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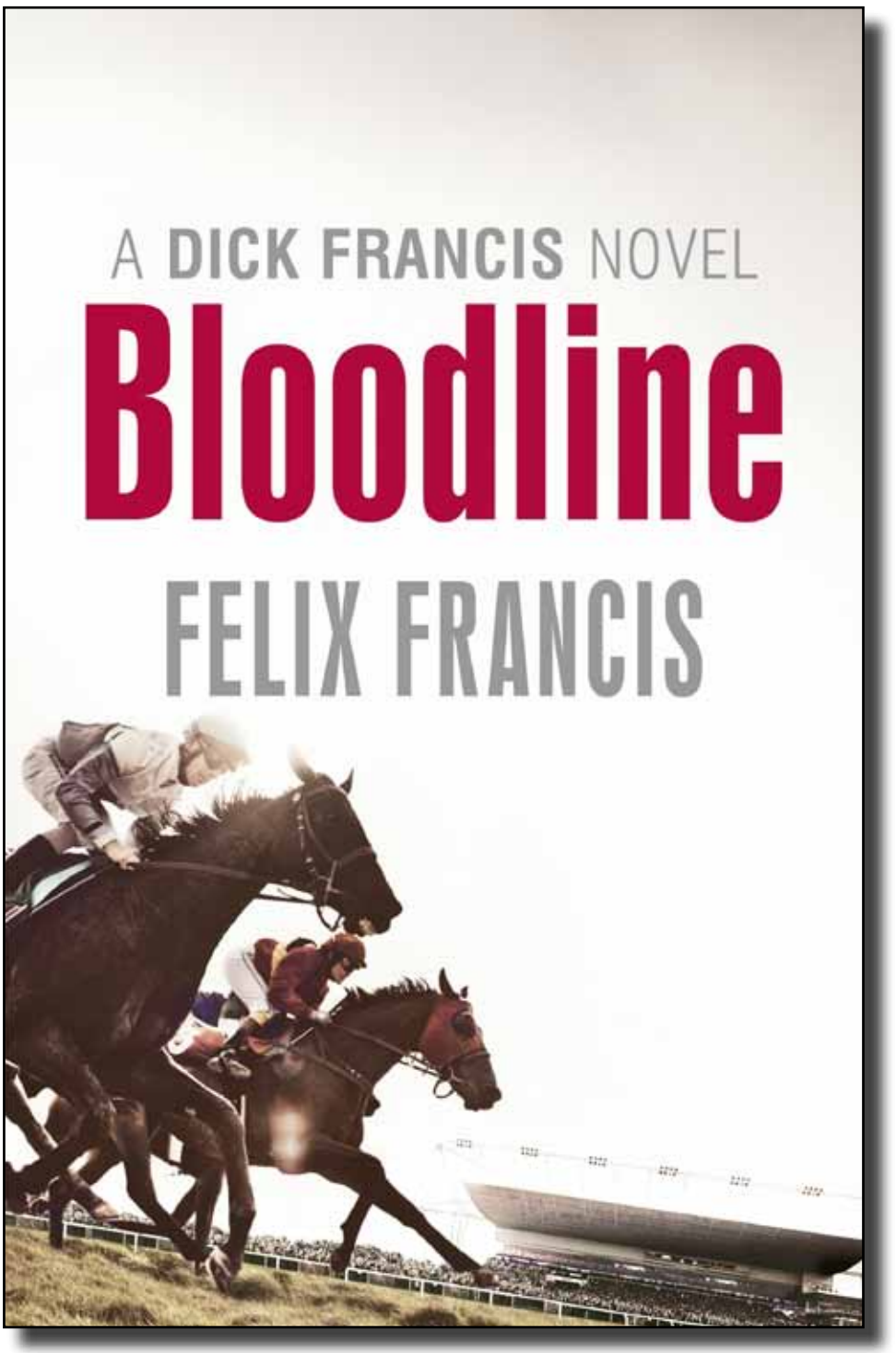
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by
Felix Francis

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1

'They're off!'

I looked down at the image of the horses on my TV monitor and shielded my eyes from the bright September sunshine. An unremarkable seven-and-a-half-furlong sprint for maiden two-year-olds at Lingfield Park with twelve runners – just another horserace, one of more than fifteen hundred such races I would watch live this year.

But this particular race was to change my life for ever.

The horses broke from the starting stalls in a fairly even line and I glanced down at my handwritten sheet that showed the runners in their draw positions as they faced me almost a mile away.

The seven-and-a-half-furlong start at Lingfield was slightly obscured from the grandstand by some overhanging trees so I leaned closer to the monitor to get a better view.

'They're running in the Herald Sunshine Limited Maiden Stakes and Spitfire Boy is the early leader,' I said, 'with Steeplejack also showing early pace.

Sudoku is next on the rail tracked by Radioactive with Troubleatmill running wide. Postal Vote is next, then High Definition and Low Calorie with Bangkok Flyer on the far outside in the green jacket, followed by Tailplane with the white cap and Routemaster in the orange hoops. The backmarker at this stage is Pink Pashmina, who is struggling and getting a reminder as they pass the six-furlong marker.'

I lifted my eyes from the monitor and looked down towards the horses using my high-power binoculars. At six furlongs I could now see them all clearly as they raced directly towards me, the foreshortening effect of the binoculars making the horses' heads seem to bob up and down unnaturally.

Races like this, with the horses running headlong down the straight track, nearly always made life difficult for commentators and this one was no exception. The twelve runners had split into two groups with eight horses running close to the nearside rail and the four others making their way right down the middle.

The punters on the grandstands understandably wanted to know which horse was leading but the angle from which I was looking did not make it an easy task to decide.

'The red jacket of Spitfire Boy leads the larger group on the nearside with Radioactive making a challenge. Troubleatmill and Bangkok Flyer are running neck-and-neck in the middle of the course with half a mile to go.'

I looked intensely at the field as they galloped

towards me. It may have stated in the racecard that Bangkok Flyer's colours were dark green but, silhouetted in the sunshine, they looked very black to me and I didn't want to confuse them with the navy jacket of Postal Vote.

No, I was sure. It was Bangkok Flyer with his sheepskin noseband and he was living up to his name.

'Bangkok Flyer, with the sheepskin noseband, now stretching away on the far side. He has opened up a two-length margin over Troubleatmill, who seems not to be staying the distance. And on the nearside Spitfire Boy has finally been caught by Radioactive but here comes Sudoku between horses under Paul James in the white jacket, who has yet to move a muscle.'

I lowered my binoculars and watched the horses unaided.

'Sudoku now sweeps to the front on the nearside as they pass the furlong pole but he still has the short-priced favourite, Bangkok Flyer, to beat. Sudoku and Bangkok Flyer come together as they move into the closing stages. Sudoku in white and Bangkok Flyer in dark green, it's a two-horse race.' The tone of my voice rose higher and higher as the equine nostrils stretched for the finishing line beneath me. 'Bangkok Flyer and Sudoku stride-for-stride. Sudoku and Bangkok Flyer.' My pitch reached its crescendo. 'Sudoku wins from Bangkok Flyer, Low Calorie runs on gamely to be third, Radioactive is fourth, followed by the long-time leader Spitfire Boy, then Routemaster, High Definition, Troubleatmill, Steeplejack, then Tailplane and Postal

Vote together, and finally the filly, Pink Pashmina, who has finished a long way last.'

I pushed the button that switched off my microphone.

'First number ten, Sudoku,' said the judge over the PA. 'Second number one, third number four. The fourth horse was number eight. The distances were a neck, and two and a half lengths.'

The PA fell silent.

The race was over. The excitement had come and gone, and the crowd would already be looking forward to the next contest in thirty minutes.

I looked out across the track and felt uneasy.

Something there hadn't been quite right.

It wasn't my commentary. I hadn't confused the horses or called the wrong horse home as the winner – something that every race caller had done at some time in his life. It was the race itself that hadn't been quite right.

'*Thanks, Mark. Great job*,' said a voice in my headphones. '*And well done mentioning every horse and thanks for the finish order.*'

'No problem, Derek,' I said.

Derek was a producer for RacingTV, the satellite broadcaster that was showing the racing live. He would be sitting in the scanner, a large blacked-out truck somewhere behind the racecourse stables with a bank of television images in front of him, one for each of the half a dozen or so cameras, and it was he who decided what pictures the people at home or in the betting shops

would see. The TV company didn't have their own commentator so they took the course commentary – me. But they liked it if all the horses were mentioned at least once and they were pretty insistent on the full finishing order being given. It was fine with twelve runners but not so easy when there were thirty or more, especially in a sprint like this when the whole thing was over in less than a minute and a half.

'Derek?' I said, pushing a button on the control box.

'*Go ahead*,' he replied into my ears.

'Could you make me a DVD of that race? To take home. Every angle.'

'*But she didn't win*.'

'I still want it,' I said.

'*OK*,' he said. '*It'll be ready*.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'll collect it after the last.'

'*We'll still be here*.'

There was a click and my headphones went silent once more.

'*But she didn't win*,' Derek had said.

'She' was my sister – my twin sister, to be precise. Clare Shillingford – top jockey with more than six hundred winners to her name.

But that race had not been one of them. She'd just come second by a neck on Bangkok Flyer, and, I thought, it was her riding that hadn't been right.

I looked at my watch. There were at least twenty minutes before I needed to be back here in the commentary

box for the next race so I skipped down the five flights of stairs to ground level and made my way round behind the grandstand to the weighing room.

I put my head through the open doorway of the racecourse broadcast centre, a small room just off the main weighing room that was half-filled with a bank of electronic equipment all down one wall.

'Afternoon, Jack,' I said to the back of a man standing there.

'Hi, Mark,' said the man, turning round and rubbing his hands on a green sweater that appeared to have more holes in it than wool. 'Everything all right?'

'Fine,' I replied.

Jack Laver was the technician for the on-course broadcasting service that relayed the closed-circuit pictures to the many television sets all around the racecourse, including the monitor in the commentary box. His dress sense might have been suspect but he was an absolute wizard with electronics.

'Fancy a cuppa?' he asked.

'Love one,' I said and he disappeared into an alcove, re-emerging with two white plastic beakers of steaming brown liquid.

'Sugar?'

'No thanks,' I said, taking one of the beakers.

Weighing-room tea would never have won any prizes for its taste, but it was hot and wet, and both were good for my voice. A race caller with a sore throat, or – worse – laryngitis, was no good for anything. Peter Bromley, the legendary BBC commentator,

always carried with him a bottle of his special balm – a secret home-made concoction containing honey and whisky. He would take a small swig before every race to lubricate the throat.

I was never as organized as that, but I did like to have a bottle of water always close to hand. And tea was a bonus.

'Jack, can you show me a replay of that last race? Just the last couple of furlongs will do.'

'Sure,' he said, moving towards the electronics. 'Did you get something wrong?' he asked, glancing over his shoulder at me with a huge grin.

'Get stuffed,' I said. 'And, no, I didn't.'

'You'd never admit it, anyway. You bloody commentators, you're all the same.'

'Perfect, you mean.'

'Ha! Don't make me laugh.'

He fiddled with some of the controls and the previous race appeared on one of the tiny screens on the front of his equipment.

'Just the last two furlongs, you say?'

'Yes, please.'

He used a large ball-type mouse to fast-forward the race, the horses moving comically along the track at break-neck speed.

'There you are,' said Jack, slowing the runners to a normal pace.

I leaned forward to get a closer look.

I hoped I was wrong. In fact, I wanted desperately to be wrong.

'Can you show me that again?' I asked Jack.

He used the ball to rewind the recording to the two-furlong pole.

I watched it once more, and there was no mistake.

I had absolutely no doubt that Clare Shillingford, my twin sister, had just been in contravention of rules (B)58, (B)59 and (D)45 of the Rules of Racing, rules that state, amongst other things, that *a rider must ride a horse throughout the race in such a way that he or she can be seen to have made a genuine attempt to obtain from the horse timely, real and substantial efforts to achieve the best possible placing*.

Put more simply, Clare had not won the race when she could have done. And, furthermore, I believed she had not won it on purpose.

The next hour passed in somewhat of a blur. Good commentating requires solid concentration to the extent that all other thoughts need to be excluded. No one actually complained about my race calling in the next two races but I knew that I hadn't been at my best, and Derek made no further appreciative comments into my ears.

I made another trip down to the weighing room between the third and fourth races. Clare had a ride in the fourth and I wanted to have a quick word with her, but it was nothing to do with my unease over her riding of Bangkok Flyer. We had a long-standing

arrangement to have dinner together that night and I wanted to confirm the plans.

'Hi, Clare,' I called out to her as she exited the weighing room in a set of bright yellow silks with blue stars across her front and back. 'Are you still on for tonight? I've booked a table at Haxted Mill for eight o'clock.'

'Great,' she said, smiling up at me as I walked alongside her. 'But I'm going to see Mum and Dad first, so I'll meet you there.'

'Fine,' I said.

I slowed to a halt and watched her walk away from me and through the small crowd into the parade ring.

I wondered whether I really knew her any more.

We had arrived into this world by Caesarean section just thirty seconds apart, she being born first, as she never failed to remind me.

Our childhoods had been totally intertwined, with us sharing first cots, then bedrooms, schools and finally a rented flat on the outskirts of Edenbridge in Kent when, aged nineteen, we had together summoned the courage to tell our overbearing father that we no longer wanted to live under his roof.

That had been twelve years ago, but our sharing of a flat had lasted barely six months before she had moved out and gone north to Newmarket.

We had both wanted to be jockeys for as long as we could remember and had ridden imaginary races and stirring finishes, first on rocking horses and then on

ponies in the paddocks behind our parents' home in Surrey.

Twins we might be, but we didn't have all the same genes.

While Clare remained short and slight, I became tall and broad.

She ate heartily and stayed annoyingly thin, while I had starved myself half to death but still grew heavier by the day. While we both became jockeys, we never rode against each other as we had done so often on our ponies. Hers became the life of a featherweight flat-jock at racing's 'Headquarters' in Newmarket, while I rode precisely five times as an amateur over the jumps before my battle with my ever-increasing body mass put paid to that career path.

So, instead, I had rather pretentiously announced my desire to be a racehorse trainer and had moved briefly to Lambourn as an assistant to the assistant at one of the top steeplechase training stables. By this time I was twenty years old but, somehow, my body had still been growing at an age when everyone else's had stopped. When it finally decided that enough was enough, I stood at six foot two inches in my socks with shoulders to match and, in spite of severe undernourishment, I was too heavy even to ride out with the string.

Riding had been my passion and I had soon discovered that driving a Land Rover up onto the Berkshire Downs each day to watch the horses at work was not what I'd had in mind as my future. I missed the adrenalin rush of riding a thoroughbred

racehorse at high speed with the wind and rain stinging my face, and watching others do what I craved for somehow made the agony all the worse.

Strange, then, that I had ended up as a race caller doing just that, but the adrenalin rush was back, in particular on big race days when my audience could be millions.

'Hello, Mark,' a voice said behind me. 'Are you rooted to that spot?'

I recognized the voice and turned round, smiling. 'Hi, Harry,' I said. 'I was just thinking.'

'Dangerous stuff, thinking.'

As far as I could tell, Harry Jacobs was a man of leisure. Only twice over the years had I asked him what he did for a living and both times he'd replied in the same way. 'Nothing if I can manage it.' He was too young to be of retirement age, I estimated him to be in his late fifties, but he would've hardly had time for any paid employment as he seemed to spend every day of his life satisfying his passion for racing.

I'd first met him when I'd been an eighteen-year-old budding amateur jockey and he had agreed to me riding one of his horses in my first ever race. I hadn't expected it to be the beginning of a firm friendship, especially as I'd missed the start, never recovered my position, and finished tailed-off last. But Harry hadn't appeared to mind and he had slapped me reassuringly on the back. We'd been firm 'racecourse' friends ever since, although I'd no idea where he lived and, I suspect, he had no idea where I did either.

'Fancy a drink?' he asked.

'Harry, I would have loved to, but I'm commentating and they're almost on their way out of the paddock. Some other time.'

'You workers.' He laughed. 'No sense of priority.'

I wondered again where his money came from. He had a sizable string of racehorses, both jumpers and flat, and there was no shortage of readies available for entertaining in private boxes around the country's racecourses.

I made it back into the commentary box just in time to describe the horses for the fourth race as they emerged out onto the course and made their way to the one-mile start.

'First going down is Jetstar in the red jacket with the white crossbelts. Next is Superjumbo in the white with a red circle and black cap.' I looked down at my notes and also at my folded copy of the *Racing Post* with its diagrams of the jockeys' silks. 'Rogerly comes next in the blue and white quarters and hooped cap followed by Scusami, the favourite, in the yellow jacket with the light blue stars and cap.' I watched Clare cantering Scusami down the course and wondered again what was going on in that head of hers underneath the light blue cap. 'Lounge Lizard is next in the green and white stripes, with Tournado in the pink with dark green epaulettes and cap completing the line-up for the John Holmes Construction Limited Stakes over a mile, the big race of the day here at Lingfield.'

I clicked off my microphone.

Six runners over a mile on the round track. Easy-peasy.

I pushed a button on my control box and the latest betting odds for the race came up on my monitor.

'Scusami is still favourite and his price has shortened to five-to-four. Superjumbo is at threes, as is Rogerly; five-to-one for Tournado, sixes Lounge Lizard, with Jetstar the rank outsider at twenty-five-to-one.'

I turned off my mike and switched the monitor to show the horses as they circled at the start.

For a race with a very large field, like the Grand National, I would have spent some time the previous evening studying the colours but, mostly, I learned them in the last few minutes before the off. If I tried absorbing six or seven races' worth all together I would simply get them confused in my head.

So I learned them race-by-race and probably couldn't describe them ten minutes after it had finished. I started each race with a clear mind, and describing the silks as the horses cantered to the start was as much part of my learning routine as for the benefit of the racegoers on the grandstands. Now I watched the horses circle on the monitor and put my finger on the image of each animal in turn while saying its name out loud. With more runners I might have gone to see them in the parade ring to give me more time, but with six . . . piece of cake.

'Going behind the stalls,' I told the crowd. 'Scusami

is still favourite at five-to-four, Rogerly now clear second at three-to-one with Superjumbo at seven-to-two; five-to-one bar those.'

I flicked the monitor back to the horses and went on putting my finger on their images and saying aloud each horse's name.

'Now loading,' I said.

Derek spoke into my ear. '*Mark, coming to you in five seconds. Four. Three. Two . . .*' He counted down to zero while I described the horses as they were being loaded into the starting stalls. As he reached zero, I paused fractionally so that I wasn't actually speaking as the satellite viewers came online.

'Just two to go now,' I said. I briefly flicked back to the odds on my monitor. 'Scusami is still favourite but has drifted slightly to six-to-four, with Rogerly still at threes. Just Superjumbo now still to be loaded.'

I took a small sip of water from my bottle.

'Right, they're all in. Ready. They're off!'

Easy-peasy, indeed. Even my grandmother could have called this race.

Scusami jumped out of the stalls first and, as an established front runner, he never relinquished the position. He was only briefly challenged in the home straight by Superjumbo but, when Clare asked him for a response, it was instant and dramatic. She only once raised her whip, mostly riding the horse out with hands and heels to a comfortable three-length victory with the others trailing past the winning post in line astern.

'*I'll make you a copy of that one too*,' said Derek into my ears. '*What a great horse. Must be a good bet for the Guineas*.'

'The opposition may have made him look better than he really is,' I replied. But I did agree with Derek. Perhaps I'd make a small investment in the ante-post market. The 2000 Guineas was not until May and a lot could happen in the next eight months.

Indeed, much would happen in the next eight hours.

Lingfield was my local course and I was home by half past six, even though the last race didn't start until five twenty-five. And I had remembered to collect the DVD from Derek with the two recordings on it.

I sat on my sofa and played them back over and over.

The difference between a moderate jockey and a great one is all about weight management, and timing. All jockeys stand in their stirrup irons and lean forward, placing their weight over the horse's shoulders, and all jockeys move their weight back and forth slightly with the horse's action, but the greats are those who use this movement to bring the most out of their mounts. They dictate to, rather than just follow, the horse beneath them.

Riding a finish with 'hands and heels' has far more to do with the positioning of weight than anything actually done to the horse with the hands or the heels. Most jockeys, especially those on the flat, ride far too

short to be able to give the animal a decent kick with their heels anyway, and the hands on the reins move back and forth with the horse's head.

I watched again the recording of Clare riding Scusami to win that afternoon's fourth race. As Superjumbo came to challenge one furlong out, Clare gave her mount a single smack with her whip down its flank, then she rode out a classical finish, lowering her back and pushing her hands back and forth along the horse's neck and moving her weight rhythmically to encourage it to lengthen its stride, which it duly did to win easily.

I compared that with her riding of Bangkok Flyer in the first when she was beaten a neck by Sudoku.

In the final furlong she appeared to give the horse three heavy backhander smacks with the whip but the head-on camera showed that these strikes were, in fact, 'air-shots', or superficial hits at best, with her hand slowing dramatically before the whip made any contact with the flesh. As on Scusami, she had lowered her back and there had also been plenty of elbow motion, but little of this had actually transmitted to her hands, the elbows going up and down rather than back and forth.

But the most telling thing was what had caused me to question her riding in the first place. Clare's body movement had been all wrong. Instead of encouraging the horse to lengthen its stride as she had done on Scusami, her actions had had the opposite effect. It was like in a car engine, if the combustion in the cylin-

der occurred when the piston was moving up not down, the effect would be to slow the engine rather than to speed it up.

So it had been with Clare's riding, and hence Bangkok Flyer had been easily caught and passed by Sudoku.

But she had been very clever. It was a real art to make it appear that she was riding out a finish for all she was worth while actually doing the opposite.

Indeed, the only reason I had been suspicious was because of a game we had loved to play when riding our ponies as kids.

The 'Race Fixing Game' we had called it – pulling up our ponies to a halt while looking like we were riding a tight finish. We had practised for days and days so that even our aged great-uncle couldn't tell what we were doing, and he'd been a regular steward for decades at racecourses all over the country.

There had been no enquiry, so the Lingfield stewards obviously hadn't spotted it, and the racing press clearly hadn't noticed anything either, as there had been no difficult questions asked of me by the journalists in the press room when I'd visited there after the fifth race.

But I could see only too clearly that Clare had definitely been playing the Race Fixing Game on Bangkok Flyer.

2

I was at Haxted Mill on time at eight and I chose a quiet corner table inside the restaurant, although they were still serving dinner on the terrace alongside the River Eden. The day may have been unseasonably warm for September but the temperature was dropping fast with the setting sun.

Clare arrived at ten past in faded blue denim jeans and a pink polo shirt.

'Sorry I'm late, Marky,' she said, sitting down opposite me.

'No problem. What would you like to drink?'

'Fizzy water.'

'You can have a bed for the night if you want to drink.'

'No, thanks,' she replied. 'I have to get back. I'm riding work in the morning, then racing.'

'Newmarket?' I asked.

She nodded. 'I've got three rides including one in the Cesarewitch Trial.'

'I'll be at Newbury so I'll watch you on the television.'

A waitress arrived with the menus and I ordered a large bottle of sparkling mineral water.

‘Don’t let me stop you having something stronger,’ Clare said.

‘You won’t. I’ll have some wine with my dinner.’

We perused the menus in silence for a while.

‘How are Mum and Dad?’ I asked.

‘Oh, God awful, as always. They’re getting so old.’

The waitress returned with the water and poured two glasses.

‘Are you ready to order?’ she asked.

‘Just the haddock for me,’ Clare said. ‘And without the mash.’

‘No starter?’ I asked.

‘No, thanks. I’ve got to do seven stone thirteen tomorrow.’

‘Wow!’ I said. ‘That is light.’

‘Too bloody light.’

‘I’ll have the steak,’ I said to the patient waitress. ‘Medium rare, but no chips.’ I could hardly eat chips with Clare watching enviously. ‘And a glass of the red Bordeaux please.’

The waitress took our menus and left us.

‘I found it really depressing, going home,’ Clare said.

‘Why?’

‘Dad’s lost all his sparkle, and Mum’s not much better. I swear Dad gets more grumpy every day.’

‘But, as you said, they’re getting old. Dad will be seventy-eight next month and Mum’s only a couple of years behind him.’

Both our parents had been in their mid forties when we had unexpectedly come along. We had three much older siblings.

'Getting old's a real bugger,' Clare said. 'I've decided I'm never getting old.'

'It's better than the alternative.'

'Is it?' Clare replied. 'I can't imagine a time when I couldn't ride any more. I wouldn't want to go on living.'

'Lester Piggott was nearly sixty when he stopped riding.'

'Yeah, I know,' she said. 'And Scobie Breasley was fifty-two when he won the Derby for the second time. I looked it up.'

My, I thought, she really was worried about retirement, and she was only thirty-one. In my experience when jockeys started thinking about retiring they usually did so pretty quickly. Lots of them say they will retire in five years and then they stop in about five months, some in five weeks, or even less.

The waitress brought me my glass of wine and offered us bread, which we both declined.

'And the house is looking old too,' Clare said.

'Well, it would, wouldn't it?' I said. According to the datestone on one of the gables, it had been built in 1607.

'You know what I mean,' she said. 'It needs some TLC.'

'A lick of paint on the windows,' I agreed, nodding. 'But Dad's a bit too old to do that himself. He may

be quite fit but I don't think ladders are a good idea any more, not at his age.'

'I think they should move,' she said decisively. 'Into somewhere smaller, or into an old folks' home. I told them so.'

'I bet that didn't go down too well.'

'No,' she agreed. 'Dad was angry – as usual. But they have to be practical. That house is too big. I think they should go into a home now, while they still can.'

'Don't be daft,' I said. 'They don't need to yet. And where would they put all their stuff?'

'What worries me is what the other one will do when one of them dies. That place is far too big for both of them, let alone one. They'll have to move then.'

'I hope that'll be years away. Anyway, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'That's typical of you,' Clare said, pointing her slender left forefinger at my chest. 'Always burying your head in the sand and doing nothing.'

'That's not fair,' I said.

'Yes it is,' she said defiantly. 'You always put things off. That's why you still live in that dreadful rented flat in Edenbridge.'

'You liked it once,' I whined.

'I did when I was nineteen, but life moves on. You should have bought yourself a house years ago. You must be earning enough by now.'

She was right. She usually was.

Our meals arrived and we sat for a while in silence, eating.

'How's your love life?' Clare asked finally.

'None of your business,' I replied, laughing. 'How's yours?'

'Absolutely wonderful. I have a new man. Three months now. What a lover!' She grinned and then laughed. He clearly made her happy.

'Who is it?' I asked, leaning forward.

'Now that's none of *your* business,' she said.

'Come on, Clare. Who is it?'

'I'm not saying,' she said seriously, drawing a finger across her mouth as if zipping it shut. She opened it, however, to pop in a piece of her haddock. 'Are you still seeing Sarah?'

'Yes,' I said.

She looked down at her plate and shook her head.

'And what's that meant to mean?' I asked.

'Mark, it's high time you had a proper girlfriend.'

'I do.'

'Sarah is not a proper girlfriend. She's someone else's wife.'

'She's working on it,' I said defensively.

'She's been working on it for five years. When are you going to realize she won't ever leave Mitchell? She can't afford to.'

'Give her time.'

'God, Mark, you're so weak. For once, do something about it. Tell her it's now or never and you're fed up waiting. You're wasting your life.'

‘You can talk,’ I said. ‘Your love life has hardly been Mills and Boon.’ Clare had dated a string of what my father had rather generously called ‘unsuitable young men’, and not all of them had been that young either. ‘Which misfit is it you’re seeing now, anyway?’

‘I told you, that’s none of your bloody business,’ she replied curtly and without the humour that had been there earlier. ‘But at least I’m not living a lie.’

‘Aren’t you?’ I said.

‘And what is that meant to mean?’ she asked belligerently.

‘Oh, nothing.’

We ate again in silence.

Why did we always seem to fight these days? When we were kids, we had been so close that we didn’t even need to speak to know what the other was thinking. But recently our twin-intuition had waned and faded away, at least in my direction. I wondered if she could still read my mind. If so, she probably wouldn’t like it.

The waitress reappeared to collect our plates.

‘Dessert?’ she asked.

‘Just coffee,’ Clare said. ‘Black.’

‘Same for me, please.’

The waitress went away and we sat there once more in awkward silence.

‘Good win on Scusami,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ Clare replied, keeping her eyes on the table.

‘Do you think he’ll win the Guineas?’

‘I doubt it. That Peter Williams colt, Reading Glass,

he'll take a lot of beating. But Scusi's good, and it would be nice to be the first lady jockey to win a Classic.' She looked upwards wistfully. 'One year, anyway.'

'But you'll ride him?'

'Maybe,' she said thoughtfully. 'That'll be up to Geoff.' Scusami was trained by Geoffrey Grubb in Newmarket.

The coffee arrived.

'Shame about Bangkok Flyer,' I said.

Clare sat in silence and looked down at her cup.

'Don't you think?' I prompted.

'I'd forgotten you were commentating.'

'You don't deny it, then?' I asked.

More silence.

'Why, Clare?'

'It's complicated.'

'How can it be complicated?' I asked incredulously. 'You fixed the bloody race.'

'Don't be silly,' she said, looking up quickly. 'I didn't fix it, I just didn't win it.'

'Don't split hairs with me,' I said sharply.

'Ooh! Look at you, getting on your high horse.'

'Be serious.'

'Why should I?'

'Because it's a serious matter,' I said. 'You could lose your licence, and your livelihood.'

'Only if I get caught.'

'I caught you.'

'Yeah, but what are you going to do about it?'

I sat and watched her. I could tell that she already knew the answer.

'Nothing. But someone else will be bound to notice if you do it again.'

'No one has done so far.'

I looked at her in disbelief.

'Are you saying this wasn't the first time you've done this?'

She smiled at me. 'Of course not.'

'Clare!'

The couple on a table nearby both looked over at us. I lowered my voice but not my anger.

'Are you telling me that you regularly don't win races you should?'

'I wouldn't say regularly,' she said. 'But I have done.'

'How often?'

She pursed her lips.

'Three or four times, maybe five.'

'But why?'

'I told you. It's complicated.'

I didn't know what to say. She was so matter-of-fact about it all. If the British Horseracing Authority knew she had 'stopped' horses three, four or five times they would probably have taken away her licence for good and banned her from all racecourses for life.

And she didn't seem bothered.

'Well, don't ever do it again,' I said in my most domineering tone.

'And what will you do about it if I do?' She was mocking me.

'Clare, please. Don't do this. Don't you understand. I love you and I don't want to see you destroy all that you've built up.'

I glanced around to make sure no one was listening.

'Don't be so patronizing,' Clare said.

I sat there stunned.

'I've had to claw my way up in this business,' she said with feeling, leaning forward across the table. 'No one gives you an inch. Lady jockey – ha! Don't make me laugh. Half of those in racing think we're no bloody good and should leave it all to the men, while the other half are a bunch of dirty old men who fantasize about us wearing tight breeches with whips in our hands. I've had to bow and scrape to them all, and to sweat blood to get where I am today, and now, at last, it's me who's in control of them.'

'Is that it, then?' I asked. 'Is this all about control?'

'You bet. Control over the bloody trainers, and the owners.'

Control, I thought, could be a powerful force. What was that old adage? – *Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Absolute power and unbridled control over others had led to the Nazis, and a world war had been needed to wrest the control from their dead fingers. Control over others was a dangerous concept.

'I thought I knew you,' I said slowly. 'But I don't.'

'I've changed,' she said, 'and I've been hardened. I've had to climb the slippery pole while others kicked

me in the teeth. Success didn't just fall into *my* lap by chance.'

We both knew what she meant.

I had been in the right place at the right time.

It was now eight years since that day at Fontwell Park races when the paddock presenter for RacingTV had been taken seriously ill with a heart attack just before he was due to go on air. The back-up presenter, the much respected wife of an up-and-coming young trainer, turned out to be the main presenter's mistress and she had insisted on going with him to hospital in the ambulance.

I was only there as a guest to watch because I'd carelessly put my hand up at a charity auction to spend a day with the RacingTV team. But I found myself putting up my hand again and volunteering to stand in.

'Do you know the horses?' the agitated producer had demanded while pulling out clumps of his already-thinning hair.

'Yes,' I'd replied.

And I had. As my sister had so correctly pointed out, I tended to drift rather a lot and I hadn't actually acquired a proper job since returning from my brief sojourn in Lambourn two years before. Rather, I'd decided to earn my living as a professional gambler and had consequently spent most of my time studying the form. I knew the horses very well.

'Only for the first race, then,' the producer had said.

'I've sent for a replacement but he won't be here until two o'clock.'

I had talked easily to the camera about each horse in the first race and had even tipped the winner. When the replacement had arrived, he'd just sat and watched me all afternoon as I'd tipped the winner in three other races as well.

'What are you doing tomorrow?' the producer had asked as they were packing up.

'Nothing,' I'd replied honestly.

'We're at Wincanton. Fancy a job?'

Since that day I had never looked back, spreading into commentating again by accident when the race caller at Windsor had been held up by a big crash on the motorway and I had been asked to stand in.

Nowadays I split my time three ways – commentating at the racecourses, paddock presenting for RacingTV, and also hosting the TV coverage on Channel 4, the terrestrial broadcaster of horseracing in Britain.

But Clare firmly believed that I still didn't have a 'proper' job, and that I would soon drift off into something else.

Maybe she was right.

'I much preferred the old you,' I said to her.

'Oh, God!' she said. 'Don't start all that again. I live in a competitive world. I have a competitive job. I have to compete. Otherwise I'd be trampled on.'

'Do you have to compete on everything?'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

‘I just feel that, whenever we have a conversation these days, it’s a points scoring exercise.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

I wasn’t going to argue with her. There was no sense in it. For whatever I might say, she would have a riposte. Losing was not an option for her, except clearly, of course, when she lost on purpose.

I paid the bill and we went out together to the car park.

‘Is there anything I can say that would stop you doing it again?’

She turned to me. ‘Probably not.’

‘I might report you to the authorities.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Don’t bank on it,’ I said.

‘Mark, don’t be such a prat. You know perfectly well that you won’t tell anyone. For a start, it would reflect badly on you. So just keep your eyes and mouth shut.’

‘I can hardly do that in my job.’

‘Then you’ll have to turn a blind eye instead.’

‘Clare, seriously, if you do that once more when I’m commentating, I’ll never speak to you again.’

She opened the door of her silver Audi TT.

‘Your loss, not mine.’

She climbed into the sports car and slammed the door shut.

Again, I was stunned. Maybe it had been a careless thing to say, but I hadn’t expected such a brusque answer.

What had happened to my lovely twin sister?

She gunned the engine and spun the rear wheels on the gravel as she shot off without a wave, without even a glance.

As I arrived back at my flat, the phone in the hallway was ringing and the caller ID readout on the handset showed me that it was Clare calling from her mobile.

I wondered what else she had to say to hurt me some more. Maybe she had thought up another barbed comment to thrust into my heart.

I let the phone go on ringing.

Eventually the answerphone picked it up and I stood there in the dark listening for any message. There wasn't one. Clare had hung up.

My own mobile started vibrating in my pocket but I also let that go to voicemail.

I didn't want to talk to her. I was hurting enough already. Even if she was ringing to apologize, which I doubted, she could wait. It wouldn't do her any harm to feel guilty for a while.

I flicked on the light and looked at my watch. It was still only nine twenty. Far from enjoying a leisurely dinner with my loving twin sister to mull over our news and catch up on family gossip, I was back home less than an hour and a half after leaving.

I felt wretched, and cheated.

I walked into my sitting-room-cum-kitchen-cum-dining-room-cum-office.

Perhaps Clare was right about my flat. Maybe it was time to move on.

We had initially found the place through a student-accommodation company and, looking at it now, I had to admit that it certainly still had a 'student' feel about it.

Once I had talked the landlord into redecorating, but that had been about eight years ago, and the cheap paint he had used had faded and cracked. I knew I should ask him to do it again but I didn't relish all the upheaval it would produce in moving my stuff. Better to live with a few marks on the walls and a slowly yellowing ceiling.

I sat down at my table and opened my laptop computer. I logged onto the *Racing Post* website and looked through the cards for the following day's racing at Newbury, where I would be presenting for Channel 4.

As hard as I tried to concentrate on the horses, looking up their form and making notes, my mind kept drifting back to Clare and our conversation over dinner.

How could she be so stupid? And for what? Did I really believe she was stopping horses from winning just to play some weird game of control over trainers and owners? There had to be more to it than that. Surely there had to be some financial implications.

'It's complicated,' she had said.

It sure was.

My phone rang again and I went on ignoring it.

I was sure it was Clare but I was angry and upset, and I wouldn't speak to her. It stopped ringing and, as before, there was no message.

I forced myself back to the horses running at Newbury the following day and spent the next hour going through all eight races in detail. Only three of the eight were due to be shown live on Channel 4 but, as I still tried to supplement my income with some winnings, I was looking for horses that I believed showed especially good value in the prices currently offered on the internet betting sites.

One particular horse, Raised Heartbeat, running in the third race, was quoted at decimal odds of 7.5; in other words, if I placed a bet of one hundred pounds I would get seven hundred and fifty back altogether, including my hundred pound stake. That was equivalent to fractional odds of thirteen-to-two. I felt sure that the horse would actually start at maybe six-to-one or even five-to-one. If I placed a bet now at the longer price and then 'layed' the horse at shorter odds tomorrow, I would effectively have a bet to nothing. If it won I would win a little, but if it lost then I wouldn't lose anything.

It was a technique I had employed for some time with considerable success. But the system wasn't foolproof. The horse could drift in the market, making my bet seem rather undervalued. I could then still lay the horse to limit my exposure but that would guarantee a financial loss whether it won the race or not.

However, due to my job, I watched the same horses

run day by day, week by week, even year by year, and I knew them as well as anyone. Experience had proved that I was more often right over the way the odds would change.

I logged into my account and made my bet on Raised Heartbeat – a hundred pounds stake to make six hundred and fifty profit.

If I was right and the price shortened to, say, five-to-one, I would then lay it, that is I'd take a hundred pound bet from someone else for them to win five hundred. Now, if the horse won, I would win six hundred and fifty on my bet and pay out the five hundred on the bet from someone else, giving me a profit of a hundred and fifty pounds. If the horse lost then I would lose my hundred pound stake but I'd also keep the hundred from someone else, leaving me even. Whereas it wasn't quite win/win, at least it was win/not-lose.

The phone rang once more. I looked at my watch. It was ten past eleven. I was tempted to answer it but I was still smarting from earlier and I didn't want another row. I would speak to her in the morning when we had both cooled off a little.

I closed the lid of my computer and went along the corridor to bed.

The only significant change I had made when Clare had moved out to go to Newmarket was to transfer from the smaller bedroom into the larger one. Now I lay awake on the double bed in the darkness and thought back to those months we had spent here together.

Undoubtedly it had been the happiest time of my life. We had escaped the nightmare of living in a house where our father had become so prescriptive of what we could and couldn't do that he had refused permission for us to go out to a friend's New Year's Eve party in spite of the fact that we were over eighteen. When we had defied him and gone anyway, we had found the house locked and bolted on our return. We had rung the bell and battered on the door but he wouldn't let us in, so we had spent the night shivering in Clare's Mini and planned our getaway.

This flat had seemed like a palace – somewhere we could leave the lights on without being shouted at, and where we didn't have to account for our every waking minute.

How I longed for a return to those halcyon days.

Perhaps I should call Clare after all.

I turned on the bedside lamp and looked at the clock. It was a quarter to midnight. Was it too late to call? It was a good half hour since she had last tried me. Would she be asleep?

I tried her anyway, figuring that she could always turn her mobile off if she didn't want to be disturbed.

It went straight to voicemail.

'Clare, it's Mark,' I said. 'I'm sorry this evening was such a disaster. Call me in the morning. Love you. Bye.'

I hung up and then turned my phone off. I needed to sleep and didn't want her calling me again tonight.

*

I woke to the sound of someone hammering on my front door.

My bedside clock showed me that it was just past three o'clock in the morning.

The hammering went on.

I turned on the bedside light and collected my dressing gown from the back of my bedroom door.

'OK, OK, I'm coming,' I shouted as I walked down the corridor.

Bloody Clare, I thought. Go home.

I opened the front door, but it wasn't Clare. Someone shone a torch right into my face so I couldn't see anything.

'Mr Shillingford?' said a voice in an official tone. 'Mr Mark Shillingford?'

'Yes,' I said, holding my hand up and trying to see past the light. 'What is it?'

'Kent Police, sir,' said the voice. 'Constable Davis.' He held out his warrant card.

My skin went cold. Personal police calls at this time of night were never good news.

'I'm sorry, sir, but I have some very bad news for you,' the constable went on. 'It's your sister, Miss Clare Shillingford.' He paused. 'She's dead.'