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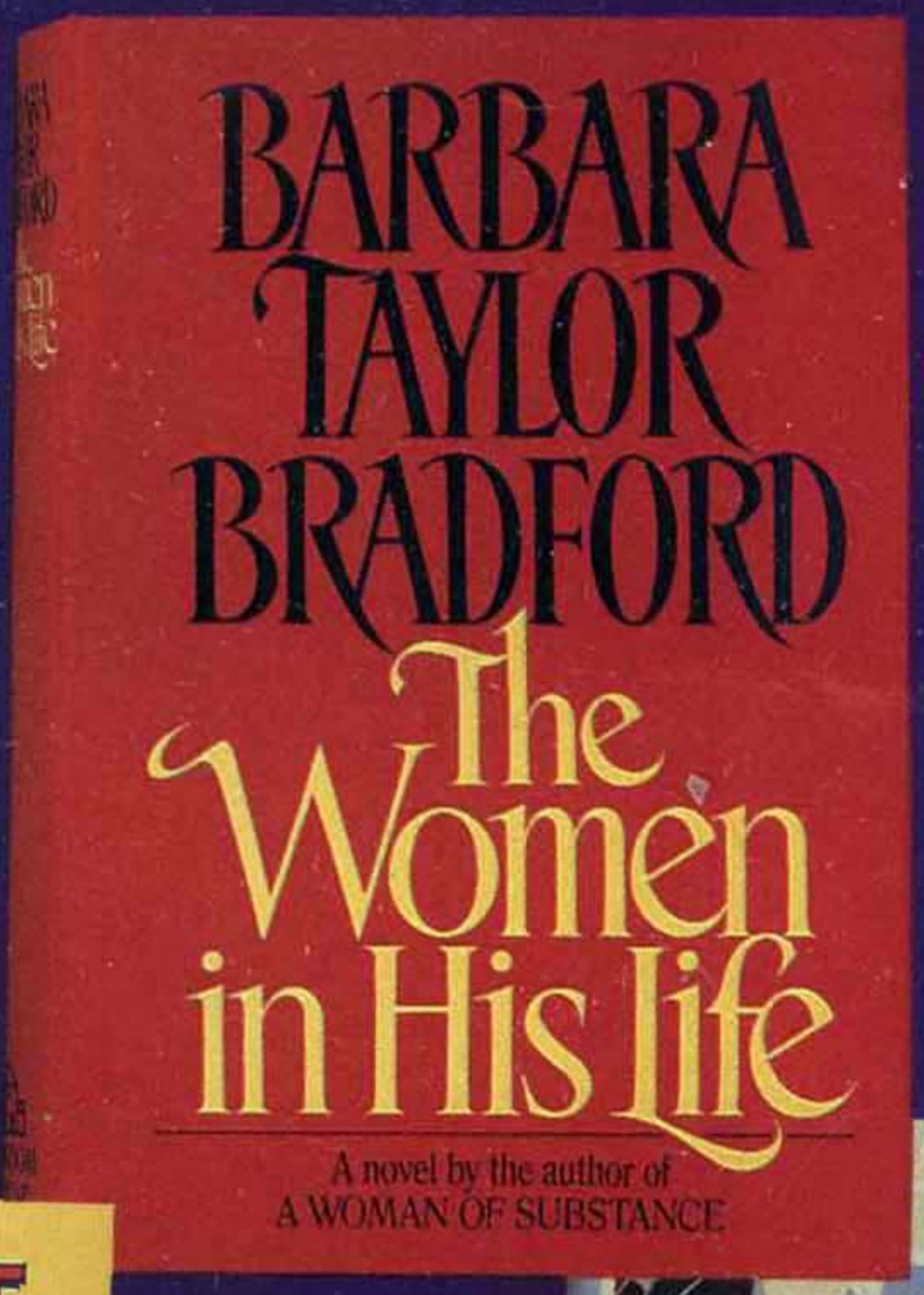

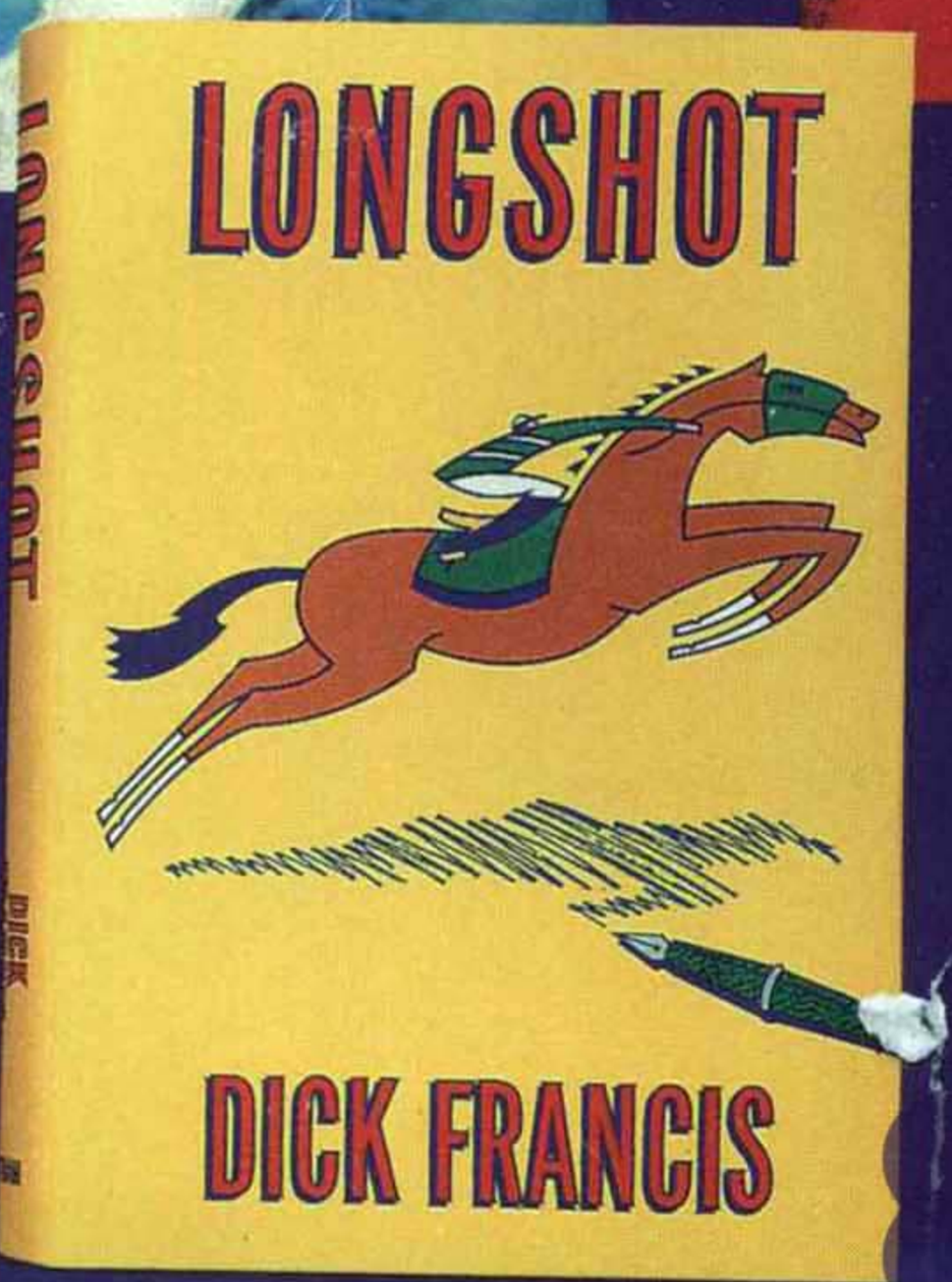

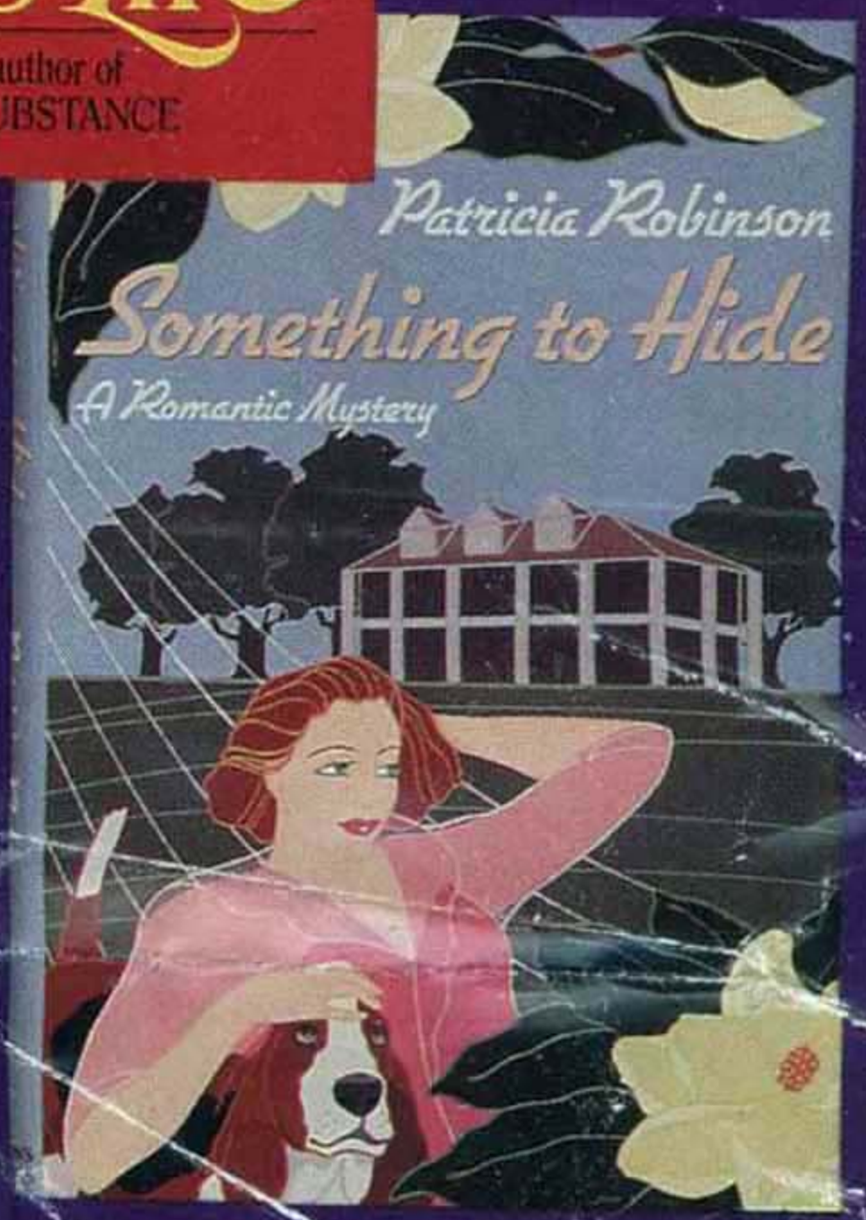

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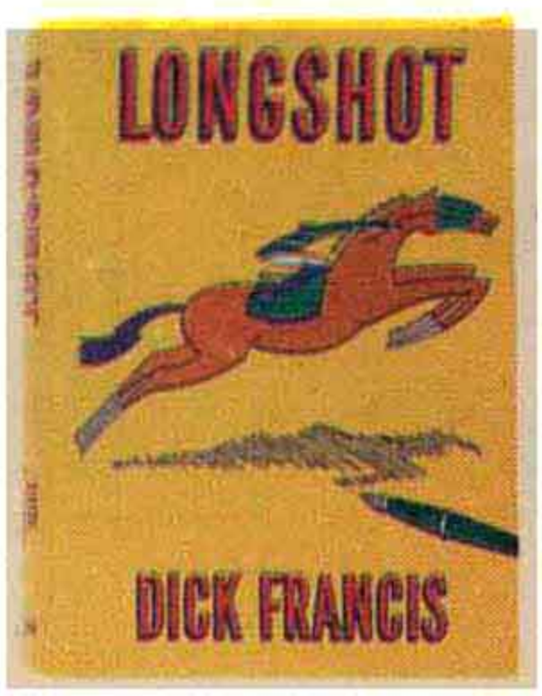

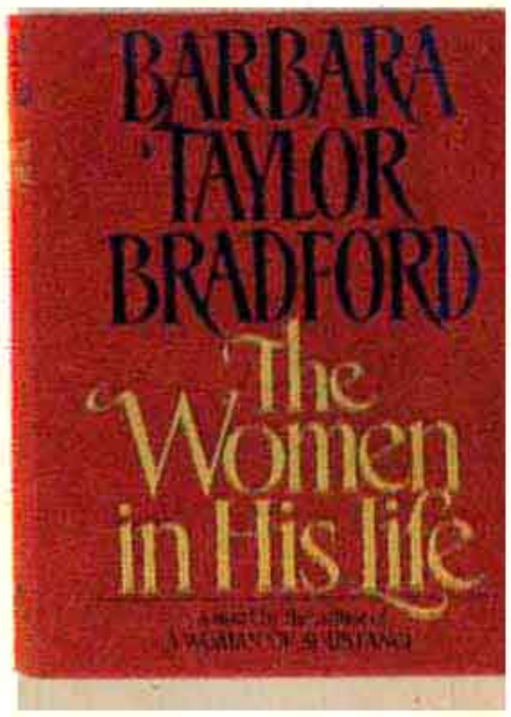

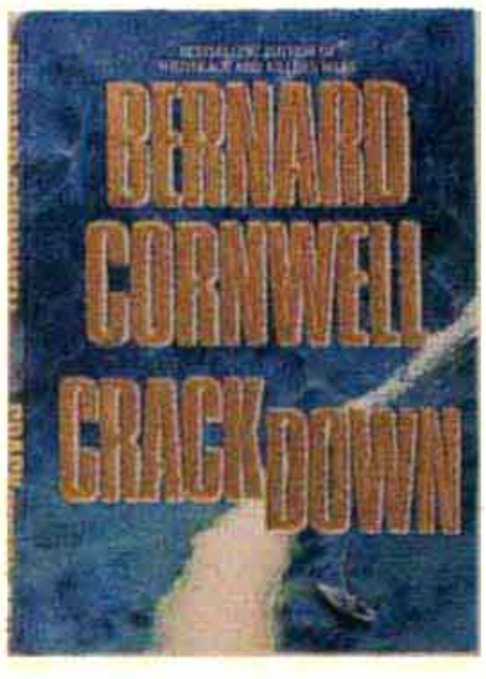

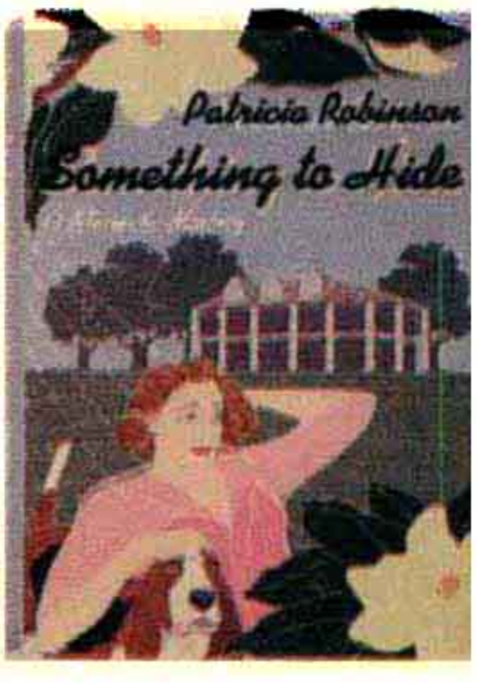

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

by Roy King

READER'S DIGEST
CONDENSED BOOKS

VOLUME 2 1991

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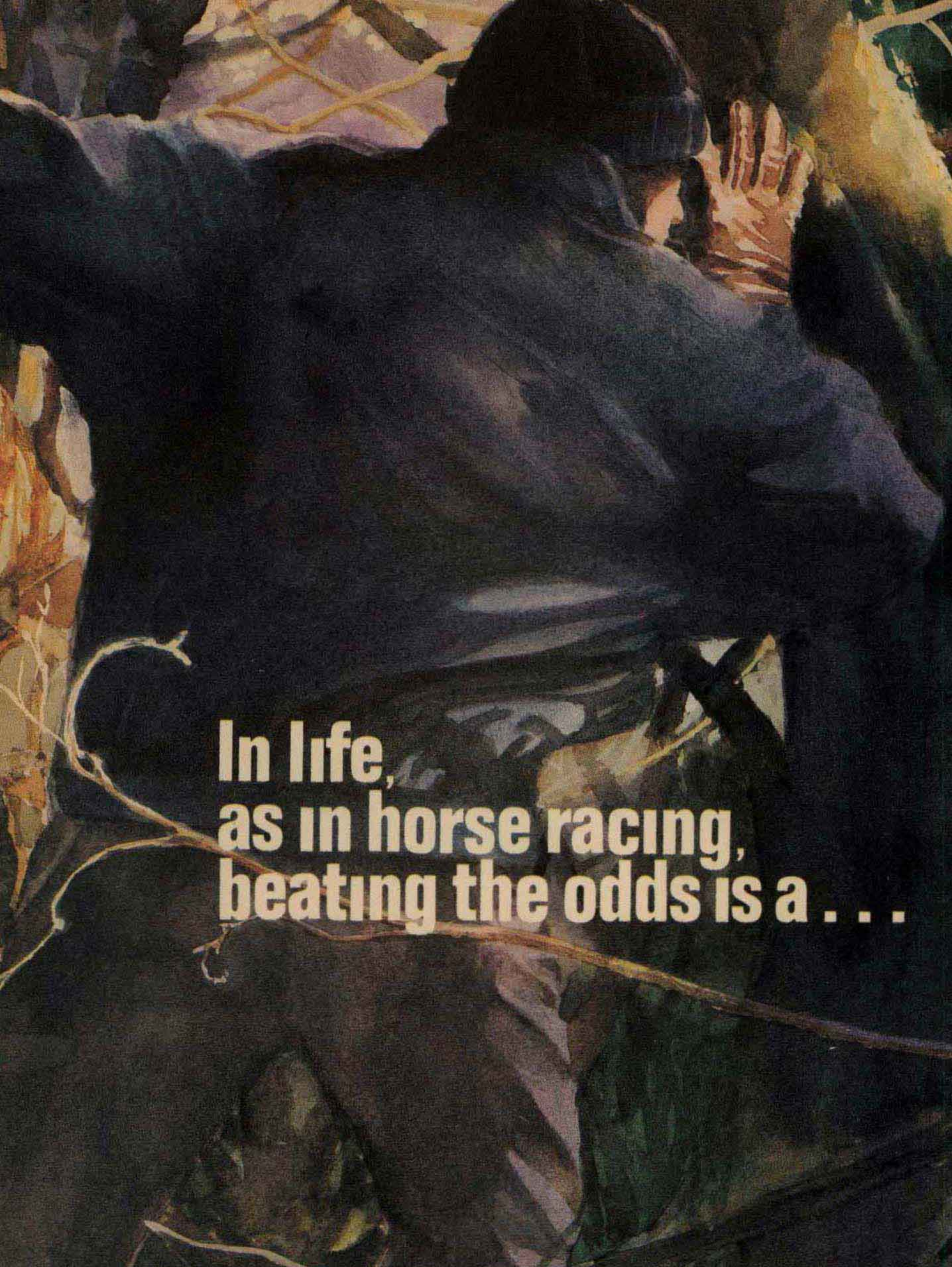
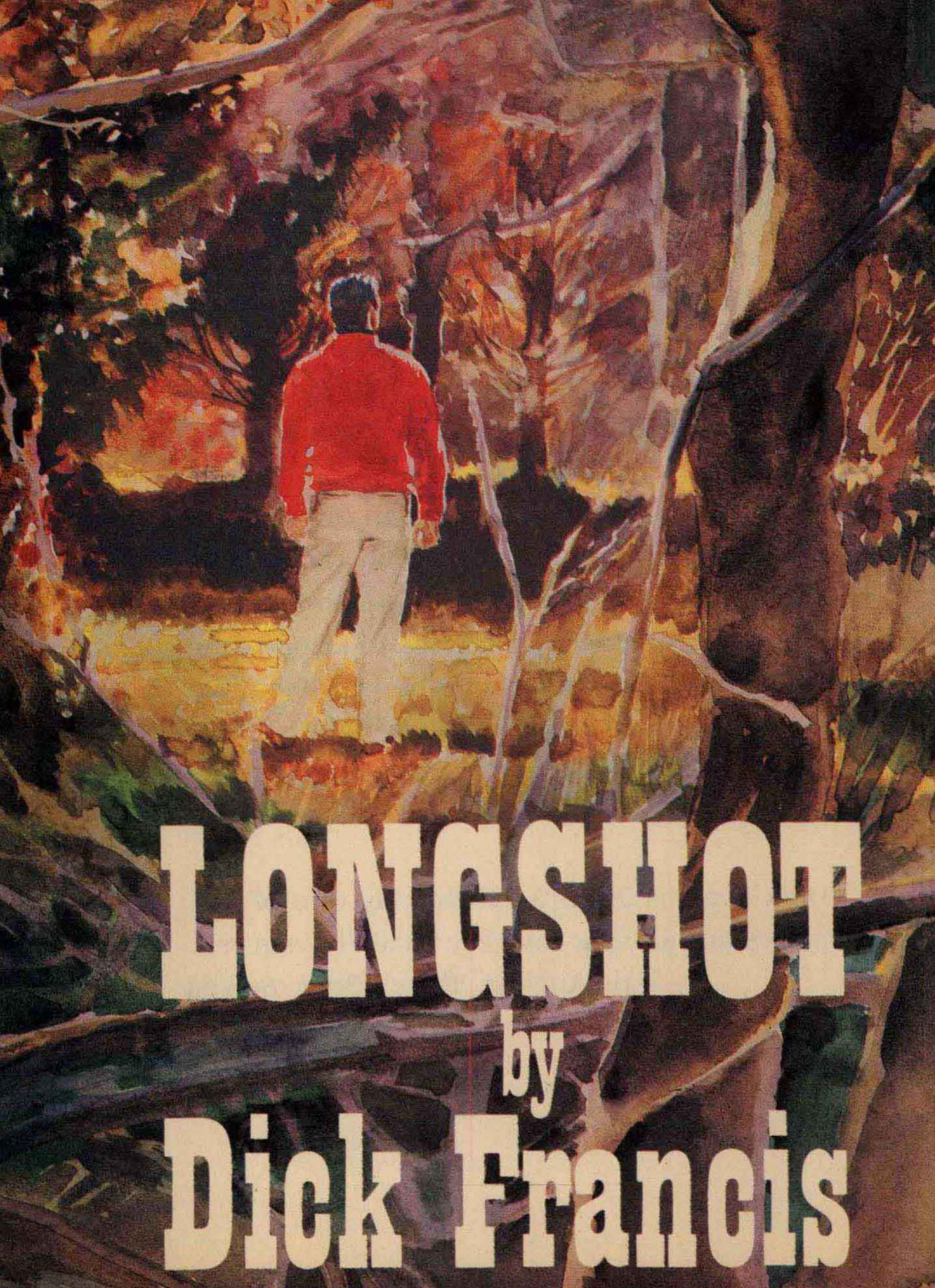

In life,
as in horse racing,
beating the odds is a . . .


LONGSHOT
by
Dick Francis

John Kendall is broke, hungry and cold. When the struggling novelist is forced out of his tiny attic room one icy February morning, he's not quite sure what he'll do to make ends meet.

On an impulse, John accepts an offer to write the biography of a champion racehorse trainer. But the deeper John digs into the man's past, the closer he comes to uncovering a gruesome truth. And someone is determined that this truth will never come to light.

For John Kendall, the greatest struggle is about to begin.

"Dick Francis is now indubitably one of the superstars among mystery-thriller writers."

—Los Angeles *Times Book Review*

Chapter 1

I ACCEPTED a commission that had been turned down by four other writers, but I was hungry at the time.

Although starving in a garret had seemed a feasible enough plan a year earlier, the present realities of existence under the frozen eaves of a friend's aunt's house, in Chiswick, in a snowy January were such that without enough income to keep well fed and warm, I was a knockover for a risky decision.

My state, of course, was my own fault. I could easily have gone out looking for paid employment. I didn't have to sit shivering in a ski suit, biting the end of a pencil, unsure of my ability and of the illuminations crashing about in my head.

The spartan discomfort was not, either, a self-pitying morass of abject failure but more the arctic doldrums between the recent acceptance of my first novel for publication and the distant date of its launch into literary orbit. This was the downside after the heady receipt of the first advance payment and its division into past debts, present expenses and six months' future rent.

Give it two years, I'd thought, kissing farewell to the security of a salary: if I can't get published in two years, I'll admit that the compulsion to write fiction is fool's gold. Tossing away the pay-checks had been a fairly desperate step, but I'd tried writing before work and after, in trains and at weekends, and had pro-

duced only dust. A stretch of no-excuse solitude would settle things one way or another.

I did, as it happened, know a lot about survival in adverse circumstances, and the prospect of lean times hadn't worried me. I'd rather looked forward to them as a test of ingenuity. I just hadn't realized that sitting and thinking in itself made one cold.

The letter from Ronnie Curzon came on a particularly cold morning, when there was ice like a half-descended curtain over the inside of my friend's aunt's attic window. It said:

> Dear John,
>
> Care to drop into the office? There's been a suggestion about American rights in your book. You might be interested. I think we might discuss it anyway.
>
> Yours ever,
> Ronnie
>
> Why can't you have a telephone like everyone else?

The day warmed up miraculously. American rights were things that happened to successful authors, not to people afflicted by self-doubts and insecurities.

"Don't worry," Ronnie had said heartily after reading the manuscript I'd dumped on his desk a couple of weeks earlier. "Don't worry, I'm sure we can find you a publisher."

Ronnie Curzon, authors' agent, had indeed found me a publisher, a house more prestigious than I would have aimed for.

"They have a large list," Ronnie had explained kindly. "They can afford to take a risk on a few first-timers." He'd told me in the same breath that I'd sell two thousand copies if I was very lucky.

On the day of the American rights letter I walked as usual from the friend's aunt's house to Ronnie's office, in Kensington High Street. I went late in the morning so as to arrive at noon. Shortly after that hour, I'd discovered, Ronnie tended to offer wine to his visitors and to send out for sandwiches.

I misjudged things to the extent that the door of his own room was firmly shut, where normally it stood open.

"He's with another client," Daisy said, smiling easily. "He

wants you to wait," she reported, and I sat on one of the two chairs arranged for the purpose.

Eventually Ronnie's door opened and out came his head, his neck and a section of shoulder. "John? Come along in."

I went down to his room, which contained his desk, his armchair, two guest chairs, a cupboard and roughly a thousand books.

"Sorry to keep you," he said, and waved me into his office.

Ronnie was round and short and enthusiastic, with smooth dark hair and soft, dry hands. He was wearing a business suit over a white shirt and a striped tie.

His other client had remained settled in his chair as if there for the day, and it seemed to me that Ronnie was stifling exasperation under a façade of aplomb.

"Tremayne," he was saying jovially to his guest, "this is John Kendall, a brilliant young author."

As Ronnie described all his authors as brilliant, even with plentiful evidence to the contrary, I remained unembarrassed.

Tremayne was equally unimpressed. Tremayne, sixtyish, gray-haired, big and self-assured, was clearly not pleased at the interruption. "We haven't finished our business," he said.

"Time for a glass of wine," Ronnie suggested, ignoring the complaint. "For you, Tremayne?"

"Gin and tonic."

"Ah . . . I meant white wine or red?"

With annoyed resignation Tremayne said, "Red, then."

"Tremayne Vickers," Ronnie said to me noncommittally, completing the introduction. "Red do you, John?"

"Great."

Ronnie bustled about, moving heaps of books and papers, clearing spaces, producing glasses, bottle and corkscrew, and presently pouring with concentration.

"To trade," he said with a smile, handing me a glass. "To success," he said to Vickers.

"Success! What success? All these writers are too big for their boots." Ronnie glanced involuntarily at my own boots, which were big enough for anyone.

"It's no use you telling me I'm not offering a decent fee," Tremayne told him. "They ought to be glad of the work." He eyed me briefly. "What do you earn in a year?"

I smiled blandly and didn't answer.

"How much do you know about horse racing?" he demanded.

"Well," I said, "not a lot."

"Tremayne," Ronnie protested, "John isn't your sort of writer."

"A writer's a writer. Anyone can do it. You said your friend here is brilliant. So how about *him*?"

"Ah," Ronnie said cautiously. "Brilliant is just . . . ah . . . a figure of speech. He's inquisitive, capable and impulsive."

"So he's *not* brilliant?" Tremayne asked ironically, and to me he said, "What have you written, then?"

I answered obligingly, "Six travel guides and a novel."

"Travel guides? What sort of travel guides?"

"How to live in the jungle. Or in deserts. That sort of thing."

"For people who like difficult holidays," Ronnie said. "John used to work for a travel agency which specializes in sending the intrepid out to be stretched."

"Oh." Tremayne looked at his wine without enthusiasm and said testily, "There must be someone who'd leap at the job."

"What is it that you want written?" I said.

Ronnie made a gesture that seemed to say, "Don't ask," but Tremayne answered straightforwardly. "An account of my life."

I blinked. Ronnie's eyebrows rose and fell.

Tremayne said, "You'd think those sportswriter johnnies would be falling over themselves for the honor, but they've all turned me down." He sounded aggrieved. "Four of them."

The truculence in Tremayne's voice was one of the reasons, I reflected, why he was having trouble. I lost interest in him, and Ronnie, seeing it, suggested sandwiches for lunch. He went over to the door and called to Daisy along the passage. "Phone down for sandwiches. Usual selection. Everyone welcome."

He brought himself in again. Tremayne went on looking disgruntled, and I drank my wine with gratitude.

"I offered to have them to stay," Tremayne complained, nig-

gling away at his frustration. "They all said the sales wouldn't be worth the work, not at the rate I was offering." He gloomily drank, and made a face over the taste. "My name alone would sell the book, I told them, and they had the gall to disagree."

He seemed to think I should know who he was, that everyone should. I hardly liked to say I'd never heard of him.

He partially enlightened me. "After all," he said, "I've trained getting on for a thousand winners. The Grand National, a Gold Cup, the Whitbread, you name it. I've seen half a century of racing. There's stories in all of it. Childhood . . . growing up . . . success . . . My life has been *interesting*, dammit."

Ronnie soothingly refilled the glasses, and Daisy at length appeared in the doorway to say the food had arrived. We all went along to the big room, where the central table had been cleared and relaid with plates, knives, napkins and large platters of sandwiches.

Ronnie's associates emerged from their rooms to join us, and I managed to eat a lot without, I hoped, its being noticeable. Fillings of beef, ham, cheese: once ordinary things that had become luxuries lately.

Tremayne harangued me again over the generic shortcomings of racing writers, while I nodded in sympathetic silence and munched away, as if listening carefully. He made a great outward show of forceful self-confidence, but there was something in his insistence that curiously belied it. It was almost as if he needed the book to be written to prove he had lived.

"How old are you?" he said abruptly, breaking off in mid-flow.

I said with my mouth full, "Thirty-two."

"You look younger. Could you write a biography?"

"I don't know. Never tried."

Ronnie fetched up beside him and wheeled him away, nodding his head placatingly under a barrage of complaints. Eventually, when nothing was left on the plates, Ronnie said a firm farewell to Tremayne, who still didn't want to go.

"There's nothing I can offer at the moment," Ronnie said, practically pushing Tremayne doorwards with a friendly clasp on his shoulder. "But I'll see what I can do. Keep in touch."

With ill grace Tremayne finally left, and Ronnie led the way back to his room.

"Tremayne asked if I'd ever written a biography," I said, taking my former place on the visitors' side of Ronnie's desk.

He gave me a swift glance, settling himself into his own padded dark green leather chair. "Did he offer you the job?"

"Not exactly."

"My advice to you would be not to think of it. It's fair to say he's a good racehorse trainer, well known in his own field. It's even fair to agree he's had an interesting life. But that isn't enough. It all depends on the writing."

"Will you find him someone?" I asked.

"Not on the terms he's looking for. He's asking for a writer to stay in his house for at least a month, to go through all his records and interview him in depth. Then he wants seventy percent of royalty income. No top writer is going to work for thirty percent."

"Thirty percent—that's starvation."

Ronnie smiled. "Anyway"—he leaned forward, saying more briskly—"about these American rights . . ."

It seemed that a New York literary agent had asked my publishers whether they had anything of interest in the pipeline. They had steered him to Ronnie. Would I, Ronnie asked, care to have him send a copy of my manuscript to the American agent, who would then, if he thought the book salable in America, try to find it an American publisher?

I managed to keep my mouth shut but was gasping inside. "I . . . er . . . I'd be delighted," I said.

"Not promising anything, you realize." He would let me know, he said, as soon as he got an opinion back from the agent.

"How's the new book coming along?" he asked.

"Slowly."

He rose to his feet, looking apologetically at his paperwork, shaking my hand warmly in farewell. "Just keep going," he said.

I went on out to the elevator, rode down two floors and went into the bitter afternoon air, thinking of the steps that had led to Ronnie's door.

Finishing the book had been one thing, finding a publisher another. The six small books I'd previously written had been part of my work for the travel firm, which had paid me pretty well for writing them besides sending me to far-flung places to gather the knowledge. The travel firm wasn't in the market for novels.

I'd taken my precious manuscript personally to a small but well-known publisher and had handed it to a pretty girl there, who suggested I should take it to an agent. She gave me a list of names and addresses.

"Try one of those," she'd said. "Good luck with it."

I'd tried Ronnie Curzon for no better reason than his office lay on my direct walk home. Impulse had led to good and bad all my life, but when I felt it strongly, I usually followed it. Ronnie had been good. Opting for poverty had been so-so. To accept Tremayne's offer would be the pits.

Chapter 2

As I walked back to the house in Chiswick I hadn't the slightest intention of ever meeting Tremayne Vickers again. I forgot him. I thought of the book I was writing, especially of how to get one character down from a runaway helium-filled balloon. I had doubts about the balloon. The chief thing I'd learned from writing fiction was fear of getting it wrong.

The book that had been accepted, *Long Way Home*, was about the survival—physical and mental—of a bunch of people isolated by a disaster. Hardly an original theme, but I'd followed the basic advice to write about something I knew, and survival was what I knew best.

I opened the front door with my latchkey and met the friend's aunt in the hall. "Hello, dear," she said. "Everything all right?"

I told her about Ronnie's sending my book to America, and her thin face filled with pleasure. She was roughly fifty, divorced, a grandmother, sweet, undemanding and boring. She'd been introduced to me as Aunty and that's what I called her, and she seemed to regard me as a sort of extension nephew.

"It's very cold. Are you warm enough up there?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," I said. The coin-in-the-slot electric heater she had installed for me ate money. I almost never switched it on.

She said, "Good, dear," and I went upstairs thinking that I'd lived in the Arctic Circle, and if I hadn't been able to deal with a cold London attic, I would have been ashamed of myself.

My room, once the retreat of Aunty's youngest daughter, had a worn pink carpet and cream wallpaper sprigged with pink roses. The resident furniture of bed, wardrobe, two chairs and a table was overwhelmed by a veritable army of crates. There were boxes and suitcases containing my collected worldly possessions: clothes, books, household goods and sports equipment, all top quality, acquired in carefree, bygone affluence. Two pairs of expensive skis stood in their covers in a corner. Wildly extravagant cameras and lenses rested in dark foam beds. A word processor was wrapped most of the time in sheeting.

I thought occasionally that I could eat better if I sold something, but it seemed stupid to cannibalize things that I might need again. The second half of the advance on *Long Way Home* wasn't due until publication day, a whole long year ahead. My small weekly allotted parcels of money wouldn't last that long, and my rent-in-advance would run out at the end of June. If I could finish this balloon lark by then and if it were accepted, maybe I'd just manage the full two years. Then if the books fell with a dull thud, I'd give up and go back to the easier rigors of the wild.

That night the air temperature over London plummeted still farther, and in the morning Aunty's house was frozen solid.

"There's no water," she said in distress when I went downstairs. "The central heating stopped, and all the pipes have frozen." She looked at me helplessly. "I'm very sorry, dear, but I'm going to stay in a hotel until it thaws. I'm going to close the house. Can you find somewhere else for a week or two?"

Dismay was a small word for what I felt. I helped her close the stopcocks and switch off her water heaters, and in return she let me use her telephone to look for another roof. I got through to her nephew, who worked for the travel firm where I'd worked.