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Front Runner

A Dick Francis Novel

Written by Felix Francis

Published by Michael Joseph

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FRONT RUNNER

A Dick Francis Novel

by

FELIX FRANCIS

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Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
Book 2 of the Georgics, verse 490: Virgil (29 BC)
Happy is he who can discover the causes of things

With my special thanks to
Debbie

I was approached by The Voice of Racing: The Sir Peter O'Sullevan Charitable Trust, and asked to include a character in my next book as an auction lot at the Trust's Annual Award Lunch in November 2014.

The lot was sold to Mr Derrick Smith, who bought it for his wife, Gay.

£40,000 was raised for the Trust by the sale, all of the money going to the six charities the Trust supports: Blue Cross, The Brooke Hospital for Animals, Compassion in World Farming, World Horse Welfare, Racing Welfare, and The Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre.

I have incorporated both Gay and Derrick in this book, but as fictitious characters. I hope they are happy with the artistic licence I have taken.

1

The display on the digital thermometer to my left read 105 degrees – 105 degrees Celsius that is, 221 degrees Fahrenheit.

Sweat ran off the end of my nose in a continuous stream and I could feel the heat deep in my chest as I breathed in the searing air.

I'd been in saunas before but never one this hot.

'So what do you want?' I asked.

My companion in this hellish place didn't answer. He simply stared at the floor between his feet.

'Come on,' I said. 'I haven't come all this way for my health. It's far too bloody hot in here. You wanted to talk to me, so talk.'

He lifted his head.

'At least you're not in one of *these* damn things.' He tugged at the black nylon sweatsuit he was wearing. As if the heat alone wasn't bad enough.

'Maybe not, but I didn't come here to be slow-roasted.'

He still didn't talk. He just looked at me. Dave Swinton, twenty-nine years old and already eight times champion steeplechase jockey. At five foot ten, he had a continuous struggle with his weight, that was common knowledge, but owners and trainers

were often happy to accept a touch overweight in order to have his exceptional skill in the saddle. And for good reason – the stats showed that he won almost a third of the races in which he rode.

'Off the record?' he said.

'Don't be silly,' I replied.

I was an investigator for the British Horseracing Authority, the organization responsible for regulatory control of all Thoroughbred racing in the United Kingdom. Nothing I saw or heard to do with racing could be *off the record*.

'I'll deny I said it.'

'Said what?' I asked. 'I've been in this bloody oven now for over ten minutes and I'm starting to look like a lobster. Either you tell me why I'm here or I'm gone.'

I wondered why he'd been so insistent that we should talk in his sauna. I had thought it was because he needed to shed a pound or two before racing at Newbury that afternoon, but maybe it was actually to make sure that I had no recording equipment hidden about my person. As a rule I used my iPhone to record meetings but that was in the pocket of my jacket and it was hanging up on a peg outside, along with the rest of my clothes.

Dave went on looking at me as if still undecided.

'Right,' I said. 'I'm done.' I stood up, wrapped the towel I had been sitting on round my waist and pushed open the sauna's wooden door.

'I lost a race this week.'

I put one foot through the doorway. 'So? You can't win them all.'

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I lost it on purpose.'

I stopped and turned to him. I knew most of the Rules of Racing by heart. Rule (D)45.1 stated that a jockey was required, at all times, to have *made a genuine attempt to obtain from his horse timely, real and substantial efforts to achieve the best possible placing*.

To lose a race on purpose was to wilfully flout that rule, an offence that could carry a penalty of ten years' disqualification from the sport.

'Why?' I asked.

He didn't answer. He simply went back to studying the space between his feet.

'Why?' I asked him again.

'Forget I ever said it.'

'I can hardly do that,' I said.

Winding back time wasn't possible. Just as uninventing the atom bomb wasn't ever going to happen.

I looked down at him but he went on scrutinizing the floor.

'Can't we get out of this bloody heat and talk about this over a glass of iced beer?'

'I can't drink *anything*,' he replied sharply without moving his head. 'Not even water. What the hell do you think I'm doing this for? I've got to lose two pounds to ride Integrated in the Hennessy.'

'Won't you be dehydrated?'

‘Usual state for me,’ he said, trying to produce a laugh. ‘I’ve been wasting every day since I was sixteen. I can’t remember what a square meal looks like. Nor a beer. In fact, I haven’t had a proper drink for years; alcohol contains far too many calories. Not that I miss it much, I don’t like the taste.’ He laughed again, but just the once. ‘Why do I do it? you ask. That’s a bloody good question.’

He stood up and we both went out of the wooden box into the coolness. I wondered how many people had a sauna in the corner of their garage, not that there wasn’t still plenty of room for a couple of expensive cars as well: a silver Mercedes saloon and a dark green Jaguar XK sports coupé, both adorned with personalized number plates.

Dave flicked off a big red switch next to the door.

‘It must cost a fortune to heat,’ I said.

‘I claim my electricity bill against tax as a business expense,’ he said, smiling. ‘This sauna is a necessity for my job.’

‘How often do you use it?’

‘Every day. I used to go to the one in the local gym but then they turned down the temperature – something to do with health and safety.’

He peeled off the nylon sweatsuit and stepped naked onto some bathroom scales.

‘What the hell is that?’ I said, pointing at an ugly purple-and-black ring on his back.

‘Something landed on me,’ he said with a smile. ‘Hoofprint.’

He looked down at the scales.

'I'm still too heavy,' he said with a sigh. 'No lunch for me today, to go with my no breakfast.'

'But you surely have to eat. You need the energy.'

'Can't afford to,' he said. 'According to his bloody owner, if I can't do ten stone four stripped by two this afternoon, I don't get to ride Integrated, and he's one of the best young chasers in the country. He's incredibly well handicapped for the Hennessy and, if I don't ride him today and he wins, I can kiss goodbye to riding him any time in the future – maybe start kissing goodbye to my whole career.'

He could kiss goodbye to his career anyway if he'd been purposely losing races.

'Tell me about the race you didn't win,' I said.

'I need a shower,' he replied, ignoring me and going into the house. '*You* can use the one in the guest bathroom if you like. Top of the stairs on the right.'

He bounded up the stairs and disappeared into what I presumed was his bedroom, closing the door firmly behind him.

Not for the first time, I wondered what I was doing here.

'Come *now*, Jeff.' That's what Dave had said intently down the line when he'd called me at ten to seven that morning. 'At once. I need to talk to you. Right now. It's vital.'

'Can't we talk on the phone?' I'd asked.

'No. Absolutely not. Far too important. This has to be done face-to-face.'

Dave Swinton was one of the very few members of the racing fraternity that I called a friend. Mostly, I avoided social contact with those I was supposed to police but, two years previously, Dave and I had been stranded for twenty-four hours together by an unseasonal ice storm as we tried to return home to England after the Maryland Hunt Cup steeplechase, north of Baltimore. He was there as a guest rider and I had been invited to oversee the introduction of a new drug-testing regime for American steeplechase horses.

We had ended up spending a freezing night in an upstate country hotel with no heat or light, the power lines having been brought down by the ice. We had passed the night huddled under blankets in front of a log fire, and we had talked.

Hence I'd come when he'd asked, giving up a precious Saturday-morning lie-in to catch an early train from Paddington to Hungerford and then a taxi to Dave's house just outside Lambourn.

He had dropped a bit of a bombshell with his claim to have lost a race on purpose but, if he refused to elaborate, I'd have made a wasted journey.

I went into his kitchen and gratefully drank down two large glassfuls of water from the cold tap. And still I was thirsty. How Dave could drink nothing after a session in that sauna was beyond me.

I followed Dave's directions to the guest bathroom and had a shower but still had to wait downstairs for more than twenty minutes before he reappeared

dressed in a dark green polo shirt, blue jeans and trainers, his standard work attire.

Whereas most top jockeys still dressed in suits and ties to go to the races in order to impress the owners and trainers, Dave Swinton had long forgone such niceties. Nowadays, Royal Ascot and the Derby meeting apart, racing in general was a more casual affair, and the current champion jockey was the most casual of them all.

'I'm going to Newbury now,' he said, picking up a grip that was lying in the hallway. 'I want to run the course before the first.'

I looked at my watch. It was coming up to ten o'clock.

'I came by train and taxi,' I said. 'Can you give me a lift?'

'Where to?'

'Newbury racecourse will be fine,' I said. 'I'll watch the Hennessy and then take the train back to town.'

'Why don't you drive like everyone else?' he said, clearly irritated.

'I've no car,' I said. 'I don't need one in London. I'll come with you.'

He could hardly say no but I could tell that he wasn't that happy. Whatever he had decided to tell me at seven o'clock that morning, he had clearly changed his mind since, and half an hour of us together in his car was not on his agenda, friends or not.

'OK,' he said grudgingly. 'Are you ready?'

*

He drove the Jaguar at speed out of Lambourn up Hungerford Hill, the only sound being the roar of the car's powerful engine, but if he thought I wasn't going to say something, he was much mistaken.

'Tell me about the race you didn't win.'

'Please, Jeff. I told you to forget it.'

'I can't,' I said.

'Try.'

He drove on in silence past The Hare public house and on towards the M4 junction, overtaking a line of slower vehicles with ease.

'Which race was it?' I asked.

He ignored me. We turned eastwards, accelerating onto the motorway.

'Come on, Dave, you asked me to come all this way because you had something to tell me that couldn't be said on the phone. So here I am. Speak to me.'

He concentrated hard on the road ahead and said nothing as the Jaguar's speedo climbed rapidly past a hundred miles per hour.

'Are you in some sort of trouble?' I asked, although he certainly would be if what he'd told me were true.

He eased up on the power and pulled over towards the left. For a nasty moment I thought he was going to stop on the hard shoulder and chuck me out, but he didn't. He just drove sedately along in the inside lane at a mere eighty-five.

'Jeff, can I speak to you off the record?' he asked again.

'You know I can't agree to that. This is my job.'

'It's *my* bloody job that I'm more worried about.'

We took the slip road off the motorway at the Newbury turning and I sat and waited quietly while he negotiated the traffic lights on the roundabout.

'Look, I'll keep what you say confidential if I can,' I said, encouraging him to go on. 'But no promises.'

He must know that I was obliged to report any breach of the rules to the BHA Disciplinary Committee.

He sighed deeply. 'I need your help.'

'Ask away.'

'I'm being blackmailed.'

'Who by?' I asked as calmly as I could.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Someone who knows more than they should about my financial affairs.'

'And aren't your financial affairs in order?'

'Yeah, of course they are.' He paused. 'But, you know, working out the bloody tax is complicated. Maybe I take a few shortcuts.'

'By not declaring certain things?'

'Yeah, maybe. But why should I pay tax on gifts?'

It depended if the 'gifts' were actually payments for services rendered.

'How much were these gifts that you didn't declare?'

'Not much,' he said. 'Not compared to what I do declare.'

Dave Swinton was, by far, the highest-earning jockey in British racing. He was the public face of the sport with a mass of endorsements and sponsorship deals. His was the image that stared out of the Racing Needs You! posters of a recent widespread campaign

to encourage the young to give it a try. His ever-present green polo shirts had the distinctive 'Swoosh' logo of a top sportswear manufacturer embroidered on the left breast above his name and there were advertising badges sewn onto each arm. He certainly earned far more from commercial endorsements than he did from his riding.

'How much?' I asked again.

'About two hundred.'

I laughed. 'But that's not enough to worry about. Just include it in your next return. No one could blackmail you over that, surely?'

'Two hundred *thousand*.'

'Ah.' The laughter died in my throat.

'Yeah. But I declare more than a million.' He paused as he overtook a line of traffic waiting at some lights, swerving across into the correct lane to turn left at the very last moment. 'And then some bastard calls me and tells me to lose a race or else he'll go to the tax authorities and spill the beans.'

'And you've no idea who?'

'None,' he said. 'Otherwise I'd have killed him.'

'I don't think that would be particularly helpful.'

'Maybe not, but it might make me feel better.'

He drove on in silence until we arrived at the racecourse.

'Which race did you lose?' I asked again as we turned into the car park.

'I had twenty-eight rides and ten winners last week, so I lost eighteen races.'

'Don't mess with me, Dave,' I said. 'You know what I mean.'

He didn't reply.

He pulled the Jaguar into a space in the jockeys' parking area.

'Do you want my advice?' I asked.

'Not really,' he said, leaning his head down onto the steering wheel.

I gave it to him anyway. 'Go to the Revenue and tell them you made an error of omission on your tax return and you want to correct it. Pay the tax. That will be an end to it, and I'll try to forget what you've told me.'

'And if I don't?'

'Then you'd be a fool. If someone has that information they will use it. They may not go to the authorities directly, but they will use it nevertheless. Perhaps they will try and sell it to a newspaper. You'd be right in the shit. Much better that you go to the taxman before they do.'

'But I shouldn't have to pay tax on gifts. It's not like they were earnings.'

He sounded as if he was trying to convince himself rather than me.

'Go and ask your accountant if you need to declare them.'

'Bloody accountants,' he said, sitting back in the seat. 'You don't want to tell them anything if you don't want the taxman to know it. In spite of the fact that it's me that pays their bill, my lot seem to work

exclusively for the government, always telling me I can't claim for all sorts of things I think are essential for my job.'

'Get a new firm, then. And do it now.'

And maybe, I thought, it was one of his accountant team who knew about his tax-return omission who was trying to make a bit of extra cash on the side.

'How much money did the blackmailer demand?' I asked him as we walked towards the racecourse entrance.

'That's what was odd,' Dave said. 'He didn't ask for money, he just said that I mustn't win the race.'

'Which race?'

He didn't answer.