

Dick
Francis

Smokescreen





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DICK FRANCIS

Smokescreen
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THE SPORT OF QUEENS (autobiography)

DEAD CERT

NERVE

FOR KICKS

ODDS AGAINST

FLYING FINISH

BLOOD SPORT

FORFEIT

ENQUIRY

RAT RACE

BONECRACK

SMOKESCREEN

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KNOCK DOWN

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BOLT

HOT MONEY

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STRAIGHT

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DRIVING FORCE

DECIDER

WILD HORSES

COME TO GRIEF

TO THE HILT

10-lb PENALTY

FIELD OF THIRTEEN

SECOND WIND

*With thanks to
Jane and Christopher Coldrey*

Preface

In 1971 I was asked to go to South Africa to take part in the Johannesburg International Horse Show, two-week long entertainment similar to the Olympia and Wembley indoor horse shows in London and Canada's Royal Winter Fair in Toronto. The invited party of about twenty international horse people included Olympic show-jumpers Piero d'Inzeo and Anneli Drummond Hay, who jumped local borrowed horses to dazzling effect. I went in the capacity of judge of varying classes of riding horses a task which meant setting the horses in order according to their looks, and then riding them to see if they moved with presence, appointing winners overall.

My wife, Mary, and I stayed with the Show Director, Christopher Coldrey, on his farm out in the country, and in between performances he introduced us to a different side of South Africa. We spent free weekend of three scorching days in the Kruger Park Game Reserve, eyeball to eyeball with lion, elephant, impala and giraffe, and were shown the back roads and hidden places by one of the senior game wardens. Naturally (for me) we went also to race meetings, and there met a man who invited us down his gold mine, offering a private conducted tour and invaluable knowledge.

Smokescreen, written after our return to England, unsurprisingly unfolds against a background of South African racing, a gold mine and blazing heat in the Kruger Park Game Reserve; and to this day if I glance into the book the beauty and the powerful sweet scent of the South African countryside fill my memory.

Edward Lincoln, the chief character, is an English film star, and for the authentic background of his job my wife and I went to the British film studios at Pinewood where we were comprehensively shown how movies are made. We already counted many actors among our friends, as Mary had earlier worked behind the scenes in the theatre, so I usefully knew how good actors behave and think.

As a mix of all these experiences, together with humour and, of course, make believe, *Smokescreen* evolved.

This is not a political book, just a matter of fun and suspense.

Chapter One

Sweating, thirsty, hot, uncomfortable, and tired to the point of explosion.

Cynically, I counted my woes.

Considerable, they were. Considerable, one way and another.

I sat in the driving seat of a custom-built aerodynamic sports car, the cast-off toy of an oil sheik's son. I had been sitting there for the best part of three days. Ahead, the sun dried plain spread gently away to some distant brown and purple hills, and hour by hour their hunched shapes remained exactly where they were on the horizon, because the 150 m.p.h. Special was not moving.

Nor was I. I looked morosely at the solid untarnishable handcuffs locked round my wrists. One of my arms led through the steering wheel, and the other was outside it, so that in total effect I was locked on to the wheel, and in consequence firmly attached to the car.

There was also the small matter of seat belts. The Special would not start until the safety harness was fastened. Despite the fact that the key was missing from the ignition, the harness was securely fastened: one strap over my stomach, one diagonally across my chest.

I could not bring my legs up from their stretched forward sports car position in order to break the steering wheel with my feet. I had tried it. I was too tall, and couldn't bend my knees far enough. And apart from that, the steering wheel was not of possibly breakable plastic. People who built spectacularly expensive cars like the Special didn't mess around with plastic steering wheels. This one was of the small diameter leather-covered metal type, as durable as Mont Blanc.

I was thoroughly fed up with sitting in the car. Every muscle in my legs, up my spine and down my arms protested energetically against the constraint. A hard band of heaviness behind my eyes was tightening into a perceptible ache.

It was time to make another determined effort to get free, though I knew from countless similar attempts that it couldn't be done.

I tugged, strained, used all my strength against the straps and the handcuffs: struggled until fresh sweat rolled down my face; and couldn't, as before, progress even a millimetre towards freedom.

I put my head back against the padded headrest, and rolled my face around towards the open window beside me, on my right.

I shut my eyes. I could feel the slash of sunlight cut across my cheek and neck and shoulder with the vigour of 15.00 hours in July at 37° North. I could feel the heat on my left eyelid. I let lines of frustration and pain develop across my forehead, put a certain grimness into my mouth, twitched a muscle along my jaw, and swallowed with an abandonment of hope.

After that I sat still, and waited.

The desert plain was very quiet.

I waited.

Then Evan Pentelow shouted 'Cut' with detectable reluctance, and the cameramen removed their eyes from the view-finders. No whisper of wind fluttered the large bright-coloured umbrellas which shielded them and their apparatus. Evan fanned himself vigorously with his shooting schedule, creating the breeze that nature had neglected, and others in the small group in the shade of portable green polystyrene sun-shelters came languidly to life, the relentless heat having hours ago drained their energy. The sound mixer took off his ear-phones, hung them over the back of his chair, and fiddled slowly with the knobs on his Nagra recorder, and the electricians kindly switched off the clutch of minibrute lamps which had been ruthlessly reinforcing the sun.

I looked into the lens of the Arriflex which had been recording every sweating pore at a distance of six feet from my right shoulder. Terry, behind his camera, mopped his neck with a dusty handkerchief and Simon added to his Picture Negative Report for the processing laboratory.

Further back, from a different angle, the Mitchell with its thousand feet magazine had shot the same scene. Lucky, who operated it, was busily not meeting my eye, as he had been since breakfast. He believed I was angry with him, because, although he swore it was not his fault, the last lot of film he had shot the day before had turned out to be fogged. I had asked him quite mildly in the circumstances just to be sure that today there should be no more mishaps, as I reckoned I couldn't stand many more retakes of Scene 623.

Since then, we had retaken it six times. With, I grant you, a short break for lunch.

Evan Pentelow had apologised to everyone, loudly and often, that we would just have to go on and on shooting the scene until I got it right. He changed his mind about how it should go after every second take, and although I followed a good many of his minutely detailed directions, he had not yet once pronounced himself satisfied.

Every single member of the team who had come to southern Spain to complete the location shots was aware of the animosity behind the tight-reined politeness with which he spoke to me, and behind that with which I answered him. The unit, I had heard, had opened a book on how long I would hang on to my temper.

The girl who carried the precious key to the handcuffs walked slowly over from the furthest green shelter, where the continuity, make-up, and wardrobe girls sat exhaust-edly on spread out towels. Tendrils of damp hair clung to the girl's neck as she opened the door of the car and fitted the key into the hole. They were regulation British police handcuffs, fastening with a stiffish screw instead of a ratchet, and she always had some difficulty in pushing the key round its last few all-important turns.

She looked at me apprehensively, knowing that I couldn't be far from erupting. I achieved at least the muscle movements of a smile, and relief at not being bawled at gave her impetus to finish taking off the handcuffs smoothly and quickly.

I unfastened the seat harness and stood up stiffly outside in the sun. It was a good ten degrees cooler than inside the Special.

'Get back in,' Evan said. 'We'll have to take it again.'

I inhaled a lungful straight from the Sahara, and counted five in my mind. Then I said, 'I'm going over to the caravan for a beer and a pee, and we'll shoot it again when I come back.'

They wouldn't pay out the pool on that, I thought in amusement. That might be a crack in the volcano, but it wasn't Krakatoa. I wondered if they would let me take a bet on the flashpoint myself.

No one had bothered to put the canvas over the Minimoke, to shield it from the sun. I climbed into the little buggy where it was parked behind the largest shelter, and swore as the seat leather scorched through my thin cotton trousers. The steering wheel was hot enough to fry eggs.

The legs of my trousers were rolled up to the knee, and on my feet were flip-flops. They contrasted oddly with the formal white shirt and dark tie which I wore above, but then the Arriflex angle cut me off at the knee, and the Mitchell higher still, above the waist.

I drove the Moke without haste to where the semicircle of caravans was parked, two hundred yards away in a hollow. An apology for a tree cast a patch of thinnish shade that was better than nothing for the Moke, so I stopped it there and walked over to the caravan assigned to me as a dressing-room.

The air-conditioning inside hit like a cold shower, and felt marvellous. I loosened my tie, undid the top button of my shirt, fetched a can of beer from the refrigerator, and sat wearily down on the divan to drink it.

Evan Pentelow was busy paying off an old resentment, and unfortunately there was no way I could stop him. I had worked with him only once before, on his first major film and my seventh, and by the end of it we had detested each other. Nothing had improved by my subsequently refusing to sign for films if he were to direct, a circumstance which had cut him off from at least two smash hits he might otherwise have collared.

Evan was the darling of those critics who believed that actors couldn't act unless the director told them inch by inch what to do. Evan never gave directions by halves: he liked to see his films called 'Evan Pentelow's latest', and he achieved that by making the gullible believe that step by tiny step the whole thing stemmed from his talent, and his alone. Never mind how old a hand an actor was, Evan remorselessly taught him his business. Evan never *discussed* how a scene should be played, how a word should be inflected. He dictated.

He had cut some great names down to size, down to notices like 'Pentelow has drawn a sympathetic performance from Miss Five-Star Blank...' He resented everyone, like me, who wouldn't give him the chance.

There was no doubt that he was an outstanding director in that he had a visual imagination of a very high quality. Most actors positively liked to work with him, as their salaries were generous and his films never went unsung. Only uncompromising bloody asses like myself believed that at least nine-tenths of a performance should be the actor's own work.

I sighed, finished the beer, visited the loo, and went out to the Moke. Apollo still raged away in the brazen sky, as one might say if one had a taste for that sort of thing.

The original director of the glossy action thriller on which we were engaged had been a quiet-spoken sophisticate who usually lifted the first elbow before breakfast and had died on his feet at 10 a.m., from a surfeit of Scotch. It happened during a free week-end which I had spent alone in Yorkshire, walking on the hills, and I had returned to the set on Tuesday to find Evan already ensconced and making his stranglehold felt.

There was about an eighth of the film still to do. The sly smile that he had put on when he saw me arrive had been pure clotted malice.

Protestations to the management had brought soothing noises but no joy.

‘No one else of that calibre was free... can’t take risks with the backers’ money, can we, not as things are these days... got to look at it realistically... sure, Link, I know you won’t work with him ordinarily, but this is a *crisis*, dammit... it isn’t actually in your contract in black and white this time you know, because I checked... well, actually, we were relying on your good nature, I suppose...’

I interrupted dryly, ‘And on the fact that I’ll be collecting four per cent of the gross?’

The management cleared its throat. ‘Er, we wouldn’t ourselves have made the mistake of reminding you... but since you mention it... yes.’

Amused, I had finally given in, but with foreboding, as the location scenes of the car all lay ahead. I had known Evan would be difficult: hadn’t reckoned, though, that he would be the next best thing to sadistic.

I stopped the Moke with a jerk behind the shelter and pulled the canvas cover over it to stop it sizzling. I had been away exactly twelve minutes, but when I walked round into the shelter Evan was apologising to the camera crews for my keeping them hanging around in this heat. Terry made a disclaiming gesture, as I could see perfectly well that he had barely finished loading the Arriflex with a fresh magazine out of the ice box. No one bothered to argue. At a hundred degrees in the shade, no one but Evan had any energy.

‘Right,’ he said briskly. ‘Get into the car, Link. Scene 623, Take 10. And let’s for hell’s sake get this one right.’

I said nothing. Of the nine previous takes, three had been fogged: that left today’s six; and I knew, as everyone else knew, that Evan could have used any one of them.

I got into the car. We retook the scene twice more.

Evan managed to shake his head dubiously even after that, but the head cameraman told him the light was getting too yellow, and even if they took any more it would be no good, as they wouldn’t be able to match it to the scene which went before. Evan gave in only because he could come up with no possible reason for going on, for which Apollo had my thanks.

The unit packed up. The girl came limply across and undid the handcuffs. Two general duty men began to wrap up the Special in dust-sheets and pegged-down tarpaulins, and Terry and Lucky began to dismantle their cameras and pack them in cases, to take them away for the night.

In twos and threes everyone straggled across to the caravans, with me driving Evan in the Moke and saying not a word to him on the way. The coach had arrived from the small nearby town of Madroledo bringing the two night-watchmen. Coach was a flattering word for it; an old airport runabout bus with a lot of room for equipment and minimum comfort for passengers. The company said they had stipulated a luxury touring coach with air-conditioning, but the bone-shaker was what had actually turned up.

The hotel in Madroledo where the whole unit was staying was in much the same category. The small inland town, far from the tourist beat, offered amenities that package holiday operators would have blanched at; but the management had had to install us there, they said, because the best hotels on the coast at Almeria were booked solid by hundreds of Americans engaged on making an epic western in the next bit of desert to ours.

In fact I much preferred even the rough bits of this film to the last little caper I had been engaged

on, a misty rock-climbing affair in which I had spent days and days clinging to ledges while the effects men showered buckets of artificial rainstorm over my head. It was never much good my complaining about the occasional wringers I got put through: I'd started out as a sort of stunt man, they said, so what was a little cold, a little heat? Get out there on the ledges, they said. Get out there in the car. And just concentrate on how much lolly you're stacking away to comfort you later through arthritis. Never fear, they said, we won't let you come to any real harm, not so long as the insurance premiums are so high, and not so long as almost every film you make covers its production costs in the first month of showing. Such charming people, those managements, with dollar signs for eyes, cash registers for hearts.

Cooler and cleaner, the entire unit met for before-dinner drinks in Madroledo's idea of an American Bar. Away out on the plain in the warm night the Special sat under its guarding floodlights, a shrouded hump, done with for the day. By tomorrow night, I thought, or at least the day after, we would have completed all the scenes which needed me stuck in the driving seat. Provided Evan could think of no reason for reshooting Scene 623 yet again, we only had 624 and 625 to do, the cavalry-to-the-rescue bits. We had done Scenes 622 and 621, which showed the man waking from a drugged sleep, and assessing his predicament, and the helicopter shots were also in the can; the wide-circling and then narrowing aerial views which established the Special in its bare lonely terrain, and gave glimpses of the man slumped inside. Those were to be the opening shots of the film and the background to the credits, the bulk of the story being told afterwards in one long flashback to explain why the car and the man were where they were.

In the bar Terry and the Director of Photography were holding a desultory discussion about focal lengths, punctuating every wise thought with draughts of sangria. The Director, otherwise known professionally as the lighting cameraman, and personally as Conrad, patted me gently on the shoulder and pressed an almost cold glass into my hand. We had all grown to like this indigenous thirst quencher, a rough red local wine diluted by ice and a touch of the fruit salads.

'There you are, dear boy, it does wonders for the dehydration,' he said, and then in the same breath finished his broken off sentence to Terry. 'So he used an eighteen millimetre wide angle and of course every scrap of tension evaporated from the scene.'

Conrad spoke from the strength of an Oscar on the sideboard, and called everyone 'dear boy' from the chairmen downwards. Aided by a naturally resonant bass voice and a droopy cultivated moustache, he had achieved the notable status of 'a character' in a business which specialised in them, but behind the flamboyance there was a sharp technician's mind which saw life analytically at twenty-four frames per second and thought in Eastman-colour.

Terry said, 'Beale Films won't use him now because of the time he shot two thousand feet one day at Ascot without an 85 filter, and there wasn't another race meeting due there until a month after they ran into compensation time...'

Terry was fat, bald, forty, and had given up earlier aspirations to climb to Director of Photography with his name writ large in credits. He had settled instead for being a steady, reliable, experienced, and continually in-work craftsman, and Conrad always liked to have him on his team.

Simon joined us and Conrad gave him, too, a glass of sangria. Simon, the clapper/loader of Terry's crew, had less assurance than he ought to have had at twenty-three, and was sometimes naïve to the

point where one speculated about arrested development. His job entailed operating the clapper board before every shot, keeping careful records of the type and footage of film used, and loading the raw film into the magazines which were used in the cameras.

Terry himself had taught him how to load the magazines, a job which meant winding unexposed film on to reels, in total darkness and by feel only. Everyone, to begin with, learned how to do it with unwanted exposed film in a well-lit room, and practised it over and over until they could do it with their eyes shut. When Simon could do this faultlessly, Terry sent him to load some magazines in earnest, and it was not until after a long day's shooting that the laboratory discovered all the film to be completely black.

Simon, it appeared, had done exactly what he had been taught: gone into the loading room and threaded the film on to the magazine with his eyes shut. And left the electric light on while he did it.

He took a sip of his pink restorer, looked at the others in bewilderment, and said, 'Evan told me to write "print" against every one of those shots we took today.' He searched their faces for astonishment and found none. 'But, I say,' he protested, 'if all the first takes were good enough to print, why on earth did he go on doing so many?'

No one answered except Conrad, who looked at him with pity and said, 'Work it out, dear boy. Work it out.' But Simon hadn't the equipment.

The bar room was large and cool, with thick white-painted walls and a brown tiled floor: pleasant in the daytime, when we were seldom there, but too stark at night because of the glaring striplighting some insensitive soul had installed on the ceiling. The four girls, sitting languidly round a table with half empty glasses of lime juice and Bacardi and soda, took on a greenish tinge as the sunlight faded outside, and aged ten years. The pouches beneath Conrad's eyes developed shadows, and Simon's chin receded too far for flattery.

Another long evening stretched ahead, exactly like the nine that had gone before: several hours of shop and gossip punctuated by occasional brandies, cigars and a Spanish-type dinner. I hadn't even any lines to learn for the next day, as my entire vocal contribution to Scenes 624 and 625 was to be a variety of grunts and mumbles. I would be glad, I thought, by God I would be glad, to get back home.

We went in to eat in a private dining-room as uninviting as the bar. I found myself between Simon and the handcuffs' girl, two-thirds of the way along one side of the long table at which we all sat together haphazardly. About twenty-five of us, there were: all technicians of some sort except me and the actor due to amble to the rescue as a Mexican peasant. The group had been cut to a minimum, and our stay scheduled for as short a time as possible: the management had wanted even the desert scenes shot at Pinewood like the rest of the film, or at least on some dried up bit of England, but the original director had stuck out for the authentic shimmer of real heat, damn and bless his departed spirit.

There was an empty space around the far side of the table.

No Evan.

'He's telephoning,' the handcuffs' girl said. 'I think he's been telephoning ever since we came back.'

I nodded. Evan telephoned the management most evenings, though not normally at great length. He was probably having difficulty getting through.

'I'll be glad to go home,' the girl said, sighing. Her first location job, which she had looked forward

to, was proving disappointing; boring, too hot and no fun. Jill—her real name was Jill, though Evan had started calling her Handcuffs, and most of the unit had copied him—slid a speculative look sideways at my face, and added, ‘Won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said neutrally.

Conrad, sitting opposite, snorted loudly. ‘Handcuffs, dear girl, that’s cheating. Anyone who prods him has her bet cancelled.’

‘It wasn’t a prod,’ she said defensively.

‘Next best thing.’

‘Just how many of you are in this pool?’ I asked sarcastically.

‘Everyone except Evan,’ Conrad admitted cheerfully. ‘Quite a healthy little jackpot it is.’

‘And has anyone lost their money yet?’

Conrad chuckled. ‘Most of them, dear boy. This afternoon.’

‘And you,’ I said, ‘have you?’

He narrowed his eyes at me and put his head on one side. ‘You’ve a temper that blows the roof off, but usually on behalf of someone else.’

‘He can’t answer your question, you see,’ Jill explained to me. ‘That’s against the rules too.’

But I had worked with Conrad on three previous films, and he had indeed told me where he had placed his bet.

Evan came back from telephoning, walked purposefully to his empty chair, and splashed busily into his turtle soup. Intent, concentrated, he stared at the table and either didn’t hear or didn’t wish to hear Terry’s tentative generalities.

I looked at Evan thoughtfully. At forty he was wiry, of medium height and packed with aggressive energy. He had undisciplined black curling hair, a face in which even the bones looked determined, and fierce hot brown eyes. That evening the eyes were looking inwards, seeing visions in his head; and the tumultuous activity going on in there showed unmistakably in the tension in his muscles. His spoon was held in rigid fingers, and his neck and back were as stiff as stakes.

I didn’t like his intensity, not at any time or in any circumstances. It always set up in me the unreasonable reaction of wanting to avoid doing what he was pressing for, even when his ideas made good sense. That evening he was building up a good head of steam, and my own antipathy rose to match.

He shovelled his way briskly through the anglicised *paella* which followed, and pushed his empty plate away decisively.

‘Now...’ he said: and everybody listened. His voice sounded loud and high, strung up with his inner urgency. It would have been impossible to sit in that room and ignore him.

‘As you know, this film we are making is called *Man in a Car*.’

We knew.

‘And as you know, the car has figured in at least half the scenes that have been shot.’

We knew that too, better than he did, as we had been with it all through.

‘Well...’ he paused, looking round the table, collecting eyes. ‘I have been talking to the producer, and he agrees ... I want to change the emphasis... change the whole shape of the film. There are going to be a number of flashbacks now, and not just one. The story will jump back every time from the

desert scene and each desert shot will give an impression of the days passing, and show the man growing weaker. There is to be no rescue, as such. This means, I'm afraid, Stephen...' He looked directly at the other actor, '... that your part is out entirely, but you will of course be paid what was agreed.' He turned back to the unit in general. 'We are going to scrap those cool witty scenes of reunion with the girl that you did at Pine-wood. Instead, we will end the film with the reverse of the opening. That is to say, a helicopter shot that starts with the car in close-up and gradually recedes from it until it is merely a dot on the plain. The view will widen just at the end to indicate a peasant walking along a ridge of hill, leading a donkey, and everyone who sees the film can decide for himself whether the peasant rescues the man, or passes by without seeing him.'

He cleared his throat into a wholly attentive silence. 'This of course means that we shall have to do much more work here on location. I estimate that we will be here for at least another two weeks, as there will have to be many more scenes of Link in the car.'

Someone groaned. Evan looked fiercely in the direction of the protest, and silenced it effectively. Only Conrad made any actual comment.

'I'm glad I'm behind the camera, and not in front of it,' he said slowly. 'Link's showing wear and tear already.'

I pushed the last two bits of chicken around with my fork, not really seeing my plate. Conrad was staring across at me: I could feel his eyes. And all the others', too. It was the actor in me, I knew, which kept them waiting while I ate a mouthful, drank some wine, and finally looked up again at Evan.

'All right,' I said.

A sort of quiver ran through the unit, and I realised they had all been holding their breath for the explosion of the century. But setting my own feelings aside, I had to admit that what Evan had suggested made excellent film sense, and I trusted to that instinct, if not to his humanity. There was a lot I would do, to make a good film.

He was surprised at my unconditional agreement, but also excited by it. Visions poured out of him faster than his tongue.

'There will be tears... and skin cracks, and sun blisters... and terrible thirst... and muscles and tendons quivering with strain like violin strings, and hands curled with cramp... and agony and frightful despair... and the scorching, inexorable, thunderous silence... and towards the end, the gradual disintegration of a human soul... so that even if he is rescued he will be different... and there won't be a single person who sees the film who doesn't leave exhausted and wrung out and filled with pictures he'll never forget.'

The camera crews listened with an air of we've-seen-all-this-before and the make-up girl began looking particularly thoughtful. It was only I who seemed to see it from the inside looking out, and I felt a shudder go through my gut as if it had been a real dying I was to do, and not pretence. It was foolish. I shook myself; shook off the illusion of personal involvement. To be any good, acting had to be deliberate, not emotional.

He paused in his harangue, waiting with fixed gaze for me to answer him, and I reckoned that if I were not to let him stampede all over me it was time to contribute something myself.

'Noise,' I said calmly.

‘What...?’

‘Noise,’ I repeated. ‘He would make a noise, too, at first. Shouting for help. Shouting from fury, and hunger, and terror. Shouting his bloody head off.’

Evan’s eyes widened and embraced the truth of it.

‘Yes,’ he said. He took a deep ecstatic breath at the thought of his idea taking actual shape. ‘... Yes.’

Some of the inner furnace died down to a saner, more calculating heat.

‘Will you do it?’ he said.

I knew he meant not would I just get through the scenes somehow, but would I put into them the best I could. And he might well ask, after his behaviour to me that day. I would, I thought; I would make it bloody marvellous; but I answered him flippantly.

‘There won’t be a dry eye in the house.’

He looked irritated and disappointed, which would do no harm. The others relaxed and began talking, but some undercurrent of excitement had awoken, and it was the best evening we had had since we arrived.

So we went back to the desert plain for another two weeks, and it was lousy, but the glossy little adventure turned into an eventual box-office blockbuster which even the critics seemed to like.

I got through the whole fortnight with my temper intact; and in consequence Conrad, who had guessed right, won his bet and scooped the pool.

Chapter Two

England in August seemed green and cool in comparison when I got back. At Heathrow I collected my car, a production line B.M.W., darkish blue, ordinarily jumbled registration number, nothing Special about it, and drove westwards into Berkshire with a feeling of ease.

Four o'clock in the afternoon.

Going home.

I found myself grinning at nothing in particular. Like a kid out of school, I thought. Going home to a summer evening.

The house was middle-sized, part old, part new, built on a gentle slope outside a village far up the Thames. There was a view down over the river, and lots of evening sun, and an unsignposted lane to approach by, that most people missed.

There was a boy's bicycle lying half on the grass, half on the drive, and some gardening tools near a half weeded flower-bed. I stopped the car outside the garage, looked at the shut front door, and walked round the house to the back.

I saw all four of them before they saw me; like looking in through a window. Two small boys splashing in the pool with a black and white beach ball. A slightly faded sun umbrella nearby, with a little girl lying on an air bed in its shade. A young woman with short chestnut hair, sitting on a rug in the sun, hugging her knees.

One of the boys looked up and saw me standing watching them from across the lawn.

'Hey,' he shouted. 'Dad's home,' and ducked his brother.

I walked towards them, smiling. Charlie unstuck herself from the rug and came unhurriedly to meet me.

'Hi,' she said. 'I'm covered in oil.' She put her mouth forward for a kiss and held my face between the insides of her wrists.

'What on earth have you been doing with yourself?' she asked. 'You look terribly thin.'

'It was hot in Spain,' I said. I walked back to the pool beside her, stripping off my loosened tie, and then my shirt.

'You didn't get very sunburned.'

'No... Sat in the car most of the time...'

'Did it go all right?'

I made a face. 'Time will tell... How are the kids?'

'Fine.'

I had been away a month. It might have been a day. Any father coming home to his family after a

day's work.

Peter levered himself out of the pool via his stomach and splashed across the grass.

'What did you bring us?' he demanded.

'Pete, I've *told* you...' Charlie said, exasperated. 'If you ask, you won't *get*.'

'You won't get much this time anyway,' I told him. 'We were miles from any decent shops. And g
and pick your bike up off the drive.'

'Oh honestly,' he said. 'The minute you're home, we've done something wrong.' He retreated round
the house, his backview stiff with protest.

Charlie laughed. 'I'm glad you're back...'

'Me too.'

'Dad, look at me. Look at me do this, Dad.'

I obediently watched while Chris turned some complicated sort of somersault over the beach ball
and came up with a triumphant smile, shaking water out of his eyes and waiting for praise.

'Jolly good,' I said.

'Watch me again, Dad...'

'In a minute.'

Charlie and I walked over to the umbrella, and looked down at our daughter. She was five years old
brown-haired, and pretty. I sat down beside the air bed and tickled her tummy. She chuckled, and
smiled at me deliciously.

'How's she been?'

'Same as usual.'

'Shall I take her in the pool?'

'She came in with me this morning... but she loves it. It wouldn't do her any harm to go again.'

Charlie squatted down beside her. 'Daddy's home, little one,' she said. But to Libby, our little one,
the words themselves meant almost nothing. Her mental development had slowed to a snail's pace
after the age of ten months, when her skull had been fractured. Peter, who had been five then, had
lifted her out of her pram, wanting to be helpful and bring her indoors for lunch. But Charlie, going
out to fetch her, had seen him trip and fall and it had been Libby's head which struck the stone step on
the terrace of the flat we then occupied in London. The baby had been stunned, but after an hour or
two the doctors could find nothing wrong with her.

It was only two or three weeks later that she fell sick, and later still, when she was surviving a
desperate illness, that the hospital doctors told us she had had a hair-line fracture at the base of the
brain, which had become infected and given her meningitis. We were so relieved that she was alive
that we scarcely took notice of the cautiously phrased warnings... 'We must not be surprised if she
were a little late in developing...' Of course she would be a little late after being so ill. But she would
soon catch up, wouldn't she? And we dismissed the dubious expression, and that unfamiliar word
'retarded'.

During the next year we learned what it meant, and in facing such a mammoth disaster had also
discovered much about ourselves. Before the accident, our marriage had been shaking towards
disintegration under the onslaughts of prosperity and success: after it, we had gradually cemented
ourselves together again, with a much clearer view of what was really important, and what was not.

We had left the bright lights, the adulation, and the whoopee, and gone to live in the country, where anyway both of us had our original roots. Better for the kids, we said; and knew it was better for us, too.

Libby's state no longer caused us any acute grief. It was just part of life, accepted and accustomed. She was treated with good humour by the boys, with love by Charlie, and with gentleness by me; and as she was seldom ill and seemed to be happy enough, it could have been a lot worse.

It had proved harder in the end to grow skins against the reactions of strangers, but after all these years neither Charlie nor I gave a damn what anyone said. So maybe Libby couldn't talk yet, couldn't walk steadily, fed herself messily, and was not reliably continent: but she was our daughter, and that was that.

I went into the house, changed into swimming trunks, and took her with me into the pool. She was slowly learning to swim, and had no fear of the water. She splashed around happily in my grasp, patted my face with wet palms and called me 'Dada', and wound her arms round my neck and clung to me like a little limpet.

After a bit I handed her over to Charlie to dry, and played water polo (of sorts) with Peter and Chris and after twenty minutes of that decided that even Evan Pentelow was a lesser task master.

'More, Dad,' they said, and, 'I say, Dad, you aren't getting out already, are you?'

'Yes,' I said firmly, and dried myself sitting beside Charlie on the rug.

She put the kids to bed while I unpacked, and I read them stories while she cooked, and we spent the evening by ourselves, eating chicken and watching an old movie (from before my days) on television. After that we stacked the dishes in the washer and went to bed.

We had no one else living in the house with us. On four mornings a week a woman walked up from the village to help with the chores, and there was also a retired nurse there who would always come to look after Libby and the boys if we wanted to go out. These arrangements were Charlie's own choice. I had married a quiet, intelligent girl who had grown into a practical, down-to-earth, and to her own surprise, domesticated woman. Since we had left London she had developed an added strength which one could only call serenity, and although she could on occasions lose her temper as furiously as I could, her foundations were now built on rock.

A lot of people in the film world, I knew, thought my wife unexciting and my home life a drag, and expected me to break out in blondes and red-heads, like a rash. But I had very little in common with the sort of larger-than-life action man I played in film after film. They were my work, and I worked hard at them, but I didn't take them home.

Charlie snuggled beside me under the duvet and put her head on my chest. I smoothed my hands over her bare skin, feeling the ripple deep in her abdomen and the faint tremble in her legs.

'O.K.?' I asked, kissing her hair.

'Very...'

We made love in the simple, ordinary way, as we always did; but because I had been away a month it was one of the best times, one of the breathtaking, fundamental, indescribable times which became base to live from. Certainty begins here, I thought. With this, what else did one need?

'Fantastic,' Charlie sighed. 'That was *fantastic*'

'Remind us to do it less often.'

She laughed. 'It does improve with keeping...'

'Mm.' I yawned.

'I say,' she said, 'I was reading a magazine in the dentist's waiting-room this morning while Chris was having his teeth done, and there was a letter in it on the sob-stuff page, from a woman who had a bald fat middle-aged husband she didn't fancy, and she was asking for advice on her sex life. And do you know what advice they gave her?' There was a smile in her voice. 'It was, "Imagine you are sleeping with Edward Lincoln".'

'That's silly.' I yawned again.

'Yeah... Actually, I thought of writing up and asking what advice they would give *me*.'

'Probably tell you to imagine you're sleeping with some fat bald middle-aged man you don't fancy.'

She chuckled. 'Maybe I will be, in twenty years' time.'

'You are so kind.'

'Think nothing of it.'

We drifted contentedly to sleep.

I had a racehorse, a steeplechaser, in training with a thriving stable about five miles away, and I used to go over when I was not working and ride out with the string at morning exercise. Bill Tracker, the energetic trainer, did not in general like to have owners who wanted to ride their own horses, but he put up with my intermittent presence on the same two counts as his stable lads did, namely that my father had once been a head lad along in Lambourn, and that I had also at one time earned my living by riding, even if not in races.

There wasn't much doing in August, but I went over, a couple of days after my return, and rode out on the Downs. The new jumping season had barely begun, and most of the horses, including my own, were still plodding round the roads to strengthen their legs. Bill generously let me take out one of the more forward hurdlers which was due to have its first run in two weeks or so, and as usual I much appreciated the chance he gave me to ride to some useful purpose, and to shake the dust off the one skill I had been born with.

I had learned to ride before I could walk, and had grown up intending to be a jockey. But the fates weren't kind: I was six feet tall when I was seventeen, and whatever special something it took to be a racer, I hadn't got. The realisation had been painful. The switch to jiggling along in films, a wretched second best.

Ironic, to remember that.

The Downs were wide and windy and covered in breathable air: nice and primaeval still, except for the power station on the horizon and the distant slash of a motorway. We walked and trotted up to the gallops, cantered, galloped where and when bidden, and walked down again, cooling the horses off; and it was absolutely great.

I stayed to breakfast with the Trackers and rode my own horse afterwards with the second lot round the roads, cursing like the rest of the lads at the cars which didn't slow down to pass. I relaxed easily in the saddle and smiled as I remembered how my father had yelled himself hoarse at me—'Sit *up*, you bloody boy. And keep your elbows *in*.'

Evan Pentelow and Madroledo were in another world.

When I got back, the boys were squabbling noisily over whose turn it was with the unbroken roller skates, and Charlie was making a cake.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Did you have a good ride?’

‘Great.’

‘Fine... Well there weren’t any calls, except Nerissa rang... Will you two be *quiet*, we can’t hear ourselves think...’

‘It’s *my* turn,’ Peter yelled.

‘If you two don’t both shut up I’ll twist your ears,’ I said.

They shut up. I’d never carried out the often repeated threat, but they didn’t like the idea of it. Chr immediately pinched die disputed skates and disappeared out of the kitchen, and Peter gave chase with muted yells.

‘Kids !’ Charlie said disgustedly.

I scooped out a fingerful of raw cake mixture and got my wrist slapped.

‘What did Nerissa want?’

‘She wants us to go to lunch.’ Charlie paused, with the wooden spoon dropping gouts of chocolate goo into the bowl. ‘She was a bit... well... odd, in a way. Not her usual brisk self. Anyway, she wants us to go today...’

‘Today!’ I said, looking at the clock.

‘Oh, I told her we couldn’t, that you wouldn’t be back until twelve. So she asked if we could make tomorrow.’

‘Why the rush?’

‘Well, I don’t know, darling. She just said, could we come as soon as poss. Before you got tied up with another film, she said.’

‘I don’t start the next one until November.’

‘Yes, I told her that. Still, she was pretty insistent. So I said we’d love to go tomorrow unless you couldn’t, in which case I’d ring back this lunch time.’

‘I wonder what she wants,’ I said. ‘We haven’t seen her for ages. We’d better go, don’t you think?’

‘Oh yes, of course.’

So we went.

It is just as well one can never foresee the future.

Nerissa was a sort of cross between an aunt, a godmother, and a guardian, none of which I had ever actually had. I had had a stepmother who loved her two previous children exclusively, and a busy father nagged by her to distraction. Nerissa, who had owned three horses in the yard where my father reigned, had given me first sweets, then pound notes, then encouragement, and then, as the years passed, friendship. It had never been a close relationship, but always a warmth in the background.

She was waiting for us, primed with crystal glasses and a decanter of dry sherry on a silver tray, in the summer sitting-room of her Cotswold house, and she rose to meet us when she heard her manservant bringing us through the hall.

‘Come in, my dears, come in,’ she said. ‘How lovely to see you. Charlotte, I love you in yellow... and Edward, how very thin you are...’

She had her back to the sunlight which poured in through the window framing the best view in

Gloucestershire, and it was only when we each in turn kissed her offered cheek that we could see the pitiful change in her.

The last time I had seen her she had been an attractive woman of fifty plus, with young blue eyes and an apparently indestructible vitality. Her walk seemed to be on the edge of dancing, and her voice held a wise sense of humour. She came from the blue-blooded end of the Stud Book and had what my father had succinctly described as 'class'.

But now, within three months, her strength had vanished and her eyes were dull. The gloss on her hair, the spring in her step, the laugh in her voice: all were gone. She looked nearer seventy than fifty and her hands trembled.

'Nerissa,' Charlie exclaimed in a sort of anguish, for she like me held her in much more than affection.

'Yes, dear. Yes,' Nerissa said comfortingly. 'Now sit down, dear, and Edward shall pour you some sherry.'

I poured all three of us some of the fine pale liquid, but Nerissa hardly sipped hers at all. She sat in a gold brocade chair in a long-sleeved blue linen dress, with her back to the sun and her face in shadow.

'How are those two little monkeys?' she asked. 'And how is dear little Libby? And Edward, my dear, being so thin doesn't suit you...' She talked on, making practised conversation and looking interested in our answers, and gave us no opening to ask what was the matter with her.

When she went into the dining-room it was with the help of a walking stick and my arm, and the feather-light lunch which had been geared to her needs did nothing to restore my lost pounds. Afterwards, we went slowly back to the summer-room for coffee.

'Do smoke, Edward dear... There are some cigars in the cupboard. You know how I love the smell... and so few people smoke here, nowadays.'

I imagined they didn't because of her condition, but if she wanted it, I would, even though I rarely did, and only in the evening. They were Coronas, but a little dry from old age. I lit one, and she inhaled the smoke deeply, and smiled with real pleasure.

'That's so good,' she said.

Charlie poured the coffee, but again Nerissa hardly drank. She settled back gently into the same chair as before, and crossed her elegant ankles.

'Now, my dears,' she said calmly, 'I shall be dead by Christmas.'

We didn't even make any contradictory noises. It was all too easy to believe.

She smiled at us. 'So sensible, you two are. No silly swooning, or making a fuss.' She paused. 'It appears I have some stupid ailment, and they tell me there isn't much to be done. As a matter of fact, it's what they *do* do which is making me feel so ill. Before, it wasn't so bad... but I have had to have X-rays so often... and now all these horrid cytotoxic drugs, and really, they make me most unwell.' She managed another smile. 'I've asked them to stop, but you know what it's like... if they can, they say they must. Quite an unreasonable view to take, don't you think? Anyway, my dears, that need not trouble you...'

'But you would like us to do something for you?' Charlie suggested.

Nerissa looked surprised. 'How did you know I had anything like that in mind?'

'Oh... Because you wanted us in a hurry... and you must have known for weeks how ill you were.'

'Edward, how clever your Charlotte is,' she said. 'Yes, I do want something... want Edward to do something for me, if he will.'

'Of course,' I said.

A dry amusement crept back into her voice. 'Wait until you hear what it is, before you promise so glibly.'

'O.K.'

'It is to do with my horses.' She paused to consider, her head inclined to one side. 'They are running so badly.'

'But,' I said in bewilderment, 'they haven't been out yet, this season.'

She still had two steeplechasers trained in the yard where I had grown up, and although since my father's death I had had no direct contact with them, I knew they had won a couple of races each the season before.

She shook her head. 'Not the jumpers, Edward. My other horses. Five colts and six fillies, running on the flat.'

'On the flat? I'm sorry... I didn't realise you had any.'

'In South Africa.'

'Oh.' I looked at her a bit blankly. 'I don't know anything about South African racing. I'm awfully sorry. I'd love to be of use to you... but I don't know enough to begin to suggest why your horses there are running badly.'

'It's nice of you, Edward dear, to look disappointed. But you really can help me, you know. If you will.'

'Just tell him how,' Charlie said, 'and he'll do it. He'll do anything for you, Nerissa.'

At that time, and in those circumstances, she was right. The finality of Nerissa's condition made me sharply aware of how much I had always owed her: not in concrete terms as much as in the feeling that she was *there*, interested and caring about what I did. In my motherless teens, that had meant a lot.

She sighed. 'I've been writing to my trainer out there about it, and he seems very puzzled. He doesn't know why my horses are running badly, because all the others he trains are doing all right. But it takes so long for letters to pass... the postal services at both ends seem to be so erratic these days. And I wondered, Edward, my dear, if you could possibly... I mean, I know it's a good deal to ask... but could you possibly give me a week of your time, and go out there and find out what's happening?'

There was a small silence. Even Charlie did not rush to say that of course I would go, although it was clear already that it would have to be a matter of how, not of whether.

Nerissa went on persuasively, 'You see, Edward, you do know about racing. You know what goes on in a stable, and things like that. You could see, couldn't you, if there is something wrong with their training? And then of course you are so good at investigating things...'

'I'm what?' I asked. 'I've never investigated anything in my life.'

She fluttered a hand. 'You know how to find things out, and nothing ever deflects you.'

'Nerissa,' I said suspiciously, 'you've been seeing my films.'

'Well, of course. I've seen nearly all of them.'

'Yes, but that's not me. Those investigating supermen, they're just acting.'

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