
DRIVING FORCE

DICK FRANCIS



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

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and
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as always*

I had told the drivers never on any account to pick up a hitchhiker but of course one day they did, and by the time they reached my house he was dead.

The bell by the back door rang as I was heating up leftover beef stew for a fairly boring supper, the consequence of living alone, and with barely a sigh and no premonition I switched off the hot plate, put the saucepan to one side and went to see who had come. Friends tended to enter at once while yelling my name, as the door was seldom locked. Employees mostly knocked first and entered next, still with little ceremony. Only strangers rang the bell and waited.

This time it was different. This time when I opened the door the light from inside the house fell yellowly on the stretched scared eyes of two of the men who worked for me, who stood uncomfortably on the doormat shifting from foot to foot, agonizedly and obviously expectant of wrath to come.

My own response to these clear signals of disaster was the familiar adrenaline rush of alarm that no amount of dealing with earlier crises could prevent. The old pump quickened. My voice came out high.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “What happened?”

I glanced over their shoulders. The bulk of one of the two largest in my fleet of horse vans stood reassuringly in the shadows out on the tarmacked parking area, the house lights raising gleams along its silvery flank. At least they hadn’t run it into a ditch; at least they’d brought it home. All else had to be secondary.

“Look, Freddie,” Dave Yates said, a defensive whine developing, “it’s not our fault.”

“What isn’t?”

“This four-eyes we picked up . . .”

“You *what*?”

The younger one said, “I told you we shouldn’t, Dave.”

In him the anxiety whine was already full-blown, since wriggling out of blame was his family habit. He, Brett Gardner, already on my list for the chop, had been hired for his muscles and his mechanical know-how, the whining nature at first unsuspected. His three months’ trial period was almost up, and I wouldn’t be making him permanent.

He was a competent watchful driver. I’d trusted him from the start with my biggest and most expensive rigs, but I’d had requests from several good customers not to send him to transport the horses to the races, as he tended to sow his own dissatisfactions like a virus. Stable lads traveling with him went home incubating grouses, to their employers’ irritation.

“It wasn’t as if we had any horses on board,” Dave Yates was saying, trying to placate. “Just Brett and me.”

I’d told all the drivers over and over that picking up hitchhikers while there were horses on board invalidated the insurance. I told them I’d sack any of them instantly if they did that. I’d also told them never, ever, to give any lifts at all to anyone, even if the van was empty of horses, and even if they knew the lift-beggar personally. No, Freddie, of course not, they’d said seriously; and now I wondered just how often they’d disobeyed me.

“What about the four-eyes?” I said, my annoyance obvious. “What’s actually the matter?”

Dave said desperately, “He’s dead.”

“You . . . *stupid* . . .” Words failed me, drowned in anger. I could have hit him, and no doubt he saw it, backing away instinctively, fright rising. All sorts of scenarios presented themselves in rapid succession, none of them promising anything but trouble and lawsuits. “What did he do?” I demanded. “Try to jump off while you were moving? Or did you run him over . . .” And dear Christ, I thought, I hope it not be that.

Dave’s surprised shake of the head put at least those fears to rest.

“He’s in the van,” he said. “Lying on the seat. We tried to wake him when we got to Newbury, but I can’t tell him it was time to get off. And we couldn’t. I mean . . . he’s dead.”

“Are you sure?”

They both reluctantly nodded.

I switched on the outside lights to flood the tarmac with visibility and went over with them for a look-see. They skittered one on each side of me, crabbing sideways, making unhappy deprecating flapping movements with their hands, trying to shed their guilt, to justify themselves, to get me to understand it was unfortunate but not, definitely not, as Dave had said, their fault.

Dave, of about my own height (five-nine) and age (mid-thirties) was primarily a horseman and secondarily a driver, usually traveling with animals that for some reason weren’t being sent with enough attendants of their own. I’d seen him and Brett off that morning to pick up nine two-year-olds locally for a one-way trip to Newmarket, their owner being in the process of transferring his entire string from one perfectly good trainer to another in a typical bad-tempered huff. It wasn’t that man’s first expensive across-country flounce, and no doubt not his last. I’d shipped his three-year-old colt for him the previous day and was booked for fillies on the morrow. More money than sense, I thought.

I knew the nine two-year-olds had arrived safely in their new home, as Brett had made the customary calls to my office both when he reached his destination and at the start of his return journey. All the vans were equipped with mobile phones: the regular reporting calls were a useful routine, even if the older drivers thought one fussy. Fussy Freddie they might well call me behind my back, but with a fleet of fourteen vans zigzagging round England most days carrying multimillion-pound fortunes on the hoof, I couldn’t afford ignorance or negligent mistakes.

The front cabs of big horse vans were always pretty roomy, having to accommodate several attendants besides one or sometimes two drivers. The cabs of my nine-horse vans could hold eight people at a pinch, not in pullman comfort but at least sitting down. Behind the driver and the two front passenger seats a long padded rear seat usually gave support to four or five narrow bottoms: on the occasion, its entire length was occupied by one man lying on his back, feet towards me, silent and no longer worried about time.

I climbed into the cab and stood looking down at him.

I’d expected, I’d realized, some sort of tramp. Someone with a stubble, smelly jacket, grubby jeans, slumped down on his luck. Not a prosperous-looking middle-aged fat man in suit, tie and gold onyx signet ring with leather-soled polished shoes pointing mutely to heaven. Not a man who looked as if he could have bought other more suitable transport.

He was certainly dead. I didn’t attempt to feel for a pulse, nor close the sagging mouth or the half-open lids behind the thick-lensed glasses. A rolled-up horse rug had provided him with a pillow. One arm had fallen by his side, the hand with the ring resting laxly on the floor, near but not touching a black briefcase. I jumped down from the cab, shut its door and looked at the worried faces of my men who would no longer meet my eyes.

“How much did he pay you?” I asked bluntly.

“Freddie!” Dave wriggled in embarrassment, trying to deny it, happy-go-lucky always, likable, b

of variable good sense.

"I'd never . . ." Brett began, fake indignation always ready.

I gave him a disillusioned stare and interrupted. "Where did you pick him up, why did he want a ride, and how much did he offer?"

"Dave fixed it," Brett said accusingly.

"But you had your cut." I took it for granted; not a question.

"Brett asked him for more," Dave said with fury. "Demanded it."

"Yes, well, calm down." I began to walk back towards the house. "You'd better sort out what you're going to tell the police. Did he give you a name, for instance?"

"No," Dave said.

"Or a reason for wanting a lift?"

"His car had broken down," Dave explained. "He was at the South Mimms service station, pacing about and sweating round by the diesel pumps, trying to get the driver of an oil tanker to take him to Bristol."

"So?"

"So, well, he had a fistful of readies but the tanker was going to Southampton."

"What were you doing by the diesel pumps anyway?" I asked.

They'd had no need to take on more fuel, not just going to Newmarket and back.

"We'd stopped there," Dave said vaguely.

"Dave had a stomachache," Brett enlarged. "The squits. We had to stop to get him something for it."

"Imodium." Dave confirmed, nodding. "I was just walking past the pumps on my way back, see?"

Bleakly I led the way into the house, going through the back door into the hall and then wheeling left into the big all-purpose room where I customarily spent much of my time. I drew back the curtains, revealing the horse van out on the tarmac, and stood looking at it while I phoned the police.

The local constable who answered knew me well, as we'd both spent much of our lives in the racing center of Pixhill, a big village verging on small town sprawling across a fold of downland in Hampshire, south of Newbury.

"Sandy?" I said briefly, when he answered. "This is Freddie Croft. I've a slight problem . . . One of my vans picked up a hitchhiker who seems to have died on the journey. Do you mind coming over? He's outside my house, not along at the farm."

"Dead, do you mean?" he asked cautiously, after a pause.

"I mean dead. As in not breathing."

He cleared his throat. "You're not having me on?"

"Sorry, no."

"Well, all right. Ten minutes."

Pixhill's token police force consisted of Sandy alone, a Wild West outpost on the frontiers of law and order. Pixhill's police station consisted of an office-room in Sandy's house, where his chief activity was writing up records of his daily patrols. Out of hours, like now, he would be watching television in scruffy clothes, drinking beer and casually cuddling his children's mother, a plump lady perennially in bedroom slippers.

In the ten promised minutes before he sped importantly onto my tarmac in his official car with every available light flashing, I learned not much more about our unwelcome deceased guest.

"How was I to know he'd die on us?" Dave said aggrievedly as I put down the receiver. "Do you mind someone a favor . . . Yeah, well, I know you told us not to. But he was going on something chronic."

about how he had to get to Bristol for his daughter's wedding or something . . ."

I looked at him in disbelief.

"Yeah, well," Dave said defensively, "how was I to know?"

"It was all Dave's idea," Brett assured me.

"Did you talk to him?" I asked them.

"Not that much," Dave said. "He chose that seat behind us, anyway. Didn't seem to want to talk."

"I told Dave it was all wrong," Brett complained.

"Shut up," Dave said angrily. "You could have refused to drive him. I didn't notice you saying you wouldn't."

"And neither of you noticed him dying, either?" I suggested with irony.

The idea discomfited them, but no, it appeared, they hadn't.

"Thought he was asleep," Dave said, and Brett nodded. "So then," Dave went on, "when we couldn't wake him . . . I mean, you saw how he looks . . . well, we'd just pulled off the motorway at the Newbury junction . . . we were going to drop him at the Chieveley service station there so he could get another lift on to Bristol . . . well . . . there he was, dead, and we couldn't roll him out onto the ground, could we?"

They couldn't, I agreed. So they'd brought him to my doorstep, like cats bringing home a dead bird.

"Dave wanted to dump him somewhere," Brett whined virtuously. "Dave wanted to. It was me saying we couldn't."

Dave glared at him. "We *discussed* it," he said, "that's all we did."

"You'd have been in real trouble if you'd dumped him," I said, "and not just from me."

Sandy, still buttoning himself hastily into his dark blue uniform, arrived at that moment to take charge in the slightly pompous manner he'd developed over the years. One look at the corpse set him summoning help over his radio, resulting presently in a doctor and a host of unanswerable questions.

The dead man did, it seemed, at least have a name, discovered via a walletful of addresses and credit cards. Sandy brought the wallet down from the cab and showed it to me, where I waited on the ground outside.

"K. K. Ogden. Kevin Keith Ogden," he said, picking his way through the contents with stubby fingers. "Lives in Nottingham. Mean anything to you?"

"No." I shook my head. "Never heard of him."

He hadn't expected anything else.

"What did he die of?" I asked.

"A stroke maybe. Doc won't say before the postmortem. No sign of foul play if that's what you mean."

The archaic words "foul play" had always seemed faintly ridiculous to me, but in this case I was grateful to hear them.

"I can use the van tomorrow, then?" I asked.

"Don't see why not." He thought it over judiciously. "You might want to clean it, like."

"Yup," I said. "Always do."

He looked at me sideways. "I thought you had a rule never to give lifts."

"Dave and Brett are in big trouble."

With a glimmer of sympathy for the two men, he looked across to where they waited by the house door and said, "You didn't get your iron fist reputation for nothing, Freddie."

"What about the velvet glove bit?"

"Uh huh. That too."

Sandy at forty had thickened round the waist and softened to puffiness of cheek and jaw, but the resulting air of rustic unintelligence was misleading. His superiors at one time had posted him away from Pixhill, in accordance with their belief that a policeman became too cozy and forgiving if left too long in one small neighborhood, and had sent cruising cars in from outside to do his rounds. Sandy's absence, however, the petty crime rate of Pixhill had soared while the detection rate plummeted, and after a while P.C. Sandy Smith had been quietly reinstated, to the overall dismay of the mildly wicked.

Smart young Dr. Bruce Farway, a recent Pixhill arrival who had already alienated half his patients by patronizing them insufferably, climbed down with agility from the cab and told me brusquely not to disturb the body before he could arrange for its removal.

"I can't imagine why I should want to," I said mildly.

He eyed me with disfavor. We'd disliked each other on sight a few months ago and he'd never forgiven me for disagreeing with his diagnosis on one of my drivers and paying for a private second opinion that had proved him wrong. No humility and precious little humanity could be diagnosed in Bruce Farway, though he could be nice to sick children, I'd heard.

Leaving him issuing brisk instructions over his car phone, Sandy and I went across to the house where he took brief statements from Dave and Brett. There was bound to be an inquest, he informed them, but it shouldn't take up much of their time.

Too much, I thought crossly, and they both unerringly read my expression. I told them I'd see them in the morning. They weren't comforted, it seemed.

Not much later Sandy freed them to walk away down to the pub where they would spread their news item through the local lightning grapevine. Sandy shut his notebook, gave me an insouciant grin and drove back to his house to phone the hitchhiker's hometown police force. Only Bruce Farway remained, impatiently waiting out by his car for the arrival of Kevin Keith Ogden's onward transport. I went out to him, for an update.

"They wanted to leave him here until tomorrow," he exclaimed, affronted. "I insisted they come tonight."

Grateful for that, I asked if he'd like to wait in the house and, with a hesitant shrug, he accepted. In the big sitting room, I offered him alcohol, Coke or coffee. Nothing, he said.

He looked with a down-turned mouth at the row of framed racing photographs along one wall, mostly pictures of myself in my jockey days sitting on the backs of high-leaping horses. In a village dedicated to thoroughbred racing, where the four-footed aristocrats brought more jobs and more prosperity to the area than all other industries put together, Bruce Farway had been overheard to say that lives lived in racing were wasted. Only selfless service given to others, as for example by doctors and nurses, was praiseworthy. Jockeys' injuries, he considered, were self-inflicted. No one understood why such a man had come to Pixhill.

I thought I might as well ask him, so I did. He gave me a surprised glance and went over to the window to cast his gaze briefly at the cooling immobile horse van.

"I believe in general practice," he said. "I believe in a continuing service to a rural community. I believe in treating the family, not the illness."

All marvelous, I thought, if he hadn't looked at me superciliously down his nose in a conscious glow of superiority while he spoke.

"What did our body die of?" I asked.

He compressed his already thin lips. "Obesity and smoking, I daresay."

In another century, I thought, he would have condemned witches to the stake. For the good of the

souls, of course.

~~Thin, fervent, bigoted, he fidgeted impatiently by the window and finally asked a question of his own.~~

“Why were you a jockey?”

The answer was too complicated. I said merely, “I was born to it. My father trained steeplechasers

“Does that make it inevitable?”

“No,” I said. “My brother captains cruise ships and my sister’s a physicist.”

He removed his attention wholly from the horse van with his mouth opening in astonishment. “Are you serious?”

“Certainly. Why not?”

He couldn’t think why not and was saved from fishing for a reply by the telephone’s ringing. I answered and found Sandy on the line, slightly out of breath and fluttering notebook pages.

“The Nottingham police,” he said, “will want to know where South Mimms is, exactly.”

“They’ve surely got a map!”

“Mm. Well, tell *me*, like, then I can make a better report.”

“You’ve surely got a map as well.”

“Oh, come on, Freddie.”

I relented, smiling. “The South Mimms service station is north of London on M25. And I’ll tell you something, Sandy, our friend Kevin Keith was not taking a direct route from Nottingham to Bristol. In fact, from Nottingham to Bristol you’d never go near South Mimms in a million years, so just tell the Nottingham police to go easy on the relatives because whatever our corpse was doing in South Mimms he wasn’t going straight from home to any daughter’s wedding.”

He digested the information. “Ta,” he said, “I’ll tell them.”

I put down the receiver and Bruce Farway asked, “What daughter’s wedding?”

I explained how Dave had been persuaded to give the lift, even against express orders.

Frowning, Farway said, “You don’t believe in the daughter, then?”

“Not all that much.”

“I don’t suppose it matters why he was in . . . where did you say . . . South Mimms?”

“Not to him, anymore,” I agreed, “but it’ll waste my drivers’ time. The inquest, and so on.”

“He couldn’t help dying!” the doctor protested.

“He’s a damn nuisance.”

With plain disapproval Farway went back to watching the horse van. A boringly long time elapsed during which I drank scotch and water (“Not for me,” Farway said), thought hungrily of my recongealing stew and answered two more phone calls.

The news had traveled at warp speed. The first voice demanding facts was that of the owner whose two-year-olds had gone to Newmarket, the second that of the trainer who was having to see them leave his stable.

Jericho Rich, the owner, never wasted time on polite opening chat, saying without ceremony “What’s this about a dead man in your van?” His voice, like his personality, was loud, aggressive and impatient. His name, on official documents, was Jerry Colin Rich. Jericho suited him better, if only for the noise.

While I told him what had happened, I pictured him as I’d very often seen him in parade rings at the races, a stocky gray-haired bully given to poking holes in the air with a jabbing finger.

“You listen to me, fella,” he said now, shouting down the line. “You pick up no hitchhikers while you work for me, understand? That’s what you’ve always said and that’s how I like it. When you talk

my horses you don't take anyone else's. That's the way we've always done business and I don't want any changes."

I reflected that once his whole string had gone to Newmarket I wouldn't be doing much more business for him anyway, but alienating the cantankerous old beggar would all the same be unwise. Give him a year or two and I might be ferrying him back.

"What's more," he was saying, "when you take my fillies across tomorrow, take them in a different van. Horses can smell death, you know, and I don't want those fillies upset."

I assured him they would go in a different van, even though, as I didn't bother to tell him, the cab would be reeking of disinfectant, not death, come pickup time in the morning.

"And don't send the same driver."

It wasn't worth arguing about. "All right," I said.

He began to run out of steam, which is to say, to repeat himself. I offered him always a soft cushion of agreement as being the fastest way to blunt the sword of his anger, especially when his grievance reached the third or fourth recycle. We went through the same conversation twice more. I promised yet again to send a different van and a different driver and finally, though muttering away and still not satisfied, he clicked himself off.

He'd owned five or six hurdlers in the past, which I'd ridden for him regularly. I'd had a lot of practice in absorbing the Jericho tantrums with my own temper intact.

Thanks to the Rich decibels, Farway appeared to have heard the whole repetitious exchange because he gave me his unexpected opinion.

"It wasn't your fault your drivers picked the man up."

"Maybe." I paused. "The captain goes down with the ship, my brother says."

He stared. "Do you mean you think it *was* your fault?"

I thought chiefly that it wasn't a good time to discuss ultimate responsibility in the abstract. I wished more simply that Kevin Keith had given up the ghost in someone else's cab. A pity, I thought, that the oil tanker had been going to Southampton.

Michael Watermead, in striking contrast to Jericho Rich, spoke in soft hesitant super-educated tones over the telephone and started by asking if the nine two-year-olds that had left his care the morning had arrived safely in Newmarket.

I was certain he already knew, but I assured him that they had.

Resentment at having had to part with them would have been natural, but Michael seemed to have his feelings well in control. Tall, fair and fiftyish, his habitual air of dither fronted an effective, above-middle-rank operation of sixty good stables in three attractive quadrangles, usually healthily full. His horses liked him, always a good character reference. They nuzzled his neck if he were near enough, they came to look out of their stalls at the sound of his step in the yard. I'd never ridden for him, as he trained only Flat horses, but since I'd acquired the transport business and had grown to know him, we'd become, on a business level at least, good friends.

The third son of a baron, he trained for a distantly royal personage thirty-something from the throne, a snob-value combination that had brought him Rich's custom in the first place. The deterioration in the first flush of gratification on both sides—there were no longer many owner-strings as big as Rich's nor as talented in depth—had been complete, both men throwing me asides along the way from euphoria to disillusion.

"The man's impossible!" Michael had exclaimed over some particular transport demand from Jericho. "Totally unreasonable."

"My horse lost the race on the journey to Scotland," Rich complained. "Why does he send them

far? It costs too much and they arrive tired.” He overlooked entirely Michael’s successful forays France with the same animals.

I remained strictly neutral and nonpartisan through all owner-trainer differences out of a strong sense of self-preservation, starting right back in my early racing days over fences when an incautious criticism had got back to its target and very nearly cost me my job. I’d become adept at sympathetic noises with the minimum of actual comment, even to friends.

Getting my own way softly had eased my whole path through life and in business had served me well. I was better at placating than confronting, at persuading than commanding; and I wasn’t defeated much.

Michael said slowly, “Is it true your van brought back . . . a *dead* man?”

“ ’Fraid so.”

“Who?”

I explained yet again about Kevin Keith Ogden, and I told him that Jericho Rich had already demanded a different van and driver for his fillies on the morrow.

“That man,” Michael said bitterly. “Despite the hole it makes in my yard, I’ll be glad to see the last of him. Vile-tempered oaf.”

“Will you fill up the hole?”

“Oh sure, in time. I’ve got ten boarded out that I can bring in now, for a start. Losing Jericho’s a blight, but not a disaster.”

“Great.”

“Lunch on Sunday? Maudie will call you.”

“Fine.”

“ ’Bye.”

A man could drown in Maudie Watermead’s blue eyes. Her Sunday lunches were legendary.

Farway, still by the window, was growing impatient, repeatedly consulting his watch as if the constant checking would make time go faster.

“Scotch?” I offered again.

“I don’t drink.”

Dislike or addiction? I wondered. Probably plain disapproval, on the whole.

I looked round my spacious familiar room, wondering how he would see it. Gray carpet with scattering of rugs. Cream walls, racing photographs, my mother’s china parrot collection in an alcove. Edwardian mahogany desk, green leather swiveling chair. Sofas with ancient fading chintz, tray of drinks on a side table, padded cream curtains, table lamps everywhere, bookshelves and a potted plant with all leaves, no flowers. A lived-in room, not excessively tidy, not a decorator’s triumph.

Home.

An unenthusiastic black van at long last crawled onto the tarmac and parked between the horse van and my door. It had long black windowless sides and black windowless rear doors, and I realized it was, in fact, a hearse. Sandy in his official car returned in its wake.

Farway, exclaiming, hurried out to meet him and the three men who emerged phlegmatically from the hearse to set about their task. I followed in Farway’s wake and watched the unloading of a narrow stretcher which seemed to be covered on the upper surface with a lot of dark canvas and several sinewy straps.

The man who seemed to be in charge of things said he was from the coroner’s office and produced paperwork for Farway to deal with.

The other two climbed with the stretcher up into the cab, followed by Sandy, who soon descended

again bringing with him a grip and a briefcase. Both bags were of leather, battered but originally good. "Belongings of the deceased?" Sandy asked.

Farway thought so.

"They are not my men's," I agreed.

Sandy put the bags on the tarmac and then went aloft again to return with a plastic bag containing the booty collected from the body—a watch, a cigarette lighter, a packet of cigarettes, a pen, a comb, a nail file, a handkerchief, glasses and the onyx and gold ring. He itemized them aloud to the coroner's officer who wrote at his dictation, then attached a label saying, "Property of K. K. Ogden," and stowed them in his car.

While Sandy and the coroner's officer climbed back into the cab, I squatted down beside the bag and unzipped the top of the grip.

"I don't think you should do that," Farway protested.

The grip, half full, held overnight necessities: shaving kit, pajamas, clean shirt, nothing very new, nothing out of the ordinary. I closed the zip and snapped open the briefcase, which wasn't locked.

"Hey," Farway said.

"If a man dies on my property," I said reasonably, "I'd like to get to know him."

"But you've no right . . ."

I looked anyway through the meager contents, which seemed to me wholly uninformative. A calculator. Writing pad, nothing written on it. A bunch of postcards in an elastic band, all the same, a view of a country hotel, advertisement handouts. A bottle of aspirins, a packet of indigestion tablets, two small airline-size bottles of vodka, both full.

"Look here," Farway said uncomfortably.

I shut the briefcase and stood up. "All yours," I said.

The undertakers took their time, and when they finally brought Kevin Keith out it was through the front passenger door, not via the grooms' door farther back through which we had all so far climbed to reach the rear seat. It appeared that, death having done its stiffening work, the only way out for the body was to load it forward onto the stretcher laid along the front seats: so it came out that way, feet forward, wrapped amorphyically in canvas, retaining straps in place.

As bodies went, it appeared that this one was heavy and awkward in shape, the bent right arm being impossible to straighten. Certainly respect for the dead as such was markedly absent, the problem seeming to present itself rather as of the order of extricating an obstinate grand piano from a small angular attic. I supposed body-collectors got used to it. One of the men, besides remarks like "Heavy now" and "That arm's jamming on the door," was assessing the chances of his football team on the following Saturday. They lifted the stretcher unceremoniously through the open back doors of the black hearse as if engaged in trash disposal and I saw them transfer the canvas-wrapped Ogden off the stretcher into an opened metal coffin.

Farway too, more used to corpses than I, was taking the removal of this one prosaically. He told me he wouldn't be doing the postmortem himself but it looked to him like straightforward cardiac arrest. Plain unlucky. The inquest should be a brief formality. He would be certifying death. I might not be called.

He said good night neutrally, folded himself into his car and followed the hearse as it rolled away off my tarmac. Sandy, taking with him the grip and the briefcase, drove off peacefully in the rear.

All suddenly seemed very quiet. I looked up at the stars, eternal in the face of mortality. I wondered if Kevin Keith Ogden had known he was dying, lying along a leatherette bench seat behind the thundering engine.

I thought quite likely not. There had been times when I'd been knocked out in racing falls, when the last thing I'd seen had been a whirling blurring vision of grass and sky. After the impact I wouldn't have known if I'd died; and I'd thought sometimes, gratefully waking up, that an unaware death would be a blessing.

I climbed yet again into the cab. The rolled-up horse rug still bore the imprint of Ogden's head and there was an unappealing stain halfway along the seat, threatening action on the morrow. Damn the man, I thought.

Brett had left the key in the ignition, another taboo in my book. I stepped over into the front compartment and removed the key ring, checking that at least the brakes were on and all but the cab lights were off. Finally, switching off those interior lights also I jumped down from the passenger door, locking it behind me.

The front passenger door and the driver's door both locked with the same key that started the engine, a large complicated key supplied by the manufacturers. I locked the driver's door—Brett hadn't—and with the second more ordinary key on the ring locked the grooms' door. A third key locked the small compartment under the dashboard that contained the mobile telephone power switch and various documents, which I'd checked and found secure.

I walked again right round the van, making a last inspection. Everything seemed as it should be. The two ramps for horses were up and bolted. The five doors for humans, two for the front seats, three for the attendants, were similarly immovable. The flap over the intake to the diesel tanks, fastened by the fourth and last key on the key ring, was proof against siphoning thieves.

Feeling all the same uneasy I went back to the house and locked the back door behind me, which I didn't do always. I stretched out a hand to switch off the outside lights and then changed my mind and left them on.

The fleet usually spent the night inside a large brick-walled converted farmyard, the wide stone entrance gates padlocked. The nine-van standing alone on my tarmac seemed unaccustomed and vulnerable, even though rigs of that size were seldom stolen. There were too many identity numbers engraved on too many parts, quite apart from the name CROFT RACEWAYS painted in about six places, the whole thing hardly inconspicuous for anyone trying to avoid notice.

I reheated the old stew, sloshed some red wine into it for excitement and ate the result while leaving the sitting room curtains open so that I could see the horse van all the time.

Absolutely nothing happened. My unease slowly abated, and I put down its existence simply to the fact of Ogden's demise.

I made and received a few more telephone calls, checking particularly with my senior driver that all the other vans were back at the farm. The rest of the day's journeys, it seemed, had for once gone uneventfully to plan: no mix-ups over time, no engine troubles, no equipment or attendants left behind. All the drivers had filled in their log sheets and popped them as requested into the letter box of the office. The padlocks were on the gates. No keys were anywhere accessible. Despite the death of a passenger, the overall message I received was that the boss could relax and go to bed.

The boss, in the end, did just that, though from my bedroom, which was over the sitting room, I still had a clear view of the horse van out under the lights. I left the curtains wide open and although I never slept with them fully closed I nevertheless woke several times because of the continuing unusual brightness outside. At about three in the morning I became suddenly fully alert, disturbed by more than plain light. Disturbed by a moving flash across the ceiling, indistinct, like sheet lightning seen through my eyelids.

The weather had been mild recently, though it was still early March, but it seemed to me that the

temperature had dropped ten degrees in the past few hours. In bare feet and sleeping shorts I stood up and went to the window, shivering.

At first sight nothing seemed changed. Shrugging, I half turned to return to the warm bed and then stopped stock-still in serious alarm.

The grooms' door, through which we'd all climbed, was slightly open, not securely locked, as I had left it.

Open.

I stared hard, but there was no mistake. There was a black line of shadow where the door no longer fitted flat and snugly into position. The flash of light I'd seen must have been a reflection from the window as the door had been opened.

Without considering clothes I sprinted headlong downstairs and along to the back door, unlocking it, throwing my feet into gumboots and snatching an old raincoat from a peg. Trying to fit my arms into its sleeves I ran across the tarmac and pulled the door wide.

There was a figure inside there, in black, as surprised to see me as I to see him. At first he had his back towards me, then when he whirled round with a fierce exclamation, more an explosion of escaping breath than an actual word, I saw that his head was covered with a black hood, his eyes alive through holes, the cliché disguise of robbers and terrorists.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled at him, trying myself crazily to climb up after him. Stupid thing to do in gumboots: the stepholes weren't designed for their clumsy width.

Black-mask snatched up the rolled horse rug, gave it a fast shake to open its folds and threw it over me while I was still halfway up. I slid off the toeholds, stepped back unbalanced into a void and landed in a heap on the tarmac. The black figure, dimly seen, jumped over onto the driver's seat, unlatched the door on that side, leaped athletically to the ground and ran for the shadows, lithe and scudding.

Perhaps in sneakers I could have made it a contest. In gumboots and an unbelted raincoat still only half on, it was hopeless. I stood up disgustedly, disentangling myself from the horse rug, fastening the raincoat belatedly and listening in vain for any sound of departing footsteps.

None of it made sense, nor did standing around shivering in inappropriate clothes in the middle of the night. There was nothing worth stealing in the van save perhaps the radio or phone, but the black figure hadn't seemed to be attacking either. He hadn't in fact seemed to be doing anything in particular, when I looked back to my first sight of him, but simply standing in the cab with his back to me. There had been dust and streaks of dirt on his clothes. As far as I could remember he hadn't been carrying anything. No tools, not even a flashlight. If he'd opened the grooms' door with either a key or a lockpick, he must have put it in a pocket.

The keyhole of the grooms' door was in the handle itself. There was no key in the lock, nor, when I looked, any obvious scratches or signs of force or tampering.

Cold and cross I threw the horse rug back into the cab, shut the grooms' door and the driver's-side door and went back to the house to fetch the keys again to relock them.

Out of respect for my carpets I slid my feet out of the gumboots and padded through the hall and across the sitting room to the desk, not bothering to switch on any lights in there owing to being able to see perfectly well because of the glow outside. I retrieved the keys from the desk drawer, retraced my steps, resumed the gumboots and clomped back towards the wheels.

Coming close, I saw without belief that there was a black moving shadow again inside the cab. Monstrous, I thought, and what in God's name could he want? He was standing behind the driver's seat, feeling forward into the storage shelf that spread across the whole width of the cab high and

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