away out of my sight with his high-heeled concubine clicking away on the tarmac five paces behind him, fooling nobody.

What sort of gall did a gall bladder store?

I hadn't had time to search on the internet as Faye had called me just as I was leaving my hotel for the racecourse. I'd look it up later.

The human swarm was beginning to thin out as the

first race approached, most people having arrived early to grab a bite and a beer before the start of proceedings, with time to make their selections and place their bets. Those held up in the race-day traffic now hurried through the turnstiles, making a beeline for the betting ring and the grandstand.

'They're off!' The public address announced the start of the first race of the Festival, greeted as always with a huge roar from the excited crowd.

Perhaps the cancer has been caught early.

I knew Faye had been for tests after having pains in her abdomen over Christmas but she'd assumed it was kidney stones, something she'd had once before.

What had she said that morning? *I may have only a few months left*. But Faye always tended to look on the darker side of life.

As she had also said, time would tell.

My mind was drifting again and I almost missed him.

Just as the race was coming towards an exhilarating finale with the crowd cheering, the target came through the end turnstile in a rush, hurrying on as if he wanted to catch the finish, a red scarf wound around his neck and mouth, and with a battered and damp trilby pulled down hard over his ears. Again, it was the eyes that gave him away.

'Bingo,' I said into my microphone. 'He's here. Following now.'

I slipped out of the racecard kiosk and scurried along behind him, keeping about ten yards back.

He went past the shops of the tented village then turned right towards the concourse between the parade ring and the grandstand. There was purpose in his progress as if he had a specific agenda rather than merely wandering around. Perhaps, as we suspected, he was on his way to meet someone, but why here when it would be safer to do so elsewhere in private?

Suddenly he stopped completely and turned round to face me.

Bugger.

I went past him without breaking step and without a glance in his direction, instead looking down at the iPhone in my hand.

I knew he wouldn't know me.

I'd hardly recognized myself that morning as I had looked in the hotel bathroom mirror. I was constantly being ribbed by my colleagues but I believed that I was most effective if none of those I was pursuing knew what I really looked like. Hence I used disguises, frequently changing the colour of my own curls, or using wigs and various degrees of facial hair, glued in place with a latex-based adhesive.

A good disguise was all about distracting people's attention away from the eyes. Give them something else to stare at and they might remember that feature but they would not recognize the man beneath.

On that particular day I sported a well-trimmed goatee beard with collar-length dark hair under a brown woollen beanie, as well as a faded green anorak over a grey shirt and navy sweater, plus blue

chinos. I purposely didn't want to look like one of the 'establishment', but equally I needed to blend into the background.

I went on twenty strides and then stopped, half turning back. I put my mobile to my ear as if making a call and, using my thumb on the touchscreen, I silently took two photos back towards the target.

He was moving again and I stood quite still talking to no one on my phone as he walked right past me. I waited for a moment, letting him get ten or fifteen yards away, before following him up past the bookshop and the confectionary kiosk, and then on towards the Centaur Centre and the Tattersall end of the grandstand.

We were moving against the human traffic that was spilling out of the grandstand towards the winners' enclosure now that the race was over.

The target pressed on into the stream, forcing his way through as I struggled to keep up behind him.

I almost lost him altogether as a group of six well-built and inebriated punters insisted on walking in-line abreast, jostling me to and fro with guffaws as I tried to get past.

'What's the 'urry, mate?' said one as he pushed me back. 'Got a date, 'ave you?'

He laughed enthusiastically at his own weak joke and took another swig from his beer while I ducked under his raised arm. How could anyone, I wondered, be half-cut after only the first race?

I scanned the mass of heads in front of me, searching for a battered trilby.

Where had he gone?

I rushed forward in desperation and almost ran straight into the back of the target as he himself was slowed by the congestion in the pinch-point beneath the Hall of Fame.

Calm down, I told myself.

'Have you still got him, Jeff?' Nigel asked into my ear.

'Yes,' I said quietly into my left sleeve.

'Need any help?'

'Yes,' I said again.

'Where?'

'Under the Hall of Fame bridge.'

'On my way,' Nigel replied.

The target was on the move again, ducking into one of the bars beneath the grandstand.

'Going into the Winged Ox Bar,' I said into my sleeve.

'OK,' came the reply. 'One minute away.'

The bar was packed with long queues at every counter but the target was clearly not here to get a drink. Instead he weaved his way right through the throng and out onto the now almost empty viewing steps beyond.

I'd been close to him as he crossed the teeming bar but now I hung back so as not to alert him to my presence.

I watched as he stood for a moment, moving his head from side to side as if searching for something before setting off again down the steps.

What was he doing here? I asked myself again. Surely he must know that meeting someone at a racecourse was likely to provoke a reaction from the racing authorities.

I went out onto the viewing steps and looked down.

The target moved swiftly towards where the lines of bookmakers were sheltering from the rain under their multicoloured and name-branded umbrellas.

Had he come to speak to a bookmaker?

Nigel Green joined me.

'That's our man,' I said, pointing, 'with the red scarf.'

The target was about twenty yards away and, as we watched, he took his right hand out of his coat pocket. His hand was not empty.

'Knife! Knife!' I shouted loudly, rushing down the steps.

My shouts were swept away by the wind and there was nothing I could do but watch as the target went straight up to one of the bookmakers and slashed at his throat. There was no warning, no words at all, just a clean swipe of the blade across the bookie's unprotected skin, which turned instantly from pink to bright red.

It had occurred so fast that even those standing close by seemed not to realize what had happened until the bookmaker in question toppled face-first onto the wet tarmac, blood gushing from the wound in his neck like a scarlet fountain.

Meanwhile, the target moved away, walking fast along the line of bookmakers, dodging other racegoers,

some of whom were running towards the spot behind him where a woman had begun screaming loudly.

I went on following the target while Nigel went to tend the victim.

So that was why he'd come. Not to meet or to talk, but to kill.

I followed him along to the end of the grandstand where the food stalls were doing brisk business. He turned right and started up the slope towards the south exit. I hurried after him, the need for stealth now ended.

He glanced back over his shoulder, noticed me pushing my way through the hamburger queue and began to run.

I ran after him, towards the entrance where late arrivals were still streaming through the turnstiles.

The official at the exit gate alongside the turnstiles wouldn't let the target out. He kept asking for his ticket so it could be scanned for re-entry.

I was by now just a few feet away. The target looked up and saw me watching him.

He panicked and reached into his coat pocket for the knife, its blade still showing red.

'Get back,' he shouted, waving the knife in front of him. 'Get back, all of you.'

I stepped back a pace or two while others moved much farther away.

'Give it up,' I said to him. 'There's no escape.'

He looked around with wide eyes and grabbed hold of the gateman who had been cornered next to his gate.

‘Open the gate,’ the target ordered, ignoring the two large policemen in bright yellow jackets who had appeared on its far side, one of whom was talking urgently into his personal radio. ‘Open the bloody gate!’ He was desperate.

The gateman tried to comply but in his haste and nervousness he couldn’t get the latch to open.

‘Give yourself up,’ I shouted but the target simply waved his knife more vigorously, slashing it towards me.

I retreated a few more steps.

More police arrived and a stand-off ensued, with the target holding the unfortunate gateman in his left hand with the knife in his right.

‘Open the gate or I’ll kill him.’ The knife was close to the gateman’s neck.

‘Let him go and then we’ll open the gate,’ shouted one of the policemen on the far side.

‘No,’ yelled the target in escalating distress. ‘Open the gate first.’

The impasse continued and was finally broken only when one of the newly arrived police officers stepped forward and shot the target with a Taser stun gun.

He instantly dropped to the ground, his body writhing around uncontrollably from the multi-thousand-volt electric shocks delivered by the Taser. Two more policemen came forward, carefully removing the knife before bending the target’s arm behind his back and applying a pair of sturdy handcuffs to his wrists.

Satisfied, they stood up, leaving the target lying face down on the cold wet tarmac.

'Who is he?' one of them asked me.

'Matthew Unwin,' I said. 'He's a banned ex race-horse trainer.'

'Banned?' he said. 'Banned from what?'

'All racecourses and racing stables.'

'So what's he doing here, then?' the policeman asked.

Murdering a bookmaker.