DICK FRANCIS

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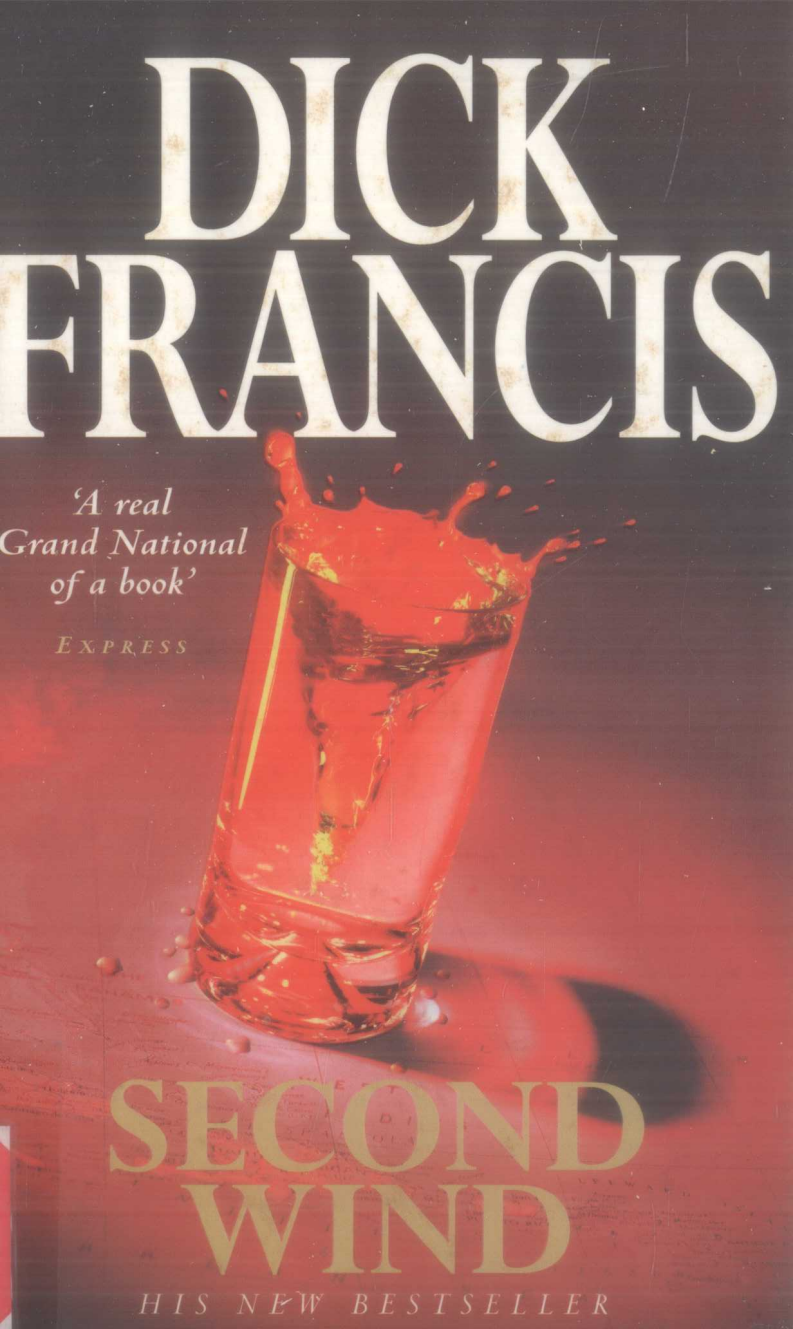

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Dick Francis

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SECOND WIND

Dick Francis has written forty international bestsellers and is widely acclaimed as one of the world's finest thriller writers. His awards include the Crime Writers' Association's Cartier Diamond Dagger for his outstanding contribution to the crime genre, and an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Tufts University of Boston. In 1996 Dick Francis was made a Mystery Writers of America Grand Master for a lifetime's achievement. He and his wife, Mary, divide their time between England and the British West Indies.

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My sincere thanks
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horseman

and

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PROLOGUE

Delirium brings comfort to the dying.

I had lived in an ordered world. Salary had mattered, and timetables. My grandmother belonged there with her fears.

'But isn't there a risk?' she asked.

You bet your life there's a risk.

'No,' I said. 'No risk.'

'Surely flying into a hurricane must be risky?'

'I'll come back safe,' I said.

But now, as near dead as dammit, I tumbled like a rag-doll piece of flotsam in towering gale-driven seas that sucked unimaginable tons of water from the deeps and hurled them along in liquid mountains faster than a Derby gallop. Sometimes the colossal waves swept me inexorably with them. Sometimes they buried me until my agonized lungs begged the ultimate relief of inhaling anything, even water, when only air would keep the engine turning.

I'd swallowed gagging amounts of Caribbean salt.

It had been night for hours, with no gleam anywhere. I was losing all perception of which way was up. Which

way was *air*. My arms and legs had bit by bit stopped working.

An increasingly out-of-order brain had begun seeing visions that shimmered and played in colours inside my head.

I could see my dry-land grandmother clearly. Her wheelchair. Her silver shoes. Her round anxious eyes and her miserable foreboding.

'Don't go, Perry. It gives me the heebie-jeebies.'

Whoever listens to grandmothers.

When she spoke in my head, her mouth was out of sync with her voice.

I'm drowning, I thought. The waves are bigger. The storm is worse. I'll go to sleep soon.

Delirium brings comfort at the end.

CHAPTER ONE

At the beginning it was a bit of fun.

Kris Ironside and I, both single, both thirty-one, both meteorologists employed to interpret the invisible swings and buffets of global air for television and radio audience consumption, both of us found without excitement that some of the holiday weeks allotted to us overlapped.

We both worked in the Weather Centre of the British Broadcasting Corporation, taking it in turns with several other forecasters to deliver the good or bad weather news to the nation. From breakfast to midnight our voices sounded familiar and our faces smiled or frowned into millions of homes until we could go nowhere at all without recognition.

Kris rather enjoyed it, and so had I once, but I had long gone beyond any depth of gratification and sometimes found the instant identification a positive drawback.

'*Aren't you . . .?*'

'*Yes, I guess so.*'

I used to go for holidays to lands that didn't know me. A week in Greece. Elephants in the Serengeti. By dug-out

canoe up the Orinoco. Small adventures. No grand or gasp-worthy dangers. I lived an ordered life.

Kris stabbed with his thumb the roster pinned to the department notice board. Disgust shook his hand.

'October and November!' he grumbled. 'And I asked for August.'

It was January at the time: August tended to be given to those with school-age children. Kris's chances of August had always realistically been zero, but with Kris hope often outweighed common sense.

It was his streak of wild unpredictability – the manic side of his character – that made him a good evening pub companion, but a week in his company once in the foothills of the Himalayas had left me glad to return to home soil.

My own name, Perry Stuart, appeared alphabetically near the bottom of the list, ahead only of Williams and Yates. In late October, I saw, I could take the ten working days still owing to me by then and return to the screen on the eve of Fireworks Night, November 5th. I shrugged and sighed. Year after year I got especially chosen and, I supposed, honoured to deal with the rain-or-no-rain million-dollar gamble on fine weather for the night the skies blazed with the multicoloured firework starbursts sent up in memory of Guy Fawkes and his blow-up-Parliament gunpowder plot. Year after year, if I got downpours right, I winced over sackloads of letters from reproachful children who reckoned their disappointment to be my fault.

Kris followed my gaze down the list and tapped my name with his finger.

'October and November,' he pronounced without surprise. 'Don't tell me! You'll waste half of that leave on your grandmother again.'

'I expect so.'

He protested, 'But you see her every week.'

'Mm.'

Where Kris had parents, brothers and a coven of cousins, I had a grandmother. She had literally plucked me as an infant out of the ruins of a gas-exploded house, and had dried her grief for my dead parents in order to bring me up.

Where batches of my meteorological colleagues had wives, husbands, live-ins and one-nighters I had – sometimes – my grandmother's nurses. I wasn't unmarried by design: more by lack of urgency or the advent of Cinderella.

As autumn approached the Ironside manic-depressive gloom intensified downwards. Kris's latest girlfriend left him, and the Norwegian pessimism he'd inherited from his mother, along with his pale skin, lengthy jaw and ectomorph physique, was leading him to predict cyclones more often than usual at the drop of a single millibar.

Small groups of the great wide public with special needs tended to gravitate to particular forecasters. One associate, Beryl Yates, had cornered weddings, for instance, and Sonny Rae spent his spare time advising builders and house painters, and pompous old George told local councils when they might dryly dig up their water mains.

Landowners, great and small, felt comfortable with Kris, and would cut their hay to the half-hour on his say-so.

As Kris's main compulsive personal hobby was flying his own light aircraft, he spent many of his free days lunching with far-flung but welcoming farmers. They cleared their sheep out of fields to give him landing room and had been known to pollard a row of willows to provide a safe low-trajectory take-off.

I had flown with him three times on these farming jaunts, though my own bunch of followers, apart from children with garden birthday parties, had proved to be involved with horses. I seemed particularly to be consulted by racehorse trainers seeking perfect underfoot conditions for their speedy hopefuls, even though we did run forecasts dedicated to particular events.

By voice transfer on a message machine a trainer might say, 'I've a fancied runner at Windsor on Wednesday evening, what are the chances of firm ground?' or 'I'm not declaring my three-mile chaser to run tomorrow unless you swear it'll rain overnight.' They might be Pony Club camp organizers or horse show promoters, or even polo entrepreneurs, begging for the promise of sunshine. They might be shippers of brood mares to Ireland anxious for a calm sea-crossing, and they might above all be racecourse managers wanting advice on whether or not to water their turf for good going in the days ahead. The prospect of good going encouraged trainers to send their horses. The prospect of many runners encouraged spectators to arrive in crowds.

'Good going' was gold dust to the racing industry; and woe betide the forecaster who misread the clouds.

But no weather-man, however profound his knowledge or intuition, could guess the skies right all the time and, as over the British Isles especially, the fickle winds could change direction without giving notice, to be accurate eighty-five per cent of the time was miraculous.

Kris's early autumnal depression intensified day by day and it was from some vague impulse to cheer him up that I agreed to his suggestion of a Sunday-lunch flight to Newmarket. Our host, Kris assured me, would be catering for at least twenty guests, so my presence would hardly overload the arrangements. 'And besides,' Kris added with mild routine sarcasm, 'your face is your fortune, you can't get away from it. Caspar will slobber all over you.'

'Caspar?'

'Caspar Harvey, it's his lunch.'

'Oh.'

Caspar Harvey might be one of Kris's wealthiest farming cronies, but he also owned three or four racehorses whose trainer twittered in nervous sound-bites in my ears from Monday to Sunday. Oliver Quigley, the trainer, temperamentally unsuited to any stressful way of life, let alone the nerve-breaking day-to-day of the thoroughbred circuit, was, on his messages system, audibly in awe of Caspar Harvey, which was hardly the best basis for an owner-trainer relationship.

I had met neither man face to face and didn't much want

to, but as the day of the lunch approached I kept coming across references to 'that gift to racing, Caspar Harvey' or 'Caspar Harvey in final dash to honours on the winning owners' list' or 'Caspar Harvey pays millions at the Yearling Sales for Derby hopes', and as my knowledge and curiosity grew, so did my understanding of the Quigley jitters.

The week before the Caspar Harvey lunch was one of those times when I gave the top two forecasts, at six-thirty and nine-thirty each evening, daily working out the probable path of air masses and going in front of the cameras at peak times to put my assessments on the line. Many people used to think that all Kris and I and other forecasters did was to read out from someone else's script: there was often surprise when we explained that we were in actual fact forecasters, that it was we who predicted the weather ourselves, using the information gathered from distant weather stations and having discussed it with colleagues. We then went 'live' and unscripted – and usually alone – into a very small studio where we ourselves placed the computerized weather symbols on the background screen map of Britain.

There are well over two hundred weather stations covering the British Isles, each reporting local wind speeds and direction and barometric pressure into a large central computer housed in the main Meteorological Office in Bracknell, near Ascot, west of London. Into that computer too came data from all over the world, and one could draw from it everything the world's weather was likely to do in

the next forty-eight hours. But nothing was ever certain, and a lurch of high atmosphere pressure could let in a polar gust that would refrigerate our cheerful expectations into unconvincing explanations.

The late September Sunday of Caspar Harvey's lunch, though, dawned fine and clear with a chilly wind from the east, conditions that would remain that way all day while the farmers of East Anglia harvested their late-ripening barley. 'Perfect for flying,' Kris said.

Kris's aeroplane, a low-winged single-engined Piper Cherokee, was approximately thirty years old. He, he frankly acknowledged, was its fourth owner, the third being a flying club that had sometimes put six hours a day on the propeller log (Kris's only gripe) and rubbed old-age patches into the cracked leather seats.

My first reaction to the antique rig a couple of years earlier had been, 'No thanks, I'll stay on the ground', but in his home airfield's echoing hangar Kris had introduced me to a mechanic who understood the relationship between loose screws and sudden death. I'd put my life in Kris's hands on the mechanic's assurance that old though the Piper might be, it was airworthy to the last rivet.

Kris, in fact, had turned out to be a surprisingly competent pilot. I'd expected him to be as volatile in the air as in his general behaviour but instead he was soberly responsible at the controls and only as high as a radiosonde balloon afterwards.

Many of our colleagues found Kris a difficult companion and asked me in mild exasperation how I dealt with his

obvious leaning towards my company. I usually answered truthfully that I enjoyed his slightly weird views on life, and I didn't mention that in his depressive periods he talked familiarly about suicide as if discussing an unimportant life choice like what tie to wear for early breakfast broadcasts.

It was regard for his parents, and for his father in particular, that deterred him from the final jump into the path of a train (his preferred method of exit), and I reckoned that he had less self-hatred and more courageous staying power than many who'd given in to a death wish.

At the time of Caspar Harvey's lunch party, Kris Ironside at thirty-one had outlasted the macabre instincts of a succession of young women who had temporarily found the idea of suicide fascinating, and was beginning to face the possibility that he might yet make it to middle age.

In appearance, apart from the overall tall and willowy build, he was noticeably good-looking with pale blue intelligent eyes, wiry blond stick-out hair that refused help from barbers, a strong blond moustache and, on screen particularly, a sort of half-grin that dared you not to believe his every word.

He kept his flying pride and joy on White Waltham airfield and to its upkeep devoted the bulk of his income, gleefully informing anyone who would listen that it left aerobic exercises out of sight as a keep-fit heart-stresser. He greeted me at White Waltham with what I knew from experience to be super-charged happiness. His Cherokee, parked by the petrol pumps, was taking aboard fuel that was no more stable than himself, each wing tank being

filled to overflowing to expel any water formed there by hot saturated air condensing as the aircraft cooled after last time out.

Kris, never one of the old goggles-and-white-silk-scarf variety of pilots, was wearing a plaid heavy wool shirt with a Norwegian-knit sweater on top. He eyed my dark trousers, white shirt and navy jacket and nodded approval: in some way he considered my all too conventional appearance to be a licence for his own eccentricity to flourish.

He finished the refuelling, checked that the two wing tank-caps were screwed on tight and then, having with my help pushed the little white aeroplane a short distance from the pumps (a small courtesy to other refuellers), he methodically walked around the whole machine, intoning his checklist to himself as he touched each vital part. As usual, he finished by unclipping and opening backwards each half of the engine cowling, checking that the mechanic hadn't left a rag in the works (as if he would!) and also wiping the dipstick clean before re-inserting it down into the sump, to make sure there was a satisfactorily deep lake of oil there to lubricate the engine. Kris had never been one to take foolish chances when it came to flying.

Once aboard and sitting in the left-hand (captain's) seat he equally seriously completed his pre-starting checks – all switches in good order, and things like that – and finally started the engine, gazing concentratedly at its gauges.

Used to his meticulous ways, I sat placidly waiting for satisfaction to relax the tension in his backbone and hands, until at last he grunted, switched on his radio, and informed