

STRAIGHT

DICK
FRANCIS



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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“*Straight* is Dick Francis writing at his very, very best.”

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I’m willing to wager, whatever the odds,
you will spring to the finish line.”**

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STRAIGHT

Steeplechase jockey Derek Franklin has had more broken bones than he cares to count, but it seems his latest injury could very well bring his days on the racecourse to a screeching halt. But that’s the least of his concerns when his brother turns up dead, leaving Derek as the sole inheritor of his brother’s business, his horses, his mistress—and his life-threatening enemies.

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Fiction by Dick Francis

SHATTERED
SECOND WIND
FIELD OF THIRTEEN
10 LB. PENALTY
TO THE HILT
COME TO GRIEF
WILD HORSES
DECIDER
DRIVING FORCE
COMEBACK
LONGSHOT
STRAIGHT
THE EDGE
HOT MONEY
BOLT
BREAK IN
PROOF
THE DANGER
BANKER
TWICE SHY
REFLEX
WHIP HAND
TRIAL RUN
RISK
IN THE FRAME
HIGH STAKES
KNOCKDOWN
SLAY RIDE
SMOKESCREEN
BONECRACK
RAT RACE
ENQUIRY
FORFEIT
BLOOD SPORT
FLYING FINISH
ODDS AGAINST
FOR KICKS
NERVE
DEAD CERT

Nonfiction by Dick Francis

A JOCKEY'S LIFE
THE SPORT OF QUEENS

STRAIGHT

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ANDREW HEWSON—literary agent**

**and as always to
MERRICK and FELIX, our sons.**

**All the people in this story are imaginary.
All the gadgets exist.**

I inherited my brother's life. Inherited his desk, his business, his gadgets, his enemies, his horses and his mistress. I inherited my brother's life, and it nearly killed me.

I was thirty-four at the time and walking about on elbow crutches owing to a serious disagreement with the last fence in a steeplechase at Cheltenham. If you've never felt your ankle explode, don't try it. As usual, it hadn't been the high-speed tumble that had done the damage but the half-ton of one of the other runners coming over the fence after me, his forefoot landing squarely on my boot on the baked earth of an Indian summer. The hoof mark was imprinted on the leather. The doctor who cut the boot off handed it to me as a souvenir. Medical minds have a macabre sense of humor.

Two days after this occurrence, while I was reluctantly coming to terms with the fact that I was going to miss at least six weeks of the steeplechasing season and with them possibly my last chance of making it to champion again (the middle thirties being the beginning of the end for jump jockeys), I answered the telephone for about the tenth time that morning and found it was not another friend ringing to commiserate.

"Could I speak," a female voice asked, "to Derek Franklin?"

"I'm Derek Franklin," I said.

"Right." She was both brisk and hesitant, and one could understand why. "We have you listed," she said, "as your brother Greville's next-of-kin."

Those three words, I thought with an accelerating heart, must be among the most ominous in the language.

I said slowly, not wanting to know, "What's happened?"

"I'm speaking from St. Catherine's Hospital, Ipswich. Your brother is here, in the intensive care unit ..."

At least he was alive, I thought numbly.

"... and the doctors think you should be told."

"How is he?"

"I'm sorry. I haven't seen him. This is the social worker. But I understand that his condition is very serious."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He was involved in an accident," she said. "He has multiple injuries and is on life support."

"I'll come," I said.

"Yes. It might be best."

I thanked her, not knowing exactly what for, and put down the receiver, taking the shock physically in lightheadedness and a constricted throat.

He would be all right, I told myself. Intensive care meant simply that he was being carefully looked after. He would recover, of course.

I shut out the anxiety to work prosaically instead on the practicalities of getting from the town of Hungerford in Berkshire, where I lived, to Ipswich in Suffolk, about a hundred and fifty miles across the country, with a crunched ankle. It was fortunately the left ankle, which meant I would soon be able to drive my automatic gears without trouble, but it was on that particular day at peak discomfort and even with painkillers and icepacks was hot, swollen and throbbing. I couldn't move it without holding

my breath, and that was partly my own fault.

Owing to my hatred—not to say phobia—about the damaging immobility of plaster of Paris, I had spent a good deal of the previous day persuading a long-suffering orthopedic surgeon to give me the support of a plain crepe bandage instead of imprisonment in a cast. He was himself a plate-and-screw man by preference but had grumbled as usual at my request. Such a bandage as I was demanding might be better in the end for one's muscles, but it gave no protection against knocks, as he had reminded me on other occasions, and it would be more painful, he said.

"I'll be racing much quicker with a bandage."

"It's time you stopped breaking your bones," he said, giving in with a shrug and a sigh and obligingly winding the crepe on tightly. "One of these days you'll crack something serious."

"I don't actually like breaking them."

"At least I haven't had to pin anything this time," he said. "And you're mad."

"Yes. Thanks very much."

"Go home and rest it. Give those ligaments a chance."

The ligaments took their chance along the back seat of my car while Brad, an unemployed welder, drove it to Ipswich. Brad, taciturn and obstinate, was unemployed by habit and choice but made a scratchy living doing odd jobs in the neighborhood for anyone willing to endure his moods. As I much preferred his long silences to his infrequent conversation, we got along fine. He looked forty, hadn't reached thirty, and lived with his mother.

He found St. Catherine's Hospital without much trouble and at the door helped me out and handed me the crutches, saying he would park and wait inside in the reception area and I could take my time. He had waited for me similarly for hours the day before, expressing neither impatience nor sympathy but simply being restfully and neutrally morose.

The intensive care unit proved to be guarded by brisk nurses who looked at the crutches and said I had come to the wrong department, but once I'd persuaded them of my identity they kitted me sympathetically with a mask and gown and let me in to see Greville.

I had vaguely expected Intensive Care to involve a lot of bright lights and clanging bustle, but I found that it didn't, or at least not in that room in that hospital. The light was dim, the atmosphere peaceful, the noise level, once my ears adjusted to it, just above silence but lower than identification.

Greville lay alone in the room on a high bed with wires and tubes all over the place. He was naked except for a strip of sheeting lying loosely across his loins and they had shaved half the hair off his head. Other evidences of surgery marched like centipede tracks across his abdomen and down one thigh, and there were darkening bruises everywhere.

Behind his bed a bank of screens showed blank rectangular faces, as the information from the electrodes fed into other screens in a room directly outside. He didn't need, they said, an attendant constantly with him, but they kept an eye on his reactions all the time.

He was unconscious, his face pale and calm, his head turned slightly toward the door as if expecting visitors. Decompression procedures had been performed on his skull, and that wound was covered by a large padded dressing which seemed more like a pillow to support him.

Greville Saxony Franklin, my brother. Nineteen years my senior: not expected to live. It had to be faced. To be accepted.

"Hi, guy," I said.

It was an Americanism he himself used often, but it produced no response. I touched his hand which was warm and relaxed, the nails, as always, clean and cared for. He had a pulse, he had circulation: his heart beat by electrical stimulus. Air went in and out of his lungs mechanically.

through a tube in his throat. Inside his head the synapses were shutting down. Where was his soul, wondered: where was the intelligent, persistent, energetic spirit? Did he know that he was dying?

I didn't want just to leave him. No one should die alone. I went outside and said so.

A doctor in a green overall replied that when all the remaining brain activity had ceased, they would ask my consent before switching off the machines. I was welcome to be with my brother at that crisis point as well as before. "But death," he said austerely, "will be for him an infinitesimal process, not a definitive moment." He paused. "There is a waiting room along the hall with coffee and things."

Bathos and drama, I thought: his everyday life. I crutched all the way down to the general reception area, found Brad, gave him an update and told him I might be a long time. All night perhaps.

He waved a permissive hand. He would be around, he said, or he would leave a message at the desk. Either way, I could reach him. I nodded and went back upstairs, and found the waiting room already occupied by a very young couple engulfed in grief, whose baby was hanging on to life by threads no much stronger than Greville's.

The room itself was bright, comfortable and impersonal, and I listened to the mother's slow sob and thought of the misery that soaked daily into those walls. Life has a way of kicking one along like football, or so I've found. Fate had never dealt me personally a particularly easy time, but that was OK, that was normal. Most people, it seemed to me, took their turn to be the football. Most survive. Some didn't.

Greville had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. From the scrappy information known to the hospital, I gleaned that he had been walking down Ipswich High Street when some scaffolding that was being dismantled had fallen on him from a considerable height. One of the construction workers had been killed, and a second had been taken to hospital with a broken hip.

I had been given my brother's clinical details. One metal beam had pierced his stomach, another had torn into his leg; something heavy had fallen on his head and caused brain damage with massive cerebral bleeding. It had happened late the previous afternoon; he had been deeply unconscious from the moment of impact and he hadn't been identified until workmen dealing with the rubble in the morning had found his diary and given it to the police.

"Wallet?" I asked.

No, no wallet. Just the diary with, neatly filled in on the first page, Next of Kin, Derek Franklin, brother; telephone number supplied. Before that, they had had no clue except the initials G.S. embroidered above the pocket of his torn and bloodstained shirt.

"A silk shirt," a nurse added disapprovingly, as if monogrammed silk shirts were somehow immoral.

"Nothing else in his pockets?" I asked.

"A bunch of keys and a handkerchief. That was all. You'll be given them, of course, along with the diary and his watch and a signet ring."

I nodded. No need to ask when.

The afternoon stretched out, strange and unreal, a time-warped limbo. I went again to spend some time with Greville, but he lay unmoving, oblivious in his dwindling twilight, already subtly numbing himself. If Wordsworth were right about immortality, it was the sleep and the forgetting that were slipping away and reawakening that lay ahead, and maybe I should be glad for him, not grieve.

I thought of him as he had been, and of our lives as brothers.

We had never lived together in a family unit because, by the time I was born, he was away at university, building a life of his own. By the time I was six, he had married, by the time I was ten he'd divorced. For years he was a semistranger whom I met briefly at family gatherings, celebrations.

which grew less and less frequent as our parents aged and died, and which stopped altogether when the two sisters who bridged the gap between Greville and me both emigrated, one to Australia and one to Japan.

It wasn't until I'd reached twenty-eight myself that after a long Christmas-and-birthday-casual politeness we'd met unexpectedly on a railway platform and during the journey ahead had become friends. Not close time-sharing friends even then, but positive enough for telephoning each other sporadically and exchanging restaurant dinners and feeling good about it.

We had been brought up in different environments, Greville in the Regency London house which went with our father's job as manager of one of the great landowning estates, I in the comfortable country cottage of his retirement. Greville had been taken by our mother to museums, art galleries and the theater: I had been given ponies.

We didn't even look much alike. Greville, like our father, was six feet tall, I three inches shorter. Greville's hair, now graying, had been light brown and straight, mine darker brown and curly. We had both inherited amber eyes and good teeth from our mother and a tendency to leanness from our father, but our faces, though both tidy enough, were quite different.

Greville best remembered our parents' vigorous years; I'd been with them through their illnesses and deaths. Our father had himself been twenty years older than our mother, and she had died first, which had seemed monstrously unfair. The old man and I had lived briefly together after that in a tolerant mutual noncomprehension, though I had no doubt that he'd loved me, in his way. He had been sixty-two when I was born and he died on my eighteenth birthday, leaving me a fund for my continued education and a letter of admonitions and instructions, some of which I'd carried out.

Greville's stillness was absolute. I shifted uncomfortably on the crutches and thought of asking for a chair. I wouldn't see him smile again, I thought: not the lightening of the eyes and the gleam of teeth, the quick appreciation of the black humor of life, the awareness of his own power.

He was a magistrate, a justice of the peace, and he imported and sold semiprecious stones. Beyond these bare facts I knew few details of his day-to-day existence, as whenever we met it seemed that he was always more interested in my doings than his own. He had himself owned horses from the day he was born. He telephoned to ask my opinion: someone who owed him money had offered his racehorse to settle the debt. What did I think? I told him I'd phone back, looked up the horse, thought it was a bargain and told Greville to go right ahead if he felt like it.

"Don't see why not," he'd said. "Will you fix the paperwork?"

I'd said yes, of course. It wasn't hard for anyone to say yes to my brother Greville: much harder to say no.

The horse had won handsomely and given him a taste for future ownership, though he seldom went to see his horses run, which wasn't particularly unusual in an owner but always to me mystifying. He refused absolutely to own jumpers on the grounds that he might buy something that would kill me. He was too big for Flat races; he'd felt safe with those. I couldn't persuade him that I would like to ride for him and in the end I stopped trying. When Greville made up his mind he was unshakable.

Every ten minutes or so a nurse would come quietly into the room to stand for a short while beside the bed, checking that all the electrodes and tubes were still in order. She gave me brief smiles and commented once that my brother was unaware of my presence and could not be comforted by my being there.

"It's as much for me as for him," I said.

She nodded and went away, and I stayed for a couple more hours, leaning against the wall and reflecting that it was ironic that it was he who should meet death by chance when it was I who active

risked it half the days of the year.

Strange to reflect also, looking back now to that lengthening evening, that I gave no thought to the consequences of his death. The present was vividly alive still in the silent diminishing hours, and all I saw in the future was a pretty dreary program of form-filling and funeral arrangements, which I didn't bother to think about in any detail. I would have to telephone the sisters, I vaguely supposed, and they might be a little long-distance grief, but I knew they would say, "You can see to it, can't you?" Whatever you decide will be all right with us," and they wouldn't come back halfway round the world to stand in mournful drizzle at the graveside of a brother they'd seen perhaps twice in ten years.

Beyond that, I considered nothing. The tie of common blood was all that truly linked Greville and me, and once it was undone there would be nothing left of him but memory. With regret I watched the pulse that flickered in his throat. When it was gone I would go back to my own life and think of him warmly sometimes, and remember this night with overall sorrow, but no more.

I went along to the waiting room for a while to rest my legs. The desperate young parents were still there, hollow-eyed and entwined, but presently a somber nurse came to fetch them, and in the distance, shortly after, I heard the rising wail of the mother's agonized loss. I felt my own teeth prickle for her, a stranger. A dead baby, a dying brother, a universal uniting misery. I grieved for Greville most intensely then because of the death of the child, and realized I had been wrong about the sorrow level. I would miss him very much.

I put my ankle up on a chair and fitfully dozed, and sometime before daybreak the same nurse with the same expression came to fetch me in my turn.

I followed her along the passage and into Greville's room. There was much more light in the room this time, and more people, and the bank of monitoring screens behind the bed had been switched on. Pale greenish lines moved across them, some in regular spasms, some uncompromisingly straight.

I didn't need to be told, but they explained all the same. The straight lines were the sum of his activity in Greville's brain. None at all.

There was no private goodbye. There was no point. I was there, and that was enough. They asked for, and received, my agreement to the disconnection of the machines, and presently the pulsing lines straightened out also, and whatever had been in the quiet body was there no longer.

* * *

It took a long time to get anything done in the morning because it turned out to be Sunday.

I thought back, having lost count of time. Thursday when I broke my ankle, Friday when the scaffolding fell on Greville, Saturday when Brad drove me to Ipswich. It all seemed a cosmos away from relativity in action.

There was the possibility, it seemed, of the scaffolding constructors being liable for damages. It was suggested that I should consult a lawyer.

Plodding through the paperwork, trying to make decisions, I realized that I didn't know what Greville would want. If he'd left a will somewhere, maybe he had given instructions that I ought to carry out. Maybe no one but I, I thought with a jolt, actually knew he was dead. There had to be people I should notify, and I didn't know who.

I asked if I could have the diary the police had found in the rubble, and presently I was given not only the diary but everything else my brother had had with him: keys, watch, handkerchief, sign

ring, a small amount of change, shoes, socks, jacket. The rest of his clothes, torn and drenched with blood, had been incinerated, it appeared. I was required to sign for what I was taking, putting a tick against each item.

Everything had been tipped out of the large brown plastic bag in which they had been stored. The bag said "St. Catherine's Hospital" in white on the sides. I put the shoes, socks, handkerchief and jacket back into the bag and pulled the strings tight again, then I shoveled the large bunch of keys into my own trouser pocket, along with the watch, the ring and the money, and finally consulted the diary.

On the front page he had entered his name, his London home telephone number and his office number, but no addresses. It was near the bottom, where there was a space headed "In case of accident please notify" that he had written "Derek Franklin, brother, next of kin."

The diary itself was one I had sent him at Christmas: the racing diary put out by the Jockey Association and the Injured Jockeys' Fund. That he should have chosen to use that particular diary when he must have been given several others I found unexpectedly moving. That he had put my name in it made me wonder what he had really thought of me; whether there was much we might have been to each other, and had missed.

With regret I put the diary into my other trousers pocket. The next morning, I supposed, I would have to telephone his office with the dire news. I couldn't forewarn anyone, as I didn't know the names, let alone the phone numbers, of the people who worked for him. I knew only that he had no partners, as he had said several times that the only way he could run his business was by himself. Partners too often came to blows, he said, and he would have none of it.

When all the signing was completed, I looped the strings of the plastic bag a couple of times round my wrist and took it and myself on the crutches down to the reception area, which was more or less deserted on that Sunday morning. Brad wasn't there, nor was there any message from him at the desk, so I simply sat down and waited. I had no doubt he would come back in his own good time, glowering as usual, and eventually he did, slouching in through the door with no sign of haste.

He saw me across the acreage, came to within ten feet, and said, "Shall I fetch the car, then?" and when I nodded, wheeled away and departed. A man of very few words, Brad. I followed slowly in his wake, the plastic bag bumping against the crutch. If I'd thought faster I would have given it to Brad to carry, but I didn't seem to be thinking fast in any way.

Outside, the October sun was bright and warm. I breathed the sweet air, took a few steps away from the door and patiently waited some more, and was totally unprepared to be savagely mugged.

I scarcely saw who did it. One moment I was upright, leaning without concentration on the crutches, the next I'd received a battering-ram shove in the back and was sprawling face forward onto the hard black surface of the entrance driveway. To try to save myself, I put my left foot down instinctively and it twisted beneath me, which was excruciating and useless. I fell flat down on my stomach in a haze and I hardly cared when someone kicked one of the fallen crutches away along the ground and tugged at the bag round my wrist.

He—it had to be a he, I thought, from the speed and strength—thumped a foot down on my back and put his weight on it. He yanked my arm up and back roughly, and cut through the plastic with a slash that took some of my skin with it. I scarcely felt it. The messages from my ankle obliterated all else.

A voice approached saying, "Hey! Hey!" urgently, and my attacker lifted himself off me as fast as he'd arrived and sped away.

It was Brad who had come to my rescue. On any other day there might have been people constantly coming and going, but not on Sunday morning. No one else seemed to be around to notice a thing. No

one but Brad had come running.

“Friggin’ hell,” Brad said from above me. “Are you all right?”

Far from it, I thought.

He went to fetch the scattered crutch and brought it back. “Your hand’s bleeding,” he said with disbelief. “Don’t you want to stand up?”

I wasn’t too sure that I did, but it seemed the only thing to do. When I’d made it to a moderate vertical position he looked impassively at my face and gave it as his opinion that we ought to go back into the hospital. As I didn’t feel like arguing, that’s what we did.

I sat on the end of one of the empty rows of seats and waited for the tide of woe to recede, and when I had more command of things I went across to the desk and explained what had happened.

The woman behind the reception window was horrified.

“Someone stole your plastic bag!” she said, round-eyed. “I mean, everyone around here knows what those bags signify, they’re always used for the belongings of people who’ve died or come here after accidents. I mean, everyone knows they can contain wallets and jewelry and so on, but I’ve never heard of one being snatched. How awful! How much did you lose? You’d better report it to the police.”

The futility of it shook me with weariness. Some punk had taken a chance that the dead man’s effects would be worth the risk, and the police would take notes and chalk it up among the majority of unsolved muggings. I reckoned I’d fallen into the ultravulnerable bracket which included little old ladies, and however much I might wince at the thought, I on my crutches had looked and been a pushover, literally.

I shuffled painfully into the washroom and ran cold water over my slowly bleeding hand, and found that the cut was more wide than deep and could sensibly be classified as a scratch. With a sigh I dabbed a paper towel on the scarlet oozing spots and unwound the cut-off pieces of white and brown plastic which were still wrapped tightly round my wrist, throwing them into the bin. What a bloody stupid anticlimactic postscript, I thought tiredly, to the accident that had taken my brother.

When I went outside Brad said with a certain amount of anxiety, “You going to the police, then?” and he relaxed visibly when I shook my head and said, “Not unless you can give them a detailed description of whoever attacked me.”

I couldn’t tell from his expression whether he could or not. I thought I might ask him later, on the way home, but when I did, all that he said was. “He had jeans on, and one of them woolly hats. And he had a knife. I didn’t see his face, he sort of had his back turned my way, but the sun flashed on the knife, see? It all went down so fast. I did think you were a goner. Then he ran off with the bag. You were dead lucky, I’d say.”

I didn’t feel lucky, but all things were relative.

Brad, having contributed what was for him a long speech, relapsed into his more normal silence and I wondered what the mugger would think of the worthless haul of shoes, socks, handkerchief and jacket whose loss hadn’t been realistically worth reporting. Whatever of value Greville had set out with would have been in his wallet, which had fallen to an earlier predator.

I had been wearing, was still wearing, a shirt, tie and sweater, but no jacket. A sweater was better with the crutches than a jacket. It was pointless to wonder whether the thief would have dipped into my trousers pockets if Brad hadn’t shouted. Pointless to wonder if he would have put his blade through my ribs. There was no way of knowing. I did know I couldn’t have stopped him, but his prize in any case would have been meager. Apart from Greville’s things I was carrying only a credit card and a few bills in a small wallet, from a habit of traveling light.

I stopped thinking about it and instead, to take my mind off the ankle, wondered what Greville had been doing in Ipswich. Wondered if, ever since Friday, anyone had been waiting for him to arrive. Wondered how he had got there. Wondered if he had parked his car somewhere there and, if so, how I would find it, considering I didn't know its license plate number and wasn't even sure if he still had the Porsche. Someone else would know, I thought easily. His office, his local garage, a friend. It wasn't really my worry.

By the time we reached Hungerford three hours later, Brad had said, in addition, only that the car was running out of juice (which we remedied) and, half an hour from home, that if I wanted him to go on driving me during the following week, he would be willing.

"Seven-thirty tomorrow morning?" I suggested, reflecting, and he said "Yerss" on a growl, which I took to mean assent.

He drove me to my door, helped me out as before, handed me the crutches, locked the car and put the keys into my hand, all without speaking.

"Thanks," I said.

He ducked his head, not meeting my eyes, and turned and shambled off on foot toward his mother's house. I watched him go; a shy difficult man with no social skills who had possibly that morning saved my life.

I had for three years rented the ground floor of an old house in a turning off the main road running through the ancient country town. There was a bedroom and bathroom facing that street and the sunrise, and a large all-purpose room to the rear into which sunset flooded. Beyond that, a small stream-bordered garden, which I shared with the owners of the house, an elderly couple upstairs.

Brad's mother had cooked and cleaned for them for years; Brad mended, painted and chopped wood when he felt like it. Soon after I'd moved in, mother and son had casually extended their services to me, which suited me well. It was all in all an easy uncluttered existence, but if home was where the heart was, I really lived out on the windy Downs and in stable yards and on the raucous racetracks where I worked.

I let myself into the quiet rooms and sat on the sofa with icepacks along my leg, watching the sun go down on the far side of the stream and thinking I might have done better to stay in the Ipswich hospital. From the knee down my left leg was hurting abominably, and it was still getting clearer by the minute that falling had intensified Thursday's damage disastrously. My own surgeon had been going off to Wales for the weekend, but I doubted that he would have done very much except say "I told you so," and in the end I simply took another Distalgesic and changed the icepacks and worked out the time zones in Tokyo and Sydney.

At midnight I telephoned to those cities where it was already morning and by good luck reached both of the sisters. "Poor Greville," they said sadly, and, "Do whatever you think best." "Send some flowers for us." "Let us know how it goes."

I would, I said. Poor Greville, they repeated, meaning it, and said they would love to see me in Tokyo, in Sydney, whenever. Their children, they said, were all fine. Their husbands were fine. Was Greville fine? Poor, poor Greville.

I put the receiver down ruefully. Families did scatter, and some scattered more than most. I knew the sisters by that time only through the photographs they sometimes sent at Christmas. They hadn't recognized my voice.

Taking things slowly in the morning, as nothing was much better, I dressed for the day in shirt, trousers and sweater as before, with a shoe on the right foot, sock along on the left, and was ready when Brad arrived five minutes early.

"We're going to London," I said. "Here's a map with the place marked. Do you think you can find it?"

"Got a tongue in my head," he said, peering at the maze of roads. "Reckon so."

"Give it a go, then."

He nodded, helped me inch onto the back seat, and drove seventy miles through the heavy morning traffic in silence. Then, by dint of shouting at street vendors via the driver's window, he zig-zagged across Holborn, took a couple of wrong turns, righted himself, and drew up with a jerk in a busy street round the corner from Hatton Garden.

"That's it," he said, pointing. "Number fifty-six. That office block."

"Brilliant."

He helped me out, gave me the crutches, and came with me to hold open the heavy glass entrance door. Inside, behind a desk, was a man in a peaked cap personifying security, who asked me

forbiddingly what floor I wanted.

“Saxony Franklin,” I said.

“Name?” he asked, consulting a list.

“Franklin.”

“Your name, I mean.”

I explained who I was. He raised his eyebrows, picked up a telephone, pressed a button and said “Mr. Franklin is on his way up.”

Brad asked where he could park the car and was told there was a yard round the back. He would wait for me, he said. No hurry. No problem.

The office building, which was modern, had been built rubbing shoulders to the sixth floor with its Victorian curlicued neighbors, soaring free to the tenth with a severe lot of glass.

Saxony Franklin was on the eighth floor, it appeared. I went up in a smooth elevator and elbowed my way through some heavy double doors into a lobby furnished with a reception desk, several armchairs for waiting in and two policemen.

Behind the policeman was a middle-aged woman who looked definitely flustered.

I thought immediately that news of Greville’s death had already arrived and that I probably hadn’t needed to come, but it seemed the Force was there for a different reason entirely.

The flustered lady gave me a blank stare and said, “That’s not Mr. Franklin. The guard said Mr. Franklin was on his way up.”

I allayed the police suspicions a little by saying again that I was Greville Franklin’s brother.

“Oh,” said the woman. “Yes, he does have a brother.”

They all swept their gaze over my comparative immobility.

“Mr. Franklin isn’t here yet,” the woman told me.

“Er ...” I said, “what’s going on?”

They all looked disinclined to explain. I said to her, “I’m afraid I don’t know your name.”

“Adams,” she said distractedly. “Annette Adams. I’m your brother’s personal assistant.”

“I’m sorry,” I said slowly, “but my brother won’t be coming at all today. He was involved in a car accident.”

Annette Adams heard the bad news in my voice. She put a hand over her heart in the classic gesture as if to hold it still in her chest and with anxiety said, “What sort of accident? A car crash? Is he hurt?”

She saw the answer clearly in my expression and with her free hand felt for one of the armchairs, buckling into it with shock.

“He died in hospital yesterday morning,” I said to her and to the policemen, “after some scaffolding fell on him last Friday. I was with him in the hospital.”

One of the policemen pointed at my dangling foot. “You were injured at the same time, sir?”

“No. This was different. I didn’t see his accident. I meant, I was there when he died. The hospital sent for me.”

The two policemen consulted each other’s eyes and decided after all to say why they were there.

“These offices were broken into during the weekend, sir. Mrs. Adams here discovered it when she arrived early for work, and she called us in.”

“What does it matter? It doesn’t matter now,” the lady said, growing paler.

“There’s a great deal of mess,” the policemen went on, “but Mrs. Adams doesn’t know what’s been stolen. We were waiting for your brother to tell us.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Annette, gulping.

“Is there anyone else here?” I asked her. “Someone who could get you a cup of tea?” Before you faint, I thought, but didn’t say it.

She nodded a fraction, glancing at a door behind the desk, and I swung over there and tried to open it. It wouldn’t open: the knob wouldn’t turn.

“It’s electronic,” Annette said weakly. “You have to put in the right numbers ...” She flopped her head back against the chair and said she couldn’t remember what today’s number was; it was changed often. She and the policemen had come through it, it seemed, and let it swing shut behind them.

One of the policemen came over and pounded on the door with his fist, shouting “Police” very positively, which had the desired effect like a reflex. Without finesse he told the much younger woman who stood there framed in the doorway that her boss was dead and that Mrs. Adams was about to pass out and was needing some strong hot sweet tea, love, like five minutes ago.

Wild-eyed, the young woman retreated to spread more consternation behind the scenes and the policemen nullified the firm’s defenses by wedging the electronic door open, using the chair from behind the reception desk.

I took in a few more details of the surroundings, beyond my first impression of gray. On the light greenish-gray of the carpet stood the armchair in charcoal and the desk in matt black unpainted and unpolished wood. The walls, palest gray, were hung with a series of framed geological maps, the frames black and narrow and uniform in size. The propped-open door, and another similar door to one side, still closed, were painted the same color as the walls. The total effect, lit by recessed spotlights in the ceiling, looked both straightforward and immensely sophisticated, a true representation of my brother.

Mrs. Annette Adams, still flaccid from too many unpleasant surprises on a Monday morning, wore a cream shirt, a charcoal-gray skirt and a string of knobbly pearls. She was dark-haired, in her late forties, perhaps, and from the starkness in her eyes, just beginning to realize, I guessed, that the upheaval of the present would be permanent.

The younger woman returned effectively with a scarlet steaming mug and Annette Adams sipped from it obediently for a while, listening to the policemen telling me that the intruder had not come this way up the elevator, which was for visitors, but up another elevator at the rear of the building which was used by the staff of all floors of offices, and for freight. That elevator went down into a rear lobby which, in its turn, led out to the yard where cars and vans were parked: where Brad was presumably waiting at that moment.

The intruder had apparently ridden to the tenth floor, climbed some service stairs to the roof, and by some means had come down outside the building to the eighth floor, where he had smashed a window to let himself in.

“What sort of means?” I asked.

“We don’t know, sir. Whatever it was, he took it with him. Maybe a rope.” He shrugged. “We’ve had only a quick preliminary look around up there. We wanted to know what’s been stolen before we ... er ... See, we don’t want to waste our time for nothing.”

I nodded. Like Greville’s stolen shoes, I thought.

“This whole area round Hatton Garden is packed with the jewel trade. We get break-ins, or attempted break-ins, all the time.”

The other policeman said, “This place here is loaded with stones, of course, but the vault’s still shut and Mrs. Adams says nothing seems to be missing from the other stockrooms. Only Mr. Franklin has the key to the vault, which is where their more valuable faceted stones are kept.”

Mr. Franklin had no keys at all. Mr. Franklin’s keys were in my own pocket. There was no harm,

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