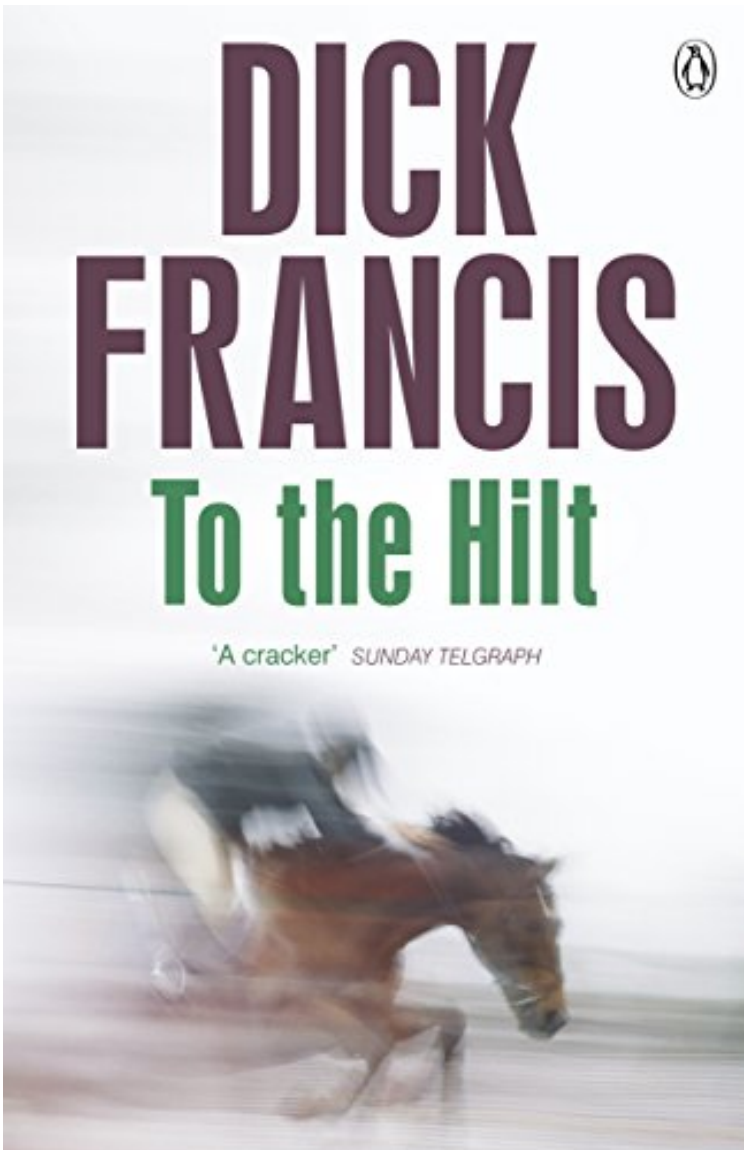


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## To The Hilt



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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA classic mystery from Dick Francis, the champion of English storytellers. Just after learning that his stepfather is gravely ill, artist Al Kinloch, returning to his remote home in the Scottish Highlands, is attacked by four men. They ask one question - 'where is it?' - then leave him for dead. Baffled and hurt, Al visits his stepfather and learns millions of pounds are missing and a valuable racehorse is under threat. Roughed up already, Al decides he has nothing to lose getting to the bottom of this. Unfortunately, the thugs who beat him up and the person behind them will make sure that Al doesn't survive their next encounter... Praise for Dick Francis: 'As a jockey, Dick Francis was unbeatable when he got into his stride. The same is true of his crime writing' Daily Mirror 'Dick Francis's fiction has a secret ingredient - his

inimitable knack of grabbing the reader's attention on page one and holding it tight until the very end' Sunday Telegraph 'The narrative is brisk and gripping and the background researched with care . . . the entire story is a pleasure to relish' Scotsman 'Francis writing at his best' Evening Standard 'A regular winner . . . as smooth, swift and lean as ever' Sunday Express 'A super chiller and killer' New York Times Book Dick Francis was one of the most successful post-war National Hunt jockeys. The winner of over 350 races, he was champion jockey in 1953/1954 and rode for HM Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, most famously on Devon Loch in the 1956 Grand National. On his retirement from the saddle, he published his autobiography, *The Sport of Queens*, before going on to write forty-three bestselling novels, a volume of short stories (*Field of 13*), and the biography of Lester Piggott. During his lifetime Dick Francis received many awards, amongst them the prestigious Crime Writers' Association's Cartier Diamond Dagger for his outstanding contribution to the genre, and three 'best novel' Edgar Allan Poe awards from The Mystery Writers of America. In 1996 he was named by them as Grand Master for a lifetime's achievement. In 1998 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List of 2000. Dick Francis died in February 2010, at the age of eighty-nine, but he remains one of the greatest thriller writers of all time.

**Extrait** A New York Times Bestseller **EXCITING**. The New York Times Book **FRANCIS HAS ADDED ANOTHER WINNER TO HIS STABLE**. The Indianapolis Star **DELIGHTFUL**... The Mystery Writers of America honored Francis as a Grand Master; this novel again shows why. Publishers Weekly **TO THE HILT** hailed as the master of crime fiction and equine thrills (Newsday), New York Times bestselling author Dick Francis delivers one of his most engrossing novels the story of a self-imposed outcast who must refresh his detection skills in order to save himself and his family... The black sheep of a prominent family, Alexander Kinloch is content to paint pictures and play the bagpipes in his ramshackle Scottish home. But the artist's peaceful life is suddenly interrupted first by a savage, mysterious beating, and then by a sudden call from his near-bankrupt family, asking for his help. Now Alexander is trying to keep several family treasures safe from harm including a steeplechaser called Golden Malt. But if he wants to prevent a cold-blooded killer from sending him straight to his grave, he's going to have to get the hang of the art of detection... **NOBODY SETS UP A MYSTERY BETTER THAN DICK FRANCIS**. San Francisco Chronicle **FEW THINGS ARE MORE CONVINCING THAN DICK FRANCIS AT A FULL GALLOP**. Chicago Tribune **MORE PRAISE FOR To the Hilt... STEPS OUT SMARTLY ON THE VERY FIRST PAGE**... To the Hilt delivers the pleasures people pay for. The New York Times Book **DICK FRANCIS'S BOOKS KEEP GETTING BETTER**... Kinloch is altruistic and warmly likable, like all of Francis's heroes, but he becomes a real person on the pages, not a generic good guy. The Associated Press **TYPICALLY ENJOYABLE**. Francis keeps the action bouncing from heather to hearth, painting a delightful portrait of his own luscious British countryside and a doddering aristocracy. Chicago Tribune **LIKABLE CHARACTERS ABOUND**. Publishers Weekly **REMARKABLY, AFTER MORE THAN THIRTY-FIVE NOVELS, DICK FRANCIS IS STILL GETTING BETTER**. Booklist **BY TURNS UNEXPECTEDLY HUMOROUS AND MOVING**. Kirkus **THE PLOT SKIPS RIGHT ALONG**... just what Dick Francis fans expect. San Antonio Express-News **BRAVE AND RESOURCEFUL**, level-headed and modest, Alexander makes an engaging hero... a host of winning characters... Like his hero, Francis is steadfast and dependable, someone you can always turn to when in need of a good rousing mystery. San Francisco Chronicle... **AND RAVE REVIEWS FOR DICK FRANCIS** Its either hard or impossible to read Mr. Francis without growing pleased with yourself: not only the thrill of vicarious competence imparted by the company of his heroes, but also the lore you collect as you go, feel like a field trip with the perfect guide. The New York Times Book One of the most reliable mystery writers working today... Francis's secret weapons are his protagonists. They are the kind of people you want for friends. Detroit News and Free Press After writing dozens of thrillers, Dick Francis always retains a first-novel freshness. The Indianapolis Star He writes about the basic building blocks of life obligation, honor, love, courage, and pleasure. Those discussions come disguised in adventure novels so gripping that they cry out to be read in one gulp then quickly reread to savor the details skipped in the first gallop through the pages. Houston Chronicle Dick Francis stands head and shoulders above the rest. Ottawa Citizen Francis just gets better and better... It can't be as easy as he makes it look, or all mystery writers would be as addictive. The Charlotte Observer [Francis] has the uncanny ability to turn out simply plotted yet charmingly addictive mysteries. The Wall Street Journal A rare and magical talent... who never writes the same story twice... Few writers have maintained such a high standard of excellence for as long as Dick Francis. The San Diego Union-Tribune **FICTION BY DICK FRANCIS FELIX FRANCIS** Dead Heat **FICTION BY DICK FRANCIS ANTHOLOGY** Win, Place, or Show **NONFICTION A**

Jockeys Life The Sport of Queens TO THE HILT DICK FRANCIS Table of Contents BEDES DEATH SONG Fore theaem neidfaerae naenig uuirthit thoncsnotturra, than him tharf sie to ymbhycggannae aer his hiniongae hwaet his gastae godaes aeththae yflaes aefter deothdaege doemid ueorthae Before that sudden journey no one is wiser in thought than he needs to be, in considering, before his departure, what will be adjudged to his soul, of good or evil, after his death-day ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

chapter 1 I dont think my stepfather much minded dying. That he almost took me with him wasnt really his fault. My mother sent me a postcard Perhaps Id better tell you your stepfather has had a heart attack which I read in disbelief outside the remote Scottish post office where I went every two weeks to collect my letters. The postcard had lain there unread for approximately ten days. Somewhat distractedly, though my stepfather and I were hardly intimate, I went back into the cluttered little shop and begged use of the telephone. Youll be reimbursing us as usual, Mr. Kinloch? Of course. Our old Donald Cameron, nodding, lifted a flap of counter and allowed me through to his own jealously protected and wall-mounted instrument. As the official public telephone, thoughtfully provided outside for the few surrounding inhabitants, survived vandalism for roughly thirty minutes each time it was mended, old Donald was accustomed to extending to customers the courtesy of his own phone. Since he charged an extra fee for its use, I privately reckoned it was Donald himself who regularly disabled the less profitable technology on his doorstep. Mother? I said, eventually connected to her in London. This is Al. Alexander, she corrected automatically, not liking my abbreviation, are you in Scotland? I am, yes. What about the old man? Your stepfather, she said reprovingly, is resting. Er...where is he resting? In hospital? In peace? In bed, she said. So he is alive. Of course hes alive. But your postcard...Theres nothing to panic about, she said calmly. He had some chest pains and spent a week in the Clinic for stabilization and tests, and now he is home with me, resting. Do you want me to come? I asked blankly. Do you need any help? He has a nurse, she said. My mothers unvarying composure, I sometimes thought, stemmed from a genuine deficiency of emotion. I had never seen her cry, had never heard tears in her voice, not even after her first husband, my father, had been killed in a shooting accident out on the moors. To me, at seventeen, his sudden loss had been devastating. My mother, dry-eyed, had told me to pull myself together. A year later, still cool at the ceremony, she had married Ivan George Westering, baronet, brewer, pillar of the British Jockey Club, my stepfather. He was not domineering; had been generous, even; but he disapproved of the way I lived. We were polite to each other. How ill is he? I asked. You can come if you like, my mother said. Its entirely up to you. Despite the casual voice, the carefully maintained distance, it sounded closer to a plea than I was used to. Ill arrive tomorrow, I said, making up my mind. If youre sure? She betrayed no relief however; no welcome. Im sure. Very well. I paid the phone calls ransom into Donalds stringy outstretched palm and returned to my laden, ancient and battered four-wheel drive outside. It had good gears, good brakes, good tires and little remaining color on its thin metal flanks. It contained, at that moment, food for two weeks, a big cylinder of butane gas, supplies of batteries, bottled water and insect killer and three brown cardboard boxes, parcel delivery, replenishing the tools of my trade. I painted pictures. I lived in a broken-down long-deserted shepherds hut, known as a bothy, out on a windy Scottish mountainside, without electricity. My hair grew to my shoulders. I played the bagpipes. My many and fairly noble relations thought me weird. Some are born weird, some achieve it, others have weirdness thrust upon them. I preferred solitude and paint to outthinking salmon and shooting for food; I had only half inherited the country skills and courtesies of my ancestors. I was the twenty-nine-year-old son of the (dead) fourth son of an earl and I had no unearned wealth. I had three uncles, four aunts and twenty-one cousins. Someone in such a large (and conventional) family had to be weird, and it seemed Id been elected. I didnt mind. Mad Alexander. Messes about with paints. And not even oils, my dear, but those frightfully common acrylics. If Michelangelo could have laid his hands on acrylics, I said, he would have joyfully used them. Acrylics were endlessly versatile and never faded. They outlived oils by furlongs. Dont be ridiculous, Alexander. I paid my uncle (the present earl, known as Himself) a painting a year as rent for the ruin I inhabited on his estate. The painting was done to his choice. He mostly asked for portraits of his horses or dogs. I quite liked to please him. Outside the post office, on that dry cloudy cold morning in September, I sat in my old jeep-type jalopy and did my paperwork, opening my letters, answering them and sending off the replies. There were two checks that day for work delivered, which I dispatched to the bank, and an order from America for six more paintings to be done at oncelike yesterday. Ridiculous, mad Alexander, in his weird way, actually, quietly prospered; and I kept that fact to myself. The paperwork done, I drove my wheels northwards, at first along a recognizable road, then a roughly graveled stretch, then up a long rutted and indistinct track which led nowhere but to my unnamed home in the Monadhliath Mountains. Between

Loch Ness and Aviemore, I usually explained, and no, I hadn't seen the monster. Whoever in the mists of time had first built my bothy had chosen its position well: it backed straight into an elbowed granite outcrop that sheltered it from the north and east, so that winter blizzards mostly leapfrogged over the top. In front lay a sort of small stony plateau that on the far side dropped away steeply, giving me long views of valleys and rocky hills and of a main road far below. The only problem with the road that served to remind me that an outside world existed was that my dwelling was visible from it, so that far too often I found strangers on my doorstep, hikers equipped with shorts, maps, half-ton walking boots and endless energy. There was nowhere left in the world unpenetrated by inquisitive legs. On the day of my mother's postcard I returned to find four of the nosy species poking around without inhibitions. Male. Blue, scarlet, orange backpacks. Glasses. English regional voices. The days when I'd offered tea, comforts and conversation were long gone. Irritated by the invasion, I drove onto the plateau, stopped the engine, removed my keys from the ignition and walked towards my front (and only) door. The four men stopped peering into things and ranged themselves into a ragged line ahead of me, across my path. There's no one in, one of them called. It's all locked up. I replied without heat, What do you want? Him as lives here, one said loudly. Maybe that's you, said another. I felt the first tremble of something wrong. Their manner subtly wasn't the awkwardness of trespassers caught in the act. There was no shuffling from foot to foot. They met my eyes not with placating apology, but with fierce concentration. I stopped walking and said again, What do you want? The first speaker said, Where is it? I felt a strong primitive impulse to turn tail and run, and wished afterwards that I'd listened to the wisdom of prehistory, but somehow one doesn't easily equate knobby-kneed hikers with positive danger. I said, I don't know what you mean, and I made the mistake of turning my back on them and retracing my steps towards the jeep. I heard their heavy feet scrunching on the stony ground behind me but still didn't truly believe in disaster until they clutched and spun me round and purposefully and knowledgeably punched. I had a sort of splintered composite view of intent malevolent faces, of gray daylight reflecting on their incongruous glasses, of their hard bombarding fists and of a wildly slanting horizon of unhelpful mountains as I doubled forwards over a debilitating pain in the abdomen. Neck chop. Jabs to the ribs. Classic pattern. Over and over. Thud, merciless thud. I was wearing jeans, shirt and sweater: they might as well have been gossamer for all the protection they offered. As for meaningful retaliation, read nonexistent. I couldn't find breath. I swung at them in anger but fought an octopus. Bad news. One of the men kept saying insistently, Where is it? Where is it? but his colleagues made it impossible for me to answer. I wondered vaguely if by it they meant money, of which I carried little. They were welcome to it, I thought groggily, if they would stop their attentions. I unintentionally dropped my small bunch of keys and lost it to a hand that grabbed it up with triumph. Somehow or other I ended with my back against the jeep: no further retreat. One of them snatched handfuls of my hair and banged my head against metal. I clawed blood down his cheek and got a head butt in return that went straight from my skull to my knees, buckling them like butter. Events became unclear. I slid to the ground, facedown. I had a close view of gray granite stones and short dry struggling blades of grass, more brown than green. Where is it? I didn't answer. Didn't move. Shut my eyes. Drifted. He's out, a voice said. Fat lot of help you are. I felt hands roughly searching my pockets. Resistance, as an option, promised only more bruises. I lay still, not wholly conscious, inertia pervading, angry but willy-nilly passive, nothing coordinating, no strength, no will. After a time of floating I felt their hands on me again. Is he alive? No thanks to you, but yes, he is. He's breathing. Just leave him. Chuck him over there. Over there turned out to be the edge of the plateau, but I didn't realize it until I'd been dragged across the stones and lifted and flung over. I went rolling fast and inexorably down the steep mountain slope, almost bouncing from rock to rock, still incapable of helping myself, unable to stop, dimly aware of my body flooding with whirling comprehensive pain. I slammed down onto a larger rock and did stop there, half on my side, half on my stomach. I felt no gratitude. I felt pulverized. Winded. Dazed. Thought vanished. Some sort of consciousness soon came crazily back, but orderly memory took much longer. Those bastard hikers, I thought eventually. I remembered their faces. I could draw them. They were demons in a dream. The accurate knowledge of who I was and where I was arrived quietly. I tried to move. A mistake. Time would take care of it, perhaps. Give it time. Those bastards had been real, I realized, demons or not. Their fists had been real. Where is it? had been real. In spite of everything, I ruefully smiled. I thought it possible that they hadn't known what they were actually looking for. It could have been whatever their victim valued most.

There was no guarantee in any case that delivering up it would save one from being thrown down a mountain. It occurred to me to wonder what time it was. I looked at my left wrist, but my watch had gone. It had been about eleven o'clock when I'd got back from the post office... Hell's teeth, I thought abruptly. Mother.

Ivan. Heart attack. I was supposed to be going to London. Or the moon. The worst thing I might feel, I considered, was nothing. Not the case. With fierce concentration, I could move all my fingers and all my toes. Anything more hurt too much for enthusiasm. Outraged muscles went into breath-stopping spasms to protect themselves. Wait. Lie still. I felt cold. Bloody stupid, being mugged on ones own doorstep. Embarrassing. A helpless little old lady I was not, but a pushover literally just the same. I found the casual callousness of the walkers extraordinary. They had appeared not to care whether I lived or died, and had in fact left it to chance. I supposed they could truthfully say, He was alive when we saw him last. They could dodge the word murder. The ebb tide in my body finally turned. Movement could at last be achieved without spasm. All I had to do from then on was scrape myself off the mountain and go catch a train. Even the thought was exhausting. I was sure, after a while, that by immense good fortune I had broken no bones in my helter-skeltering fall. Id been a rag doll. Babies got lucky through not trying to help themselves. Same principle, I supposed. With an unstoical groan, I raised from prone to kneeling on my rock and took a look up at where Id come down. The edge of the plateau was hidden behind outcrops but was alarmingly far above. Looking down was almost worse, though from five or more years of living there, I understood at once where I was in relation to the bothy above. If I could traverse to the right without losing my footing and plunging down another slope, I would come eventually to the uneven but definable path that meandered from the road below up to my home: the challenging half-hidden ascent that brought walkers to my door. The four hiker-demons had probably come up that way. I certainly didnt want to meet them if they were on their way down. Hours had probably passed, though. I knew I had lain helpless for a long time. They must surely by then have left. Realistically, I was going nowhere except uncontrollably downwards again unless I could reach that path. Hikers or not, it was the only possible route. Trying to go in the opposite direction, to reach the road-track up from the post office, was pointless, as it involved an overhang and a perpendicular rock climb, neither of which could be managed without gear. I was well used to moving alone in the mountains, and I was always careful. I would never normally have attempted what now confronted me without an axe and crampons, let alone with every move a wince, but fear of a less lucky fall, of a broken leg or worse, kept me stuck like glue, with fingernails and tiny cautious shifts of weight, to every protruding scrap of solid rock. Loose stones rattled and bounced away. Scrubby earth gave too little purchase. Rock was all. I made the journey sitting down, looking out over the perilous drops to the valley, digging in with my heels; careful, careful...careful. The path, when at last I reached it, was by comparison a broad highway. I sat on one of its rocky steps and felt as weak as thankful: sat with my forearms on my knees, head hanging, trying to be cool about a degree of strain and discomfort far beyond the easily bearable. Those bastards, I thought. The helpless rage of all victims shook in my gut. My physical state was shaming and infuriating. Somehow or other I should surely have put up a better fight. From where I sat I could see most of the long path down to the road. No scarlet, orange or blue backpacks moved on it anywhere. Curse them, I thought; and damn them; and shit. There was silence behind and above me and I had no sense of anyone being there. The inescapability of having to go up for a look was only a shade worse than actually making the effort; but I couldnt stay where I was forever. With reluctant muscles and a fearful mind I got laboriously to my feet and began the climb. No evil faces grinned over the plateau above. My instinct that I was alone proved a true one, and I crawled the last bit on hands and knees and raised my head for a cautious look without anyone pouncing on me with a yell and kicking me back into space. The reason for the silence and the absence of attackers was immediately obvious: my jeep had gone. I stood erect on the plateau, figuratively groaning. Not only had I lost my transport, but the door of my home stood wide open with heaps of my belongings spilling out of ita chair, clothes, books, bedclothes. I walked wearily across the plateau and looked in at a sickening mess. Like all who live purposefully alone without provision for guests, my actual household goods were few. I tended to eat straight out of the frying pan, and to drink all liquids from a mug. Living without electricity, I owned none of the routinely stolen things like television, stereo or computer, nor did I have a mobile phone because of not being able to recharge the batteries. I did own a portable radio for checking that interstellar war hadnt broken out, and for playing taped music if I felt like it, but it was no grand affair with resale value. I had no antique silver. No Chippendale chairs. What I did have was paint. When Id moved into the tumbledown building five and a half years earlier Id made only the center and largest of its three divisions habitable. About three yards by five, my room had been given a businesslike new roof, a large double-glazed window, and a host of anti-damp preservation measures in its rebuilt walls and flooring. Light, heat and cooking were achieved with gas. Running water came from a small clear burn trickling through nearby rocks, and for bathroom I had a weathered privy a short walk away. Id meant at first to stay

on the mountain only during the long northern summer days, but in the end had left my departure later and later that first year until suddenly the everlasting December nights were shortening again, and I stayed snug through a freezing January and February and had never since considered leaving. Apart from a bed, a small table, a chest of drawers and one comfortable chair, the whole room was taken up by three easels, stacked canvases, a work stool, a wall of shelves and the equivalent of a kitchen table covered with pots and tubes of paints, and other essentials of my work like jugs of brushes and painting knives and jam jars full of clear or dirty water. Lack of space and my own instincts dictated order and overall tidiness, but chiefly the disciplined organization was the result of the very nature of the acrylics themselves: they dried so fast when exposed to air that lids had to be replaced, tubes had to be capped, only small quantities could be squeezed onto a palette at a time, brushes had to be constantly rinsed clean, knives wiped, hands washed. I kept large amounts of clean and dirty water in separate buckets under the table and used tissues by the jeepload for keeping mess at bay. Despite all care I had few clothes free of paint stains and had to sand down the wood-block floor now and then to get rid of multicolored sludge. The mess the four demons had made of all this was spectacularly awful. I had left work in progress on all three easels, as I often painted three pictures simultaneously. All three were now facedown on the floor, thoroughly saturated by the kicked-over buckets. My worktable lay on its side, pots, brushes and paints spilling wide. Burst paint tubes had been squashed underfoot. My bed had been tipped over, chest of drawers ransacked, box files pulled down from the shelves, ditto books, every container emptied, sugar and coffee granules scattered in a filthy jumbled chaos. Bastards. I stood without energy in the doorway looking at the depressing damage and working out what to do. The clothes I was wearing were torn and dirty and I'd been bleeding from many small scrapes and scratches. The bothy had been robbed, as far as I could see, of everything I could have raised money on. Also my wallet had gone and my watch had gone. My checkbook had been in the jeep. I had said I would go to London. Well...so I bloody well would. Mad Alexander. Might as well live up to the name. Apart from moving back into the room the chair and other things that were half out of the doorway, I left the scene mostly as it was. I sorted out only the cleanest jeans, jersey and shirt from the things emptied out of the chest of drawers, and I changed into them out by the burn, rinsing off the dried trickles of blood in the cold clean water. I ached deeply all over. Bloody bastards. I walked along to the privy, but there had been nothing to steal there, and they had left it alone. Of the two original but ruined flanks to my habitable room, one was now a carport with a gray camouflage-painted roof of corrugated iron; the other, still open to the skies, was where I kept the gas cylinders (in a sort of bunker) and also trash cans, now empty, as I had taken the filled black trash bags down to the post office for disposal that morning. Let into one tumbledown wall there were the remains of what might have been a fireplace with a small oven above. Perhaps the place had once been a kitchen or bakehouse; but I'd been happier with gas. Nothing in these two side sections had been vandalized. Lucky, I supposed. From the jumble on the main bothy floor I harvested a broken stick of charcoal and slid pieces of it into my shirt pocket, and I found a sketch-pad with some clean pages; and armed with such few essentials, I left home and set off down the wandering path to the road. The Monadhliath Mountains, rising sharply to between two and a half and three thousand feet, were rounded rather than acutely jagged, but were bare of trees and starkly, unforgivingly gray. The steep path led down to heather-clad valley slopes and finally to a few pine trees and patches of grass. The transition from my home to the road was always more than a matter of height above sea level: up in the wild taxing granite wilderness, life to me at any rate felt simple, complete and austere. I could work there with concentration. The clutching normal life of the valley diminished my awareness of something elemental that I took from the Paleolithic silence and converted into paint: yet the canvases I sold for my bread and butter were usually full of color and lightheartedness and were, in fact, mostly pictures of golf. By the time I reached the road there was a hint in the quality of light of dusk hovering in the wings getting ready to draw together the skirts of evening. It was the time of day when I stopped painting. As it was then September, watch or no watch, I could pretty accurately guess at six-thirty. Even though it had been bypassed by the busy A9 artery from Inverness to Perth, there was enough traffic on the road for me to hitch a ride without much difficulty, but it was a shade disconcerting to find that the driver who stopped to pick up a long-haired jeans-clad young male stranger was an expectant-eyed fortyish woman who put her hand caressingly on my knee half a mile into the ride. Lamely I said, I only want to go to Dalwhinnie railway station. Boring, aren't you, dear? Ungrateful, I agreed. And bruised, tired and laughing inside. She took the hand away with a shrug. Where do you want to go? she asked. I could take you to Perth. Just Dalwhinnie. Are you gay, dear? Er, I said. No. She gave me a sideways glance. Have you banged your face? Mm, I said. She gave me up as a prospect and dropped me half a mile from the trains. I walked,

reuefully thinking of the offer Id declined. Id been celibate too long. It had become a habit. Bloody feeble, all the same, to pass up a free lunch. My ribs hurt.Lights were going on everywhere when I reached the station and I was glad of the minimum shelter of its bare ticket office, as the air temperature was dropping alarmingly towards night. Shivering and blowing on my fingers, I made a telephone call, endlessly grateful that this instrument at least was in fine working order and not suffering from a clone of Donald Cameron.A collect call via the operator.A familiar Scots voice spluttered at the far end, talking first to the operator, then to me. Yes, of course Ill pay for the call....Is that really you, Al? What the heck are you doing at Dalwhinnie?Catching the night train to London. The Royal Highlander.It doesnt go for hours.No...What are you doing at this moment?Getting ready to leave the office and drive home to Flora and a good dinner.Jed...He heard more in my voice than just his name. He said sharply, Al? Whats the matter?I...um...Ive been burgled, I said. Id...um...Id be very glad of your help.After a short silence he said briefly, Im on my way, and the line went quiet.Jed Parlane was my uncles factor, the man who managed the Kinloch Scottish estates. Though hed been in the job less than four years we had become the sort of friends that took goodwill from each other for granted. He would come. He was the only one I would have asked.He was forty-six, a short stocky Lowland Scot from Jedburgh (hence his name), whose plain common sense had appealed to my uncle after the turmoil stirred up by an arrogant predecessor. Jed had calmed the resentful tenants and spent maintenance money oiling many metaphorical gates, so that the huge enterprise now ran at a peaceful profit. Jed, the wily Lowlander, understood and used the Highlanders stubborn pride; and Id learned more from him about getting my own way than perhaps he realized.He came striding into Dalwhinnie station after his twelve-or-more-mile drive to reach me, and stood foursquare in front of where I sat on a brown-painted bench against a margarine wall.Youve hurt your face, he announced. And youre cold.I stood up stiffly, the overall pain no doubt showing. I said, Does the heater work in your car?He nodded without speaking and I followed him outside to where hed parked. I sat in his front passenger seat while he restarted the engine and twiddled knobs to bring out hot air, and I found myself unexpectedly shuddering from the physical relief.OK, he said, switching on the cars internal light, so whats happened to your face? Youre going to have a hell of a black eye. That left-hand side of your forehead and temple is all swollen... He stopped, sounding uncertain. I was not, I guessed, my usual picture of glowing good health.I got head-butted, I said. I got jumped on and bashed about and robbed, and dont laugh.Im not laughing.I told him about the four pseudo-hill-walkers and the devastation in the bothy.The door isnt locked, I said. They took my keys. So tomorrow maybe youll take your own key along there...though theres nothing left worth stealing...Ill take the police, he said firmly, aghast.I nodded vaguely.Jed pulled a notebook and pen from inside his jacket and asked for a list of things missing.My jeep, I said gloomily, and told him its number. Everything in it...food and stores, and so on. From the bothy they took my binoculars and camera and all my winter padded clothes and four finished paintings and climbing gear and some Glenlivet...and my golf clubs.Al!Well...look on the bright side. My bagpipes are in Inverness having new bits fitted, and Ive sent my passport away for renewal. I paused. They took all my cash and my credit card...I dont know its number, though its somewhere on file in your office...will you alert them?...and they took my fathers old gold watch. Anyway, I finished, if you have a credit card with you, will you lend me a ticket to London?Ill take you to a hospital.No.Then come home to Flora and me. Well give you a bed.No...but thanks.Why London?Ivan Westering had a heart attack. I paused briefly, watching him assimilate the consequences. You know my mother...though I suppose you dont actually know her all that well...she would never ask me to help her but she didnt say not come, which was as good as an SOS...so Im going.The police will want you to give a statement.The bothy is a statement.Al, dont go.Will you lend me the fare?He said, Yes, but...Thanks, Jed. I fished a piece of charcoal stick out of my shirt pocket and opened the sketchbook I still carried. Ill draw them. Itll be better than just describing them.He watched me start and with a touch of awkwardness said, Were they looking for anything special?I glanced across at him with half a smile. One of them kept saying, Where is it?Anxiously he said, Did you tell them?Of course not.If youd told them, they might have stopped hitting you.And they might have made sure I was dead, before they left.I drew the four men in a row, face-on: knees, boots, glasses, air of threat.Anyway, I said, they didnt say what were looking for. They just said, Where is it? so it might have been anything. They might have been fishing for anything I valued. For what I valued most, if you see what I mean?He nodded.I went on, They didnt call me by name. Theyll know it now, because it was all over things in the jeep. I finished the composite sketch and turned to a clean page. Do you remember those hikers who preyed on holidaymakers last year in the Lake District? They robbed trailers, mobile homes.The police caught them, Jed agreed, nodding. But those hikers didnt beat people and throw

them down mountains. Might be the same sort of thing, though. I mean, just opportunist theft. I drew the head of the Where is it? man, as I remembered him the most clearly. I drew him without glasses. This is their leader, I explained, shading planes into the bony face. I'm not good at voices and accents, but I'd say his was sloppy southeast England. Same with them all. Hard men? They'd all done time in a boxing gym, I'd say. Short arm jabs, like at a punch bag. I swallowed. Out of my league. Al... I felt an utter fool. That's illogical. No one could fight four at once. Fight? I couldn't even connect. I broke off, remembering. I scratched one of their faces... He was the one who crashed his head against mine. I turned to a fresh page in the sketchpad and drew again, and his face came out with a clawed cheek, eyes glaring through round glasses and a viciousness that leaped off the paper. You'd know him again, Jed said with awe. I'd know them all. I gave him the sketchpad. He looked from drawing to drawing, troubled and kind. Come home with Flora and me, he repeated. You look bad. I shook my head. I'll be all right by tomorrow. The next day is always the worst. You're a laugh a minute. After a while he sighed heavily, went into the station and returned with tickets. I got you a sleeper for tonight, and an open return for whenever you come back. Ten-oh-one from here, arrives at Euston at seven forty-three in the morning. Thanks, Jed. He gave me cash from his pockets. Phone me tomorrow evening. I nodded. He said, They've put the heater on in the waiting room here. I shook his hand gratefully and waved him away home to his comfortable Flora. chapter 2 Best to forget that night. The face that looked back from an oblong of mirror as the train clattered over the points on the approach to Euston was, I realized, going to appeal to my mother's fastidious standards even less than usual. The black eye was developing inexorably, my chin bristled, and even I could see that a comb would be a good idea. I righted what I could with the help of Jed's cash and a pharmacy in the terminus but my mama predictably eyed me up and down with a pursed mouth before dispensing a minimum hug on her doorstep. Really, Alexander, she said. Haven't you any clothes free of paint? Few. You look thin. You look... Well, you'd better come in. I followed her into the prim polished hallway of the architectural gem she and Ivan inhabited in the semicircle of Park Crescent, by Regents Park. As usual she herself looked neat, pretty, feminine and disciplined, with short shining dark hair, and a hand-span waist, and as usual I wanted to tell her how much I loved her, but didn't, because she found such emotion excessive. I'd grown tall, like my father, and had been taught by him from birth to look after the delicately-boned sweet-natured center of his devotion, to care for her and serve her and to consider it not a duty but a delight. I remembered a childhood of gusty laughter from him and small pleased smiles from her, and he'd lived long enough for me to sense their joint bewilderment that the boy they'd carefully furnished with a good education and Highland skills like shooting, fishing and stalking was showing alarming signs of nonconformity. At sixteen, I'd said one day, Dad... I don't want to go to university. (Heresy.) I want to paint. A good hobby, Al, he'd said, frowning. He'd praised for years the ease with which I could draw, but never taken it seriously. He never did, to the day he died. I'm just telling you, Dad. Yes, Al. He hadn't minded my liking for being alone. In Britain the word loner flew none of the danger signals it did over in the United States, where the desirability of being one of a team was indoctrinated from preschool. Loners there, I'd discovered, were people who went off their heads. So maybe I was off mine... but anything else felt wrong. How's Ivan? I asked my mother. Would you like coffee? she said. Coffee, eggs, toast... anything. I followed her down to the basement kitchen, where I cooked and ate a breakfast that worked a change for the better. Ivan? I said. She looked away as if refusing to hear the question and asked instead, What's the matter with your eye? I walked into... well, it doesn't matter. Tell me about Ivan. I er... She looked uncharacteristically uncertain. His doctors say he should slowly be resuming his normal activities... But? I said, as she stopped. But he won't. After a pause I said, Well... tell me. There was then this subtle thing between us: that shadowy moment when the generations shift and the child becomes the parent. And perhaps it was happening to us at an earlier age than in most families because of my long training in care of her, a training that had been in abeyance since she'd married Ivan, but which now resurfaced naturally and with redoubled force across her kitchen table. I said, James James Morrison Morrison Wetherby George Dupree... She laughed, and went on, Took great care of his mother, though he was only three. I nodded. James James said to his mother, Mother, he said, said he, You must never go down to the end of the town if you don't go down with me. Oh, Alexander. A whole lifetime of restraint quivered in her voice, but the dammed-up feelings didn't break. Just tell me, I said. A pause. Then she said, He's so depressed. Er... clinically depressed? I don't know what that means. But I don't know how to deal with it. He lies in bed most of the time. He won't get dressed. He hardly eats. I want him to go back into the Clinic but he won't do that either, he says he doesn't like it there, and Dr. Robbiston doesn't seem to be able to prescribe anything that will pull him out of it. Well... has he a good reason for being depressed? Is his heart in a bad state? They said there wasn't any need for bypasses or a pacemaker. They

used one of those balloon things on one of his arteries, thats all. And he has to take pills, of course. Is he afraid hes going to die? My mother wrinkled her smooth forehead. He just tells me not to worry. Shall I...um...go up and say hello? She glanced at the big kitchen clock, high on the wall above an enormous cooker. Five to nine. His nurse is with him now, she said. A male nurse. He doesnt really need a nurse, but he wont let him go. Wilfred the nurse and I dont like him, hes too obsequious he sleeps on our top floor here in those old attics, and Ivan has had an intercom installed so that he can call him if he has chest pains in the night. And does he have chest pains in the night? My mother said with perplexity, I dont know. I dont think so. But he did, of course, when he had the attack. He woke up with it at four in the morning, but at the time he thought it was only bad indigestion. Did he wake you? She shook her head. She and Ivan had always slept in adjoining but separate bedrooms. Not from absence of love; they simply preferred it. She said, I went in to say good morning to him and give him the papers, as I always do, and he was sweating and pressing his chest with his fist. You should have got a message to me at once, I said. Jed would have driven over with it. You shouldnt have had to deal with all this by yourself. Patsy came... Patsy was Ivans daughter. Sly eyes. Her chief and obsessive concern was to prevent Ivan leaving his fortune and his brewery to my mother and not to herself. Ivans assurances got nowhere: and Patsys feelings for me, as my mothers potential heir, would have curdled sulfuric acid. I always smiled at her sweetly. What did Patsy do? I asked. Ivan was in the Clinic when she came here. She used the telephone. My mother stopped for effect. Who did she want? I prompted helpfully. Amusement glimmered in my mothers dark eyes. She telephoned Oliver Grantchester. Oliver Grantchester was Ivans lawyer. How blatant was she? I asked. Oh, straight to the jugular, darling. Patsy called everyone darling. She would murder, I surmised, with a Sorry, darling while she slid the stiletto into the heart. She told Oliver, smiled my mother, that if Ivan tried to change his will, she would contest it. And she meant you to hear. If she hadnt wanted me to, she could have called him from anywhere else. And naturally she was sugar candy all over the Clinic. The loving daughter. Shes good at it. And she said there was no need for you to bring me all the way from Scotland while she was there to look after things? Oh dear... you know how positive she is... A tidal wave. Civility was a curse, I often thought. Patsy needed someone to be brusquely rude about the way she bullied everyone with saccharine; but if ever openly crossed she could produce so intense an expression of poor little medom that potential critics found themselves comforting her instead. Patsy at thirty-four had a husband, three children, two dogs and a nanny all anxiously twitching to please her. And of course, my mother said, theres some sort of serious trouble at the brewery, and also I think hes worried about the Cup. What cup? The King Alfred Cup, what else? I frowned. Do you mean the race? The King Alfred Gold Cup, sponsored by Ivans brewery as a great advertisement for King Alfred Gold beer, was a splendid two-mile steeplechase run every October, a regular part now of the racing year. The race, or the Cup itself, my mother said. Im not sure. At that inconclusive point the kitchen was abruptly invaded by two large middle-aged ladies who heavily plodded down the outside iron steps from road level to basement and let themselves in with familiarity. Morning, Lady Westering, they said. A double act. Sisters, perhaps. They looked from my mother to me expectantly, awaiting an explanation, I thought, as much as an introduction. My gentle mother could be far too easily intimidated. I stood and said mildly, I am Lady Westerings son. And you are? My mother told me, Edna and Lois. Edna cooks for us. Lois cleans. Edna and Lois gave me stares in which disapproval sheltered sketchily behind a need to keep their jobs. Disapproval? I wondered if Patsy had been at work. Edna looked with a critical eye at the evidence of my cooking, an infringement of her domain. Too bad. She would have to get used to it. My father and I had historically always done the family meals because wed liked it that way. It had started with my mother breaking a wrist: by the time it was mended, feeding the three of us had forever changed hands; and as Id understood very early the chemistry of cooking, good food had always seemed easy. My mother and Ivan had from the beginning employed a cook, though Edna and also Lois were new since my last visit. I said to my mother, Wilfred notwithstanding, Ill go up now and see Ivan. I expect Ill find you upstairs in your living room. Edna and Lois hovered visibly between allegiances. I gave them my most cheerful noncombative smile, and found my mother following me gratefully up the stairs to the main floor, quiet now but grandly formal with dining room and drawing room for entertaining. Dont tell me, I teased her, once we were out of earshot of the kitchen. Patsy employed them. She didnt deny it. Theyre very efficient. How long have they worked here? A week. She came with me up to the next floor, where she and Ivan each had a bedroom, bathroom and personal day-room, in his case a study-cum-office, in hers the refuge they used most, a comfortable pink and green matter of fat armchairs and television. Lois cleans very well, my mother sighed as we went in there. But she will move things. Its almost as if she moves them deliberately, just to prove to me that shes

dusted. She shifted two vases back to their old familiar position of one at each end of the mantelshelf. Silver candlesticks were returned to flank the clock. Just tell her not to, I said, but I knew she wouldnt. She didnt like to upset people: the opposite of Patsy. I went along to see Ivan, who was sitting palely in his study while noises from his bedroom next door suggested bed making and the tidying of bottles. Ivan wore a crimson woollen robe and brown leather slippers and showed no surprise at my presence. Vivienne said you were coming, he said neutrally. Vivienne was Mother. How are you feeling? I asked, sitting in a chair opposite him and realizing with misgiving that he looked older, grayer and a good deal thinner than he had been on my last visit in the spring. Then, Id been on my way to America with my mind full of the commercial part of my life. He had made, I now remembered, an unexpected invitation for my advice, and I had been too preoccupied, too impatient and too full of doubt of his sincerity to listen properly to what hed wanted. It had been something to do with his horses, his steeplechasers in training at Lambourn, and Id had other reasons than press of business to avoid going there. I repeated my question, How are you feeling? He asked merely, Why dont you cut your hair? I dont know. Curly hair is girlish. *Revue de presse* The narrative is brisk and gripping and the background researched with care . . . the entire story is a pleasure to relish (Scotsman) Dick Francis's fiction has a secret ingredient - his inimitable knack of grabbing the reader's attention on page one and holding it tight until the very end (Sunday Telegraph) Francis writing at his best (Evening Standard)