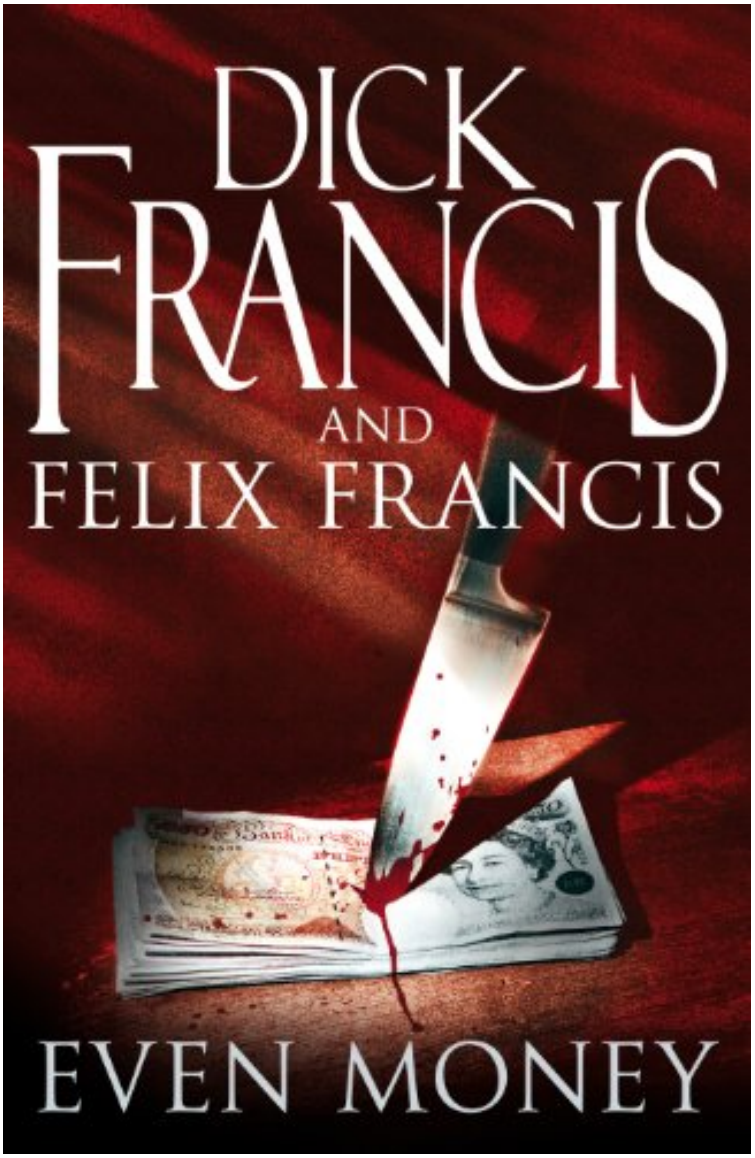
Even Money



Par Dick Francis, Felix Francis
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(Free read ebook) Even Money

Par Dick Francis, Felix Francis : Even Money before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Even Money:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEven Money is the gripping Dick Francis novel by Dick Francis and Felix Francis.Royal Ascot's first day, and bookmaker Ned Talbot watches helplessly as a string of favourites come in. With the punters totting up their winnings, he counts his losses. Then an old man steps forward with a very different claim. The father Ned never knew - long ago believed killed in a car crash - is standing before him.Barely an hour later, Ned's newly-found father is dying in Ascot's car park. Stabbed by an unknown assailant, he warns Ned 'be very careful'. But of whom? Of what? Ned races to discover the truth behind his father's disappearance and sudden reappearance. It's not just money on the line now. It's lives.From Felix Francis and Dick Francis, the bestselling co-authors of Dead Heat comes Even Money, the latest Dick

Francis novel. Packed with all the hair-raising suspense and excitement readers know and love from Dick Francis, Even Money is the most thrilling yet. Praise for the Dick Francis novels:'The Francis flair is clear for all to see' Daily Mail'Spare, efficient and unflashy . . . inexorably draws you in' Daily Telegraph'The master of suspense and intrigue' Country Life'Still the master' Racing PostDick Francis was one of the most successful post-war National Hunt jockeys. 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 and the biography of Lester Piggott. Dick Francis died in February, 2010, at the age of 89, but he remains one of the greatest thriller writers of all time.Felix Francis is the younger of Dick's two sons. Since 2006, Felix has taken a more significant role in the writing, first with Dead Heat and then increasingly with the bestsellers, Silks and Even Money. Crossfire is the fourth novel of this father-and-son collaboration.ExtraitVictoria, AustraliaBOOKMAKERSS ODDS AS USED ON BRITISH RACETRACKS1I sank deeper into depression as the Royal Ascot crowd I enthusiastically cheered home another short-priced winning favorite. To be fair, it wasnt clinical depressionI knew all about thatbut it was pretty demoralizing, just the same.I asked myself yet again what I was doing here. I had never really enjoyed coming to Ascot, especially for these five days in June. It was usually much too hot to be wearing morning dress, or else it rained, and I would get soaked. I preferred the informality of my usual haunts, the smaller steeplechase tracks of the Midlands. But my grandfather, who had started the family business, had always used the fact that we stood at the Royal Meeting as one of our major marketing tools. He claimed that it gave us some form of respectability, something he had always craved.We were bookmakers. Pariahs of the racing world. Disliked by all, and positively hated by many, including large numbers of those whose very livelihoods depended on gambling. I had discovered over the years that my clients were never my friends. Whereas City investors might develop a close relationship with their stockbrokers, punters never wanted to be seen socializing with their bookies. Most of my regulars didnt even know my name, nor did they want to. I suppose that was fair. I didnt know most of their names either. We were simply participants in transactions where each of us was trying to bankrupt the other. I suppose it was a situation not really likely to engender mutual respect.Score on seven, said a tall, top-hatted young man thrusting a banknote towards me. I glanced up at our board to check the odds we were offering on horse number seven.Twenty pounds on number seven at eleven-to-two, I said, taking his note and adding it to the wad of others in my left hand.A small printer in front of me whirred and disgorged a ticket that I handed to the man. He snatched it from me and moved quickly away into the throng as if he didnt want to be seen fraternizing with the enemy. His place in front of me was taken by a short, portly gentleman whose multicolored vest was fighting a losing battle against his expansive stomach. He was one of my regular Royal Ascot customers. I knew him only as A.J., but I had no idea what the A.J. stood for.Hundred on Silverstone to win, he wheezed at me, holding out some folded twenty-pound notes in his chubby fingers.Hundred on two at even money, I said, taking his cash and checking the amount. Another betting slip appeared out of the small printer as if by magic, and I passed it over. Good luck, A.J., I said to him, not really meaning it.Huh? he said, somewhat surprised by my comment.Good luck, I repeated.Thanks, he wheezed, and departed.In the good old days, when bookmaking was an art rather than a science, every transaction was written down in the book by an assistant. Nowadays, as in most things, it was on a computer that everything was recorded. The same computer that printed the betting slips.It kept a running tally of all the bets that we had taken, and also constantly updated our profit or liability for every possible outcome of the race. Gone were the days when it was down to the gut reaction of the bookmaker to decide when and by how much to change the prices we displayed on our fancy electronic board. Now the computer decided. Bookmaking was no longer by instinct, it was by fractions.When I had started working for my grandfather I had been his runner. It had been my job to take cash from his hand and use it to back a horse with other bookmakers, a horse on which he had taken some large bets, in order to spread his risk. If the horse was beaten, he didnt make so much, but, conversely, if it won, he didnt lose so much either. Now even that was done by computer, betting and laying horses on the Internet exchanges, even during the actual running of the race. Somehow, the romance and the fun had disappeared.Just as mobile phones have caused the demise of the tic-tac men, computer gambling was now killing off any bookmakers with personality who were prepared to back their hunches. And I wasnt at all sure if it was good for the punters, or for racing.Twenty pounds, horse two, said another man taking the plunge.Twenty on two at evens, I repeated, not so much for the man in front of me, more for Luca Mandini, my assistant, to enter the bet on his computer.Luca was my magician, my Internet whiz kid with a razor-sharp mathematical brain who stood right behind me. His fingers tapped his keyboard, and the betting slip duly appeared from the

printer.Without Luca, I was sure I would have given up by now, forced out by the relentless bullyboy tactics of the big bookmaking firms who did all they could to squeeze the profit out of the small independents. It was the same in the grocery trade, where the big supermarkets used their muscle to force the small shops to close. They didnt necessarily do it on purpose; they just did it in their never-ending drive for bottom-line figures to satisfy the expectations of some faceless group of shareholders. I was the sole shareholder in my business, and I felt the pain.I lived in daily fear that Luca would be enticed away from me by some other outfit, maybe one of those big firms who, it seemed, would stop at nothing to put the likes of me out of business in their greedy quest to capture a larger share of the betting market.I took the slip from the printer and handed it to the man standing patiently in front of me.Are you Teddy Talbot? he asked.Who wants to know? I asked him back while looking beyond for my next customer.I know your grandfather, said the man, ignoring my question.My grandfathers name had indeed been Teddy Talbot, and it was his name that was still prominently displayed above our prices board next to me. The slogan actually read TRUST TEDDY TALBOT, as if the extra word might somehow encourage punters to bet with us rather than the next man.My grandfathers dead, I said, still looking beyond him and hoping that he would move away. He was disrupting my business.Oh, he said. When did he die?I looked down at him from my lofty position on a foot-high metal platform. He was gray haired, in his late fifties or early sixties, and wearing a cream linen suit over a light blue shirt that was open at the neck. I envied the coolness of his attire. Look, I said, Im busy. If you want to talk, come back laterafter the last. Now, please move aside.Oh, he said again. Sorry.He moved away, but only a short distance, from where he stood and watched me. I found it quite disconcerting.Weighed in, announced someone over the public-address system.A lady in a straw hat came up and held out a slip to me. I took it from her. TRUST TEDDY TALBOT was printed across the top, as it was on all our betting slips. It was a winning ticket from the previous race, the first of rather too many. Nowadays, the potential win amount had to be printed on the slip, so I scanned the details and paid her out for her win, tearing the slip in half and placing the bits into a hopper to my left. The transaction was wordlessno communication was necessary.A line of winning-ticket holders was forming in front of me.Betsy, Lucas girlfriend, came and stood on my left. She paid out the winners while I took some of their winnings back as new bets on the next race. Luca scanned his screen and adjusted the prices on our board according to the bets I took and also the bets and lays he made on the Internet gambling exchanges via his computer behind me. It was like a balancing act, comparing potential gains against potential losses, always trying to keep both possibilities within acceptable ranges.It was my surname on our board, and I was the handler of the punters cash, but, in truth, it was Luca with his computer who was the real bookmaker, betting online and setting our board prices to always try to keep our predicted return greater than one hundred percent, as indicated on his screen. Anything over a hundred percent was called the overround and represented profit, less than a hundred indicated loss. Our aim was to keep the overround at about nine percent, but all the mathematics relied on us taking bets in the correct proportions for our odds, something we tried to ensure by continually adjusting our prices. However, the punters didnt always cooperate with our plans, so Luca tried his best to compensate by betting and laying on the Internet.The computer was both our best friend and our worst enemy. We liked to think that it was our slave, doing the jobs we gave it more efficiently than we could have done them ourselves. But, in reality, the computer was the master, and we were its slaves. The analysis and figures on its screen controlled our decisions without question. Technology, rather than insight, was now the idol we worshipped.And so our day progressed. I became hotter and hotter, both over and under the collar, as the sun broke through the veil of cloud, while heavily backed, short-priced winners continued to make it a great day for the punters while pushing down our percentage return into the red.I didnt need to wear my stifling morning suit, as our pitch wasnt actually in the Royal Enclosure. But we were close to the enclosure rail, in a prime position, and many of my clients wore the coveted name badges of those admitted to the inner sanctum. Besides, my grandfather had always worn formal dress at this meeting, and, since my eighteenth birthday, he had insisted that I did so too. At least he hadnt decreed that we should have top hats as well.I had never in fact applied to be admitted to the Royal Enclosure because there were no bookmaker pitches on that side of the fence. I did sometimes wonder if being a bookmaker would somehow disqualify one from admittance, like being a divorce had once done.Another favorite won the fifth race to huge cheers from the packed grandstand. I sighed audibly.Its not so bad, said Luca in my ear. I had most of that covered.Good, I said over my shoulder.The string of short-priced winners had forced us to try to limit our losses by adjusting down the offered prices on our board. Unlike in a shop, punters went in search of the highest prices as that represented a better return for their bets, provided, of course, they won. So lower prices meant that we didnt

do as much business. Even our regular clients tended to go elsewhere, chasing the fractionally better odds offered by othersthere was absolutely no loyalty amongst punters.The man in the linen suit still stood about five yards away and watched.Hold the fort, I said to Betsy. I need a pee.Will do, she said.I walked across to the man.What exactly do you want? I demanded.Nothing, he said defensively. I was just watching.Why? I demanded again.No reason, he said.Then why dont you go and watch someone else instead? I said forcefully.Im not doing any harm, he almost wailed.Maybe not, but I dont like it, I said. So go away. Now.I walked past him and into the grandstand in search of the Gents.When I returned, hed gone.Thanks, I said to Betsy as I again stood up on the platform.Come on, I shouted at the small crowd in front of me. Who wants a wager? I glanced up at the board. Eleven-to-four the field.There were a few takers but business was slow. As every race seemed to be a losing one from our point of view, it was probably just as well. At this rate, the more business we did, the more we lost.However, there was some respite when the last race of the day was won by a twenty-to-one outsider, the favorite having been boxed in against the rails until it was too late.That saved our bacon, said Luca with a broad grin.Saved your job, you mean, I said, smiling back at him.In your dreams, he replied.In my nightmares, more like.So whats the total? I asked him.In the good old days, it was easy to tell how we had done simply by the size of the wad of banknotes in my pocket, but these days we also had to consider our credit card balance with the Internet exchanges.Down fifteen hundred and sixty-two, he said with certainty, consulting his machine.Could be worse, I said, but I couldnt actually remember a previous first-day Tuesday at Royal Ascot when we had lost money.Sure could, he said. If the favorite had won the last, we would have been off another grand more at least.I raised my eyebrows at him, and he grinned. I didnt manage to take as much of the favorite as I wanted on the exchanges. Damn Internet link went down.Just us or everyone? I asked seriously.Dunno, he said, intrigued. Ill find out.Luca and I started to pack up our equipment as Betsy paid out the occasional winning ticket. Most of the racegoers were streaming for the exits to try to beat the traffic jams, and, no doubt, there would be more winning tickets from the last race handed in the following day.We kept a record on our computer of all the bets taken, both winning and losing, and it never ceased to amaze me how many of the winning tickets were never cashed. Presumably some were lost, and perhaps some inebriated punters didnt realize they were winners, but almost every day there were two or three winning bets that were never claimed. Sleepers, they were called, and they were like a cash bonus for us. But it was one we could never completely rely on. Our tickets didnt have an expiry date on them, and, only the day before, Id had to cash a sleeper from the Royal Ascot Meeting of the previous year. Maybe it had been hiding for twelve months in the deep recesses of someones morning-coat pocket, or tucked into the hatband of a topper, waiting quietly to be discovered and paid out.The crowd had mostly dispersed to the parking lots by the time Luca, Betsy and I had packed up the majority of our gear and loaded it onto our little wheeled trolley that ingeniously doubled up as a base for our computer during the racing. The betting ring was deserted save for the other bookmakers, who, like us, were packing up amongst the detritus of a days gambling: discarded newspapers, torn-up betting slips, crumpled coffee cups and half-eaten sandwiches.Do you fancy a beer? Luca asked as I pulled one of the elastic straps over our equipment.Id love one, I said, looking up at him. But I cant. I have to go and see Sophie.He nodded at me knowingly. Some other time, then. Betsy and I are going to go and have one, if thats all right with you. Were taking the train into town later to go to the party in the park.Right, I said. You go on. Ill pack up the rest of the stuff.Can you manage? he asked.He knew I could. I did it all the time. But this little exchange was his way of not taking it completely for granted.I smiled at him. No problem, I said, waving a dismissing hand at them. Go on. Ill see you both in the morning. Usual time.OK, said Luca. Thanks.Luca and Betsy went off together, leaving me standing alone next to the tarpaulin-covered equipment trolley. I watched them go, Betsy hand in hand with her young man. At one point they stopped and embraced before disappearing out of my sight into the grandstand. Just another happy couple on their way, I assumed, to the bandstand bar, where there was usually an impromptu drinking party after each days racing.I sighed.I supposed I must have been that happy once. But it had been a long time ago. What, I wondered, had happened to all the happy times? Had they deserted me for ever?I wiped my brow with the sleeve of my jacket and thought about how I would absolutely adore a nice cooling beer. I wanted to change my mind and go to find the other two, but I knew that it would end up being more trouble than it was worth. It always was.I sighed again and stacked the last few of our equipment boxes onto the trolley, then fixed the rest of the elastic cords across the green tarpaulin. I took hold of the handle and released the brakes from the wheels. As I had told Luca, I could just about manage it alone, although it was always easier with two, especially up the concrete slope towards the tunnel through the grandstand. I tugged hard on the handle.Do you want a hand with that? a voice shouted

from behind me.I stopped pulling and turned around. It was the man in the cream linen suit. He was about fifteen yards away, leaning up against the metal fence between the betting ring and the Royal Enclosure. I hadnt noticed him as wed packed up, and I wondered how long hed been there watching me.Whos offering? I called back to him.I knew your grandfather, he said again while walking over to me.You said, I replied.But lots of people knew my grandfather, and nearly all of them hadnt liked him. He had been a typically belligerent bookie who had treated both his customers and his fellow bookmakers with almost the same degree of contempt that they clearly held for him. He had been what many might have called a character on the racetrack, standing out in all weathers at an age when most men would be content to put their feet up in retirement. Yes, indeed, lots of people had known my grandfather, but hed had precious few friends, if any.When did he die? asked the man, taking hold of one side of the handle.We pulled the trolley together in silence up the slope to the grandstand and stopped on the flat of the concourse. I turned and looked at my helper. His gray hair was accentuated by the deeply tanned skin of his face. I reckoned it wasnt an English-summer tan.Seven years ago, I said.What did he die from? he asked. I could detect a slight accent in his voice, but I couldnt quite place it.Nothing, really, I said. Just old age.And bloody-mindedness, I thought. It was as if he had decided that hed had his allocated stretch in this world and it was time to go to the next. He had returned from Cheltenham races and had seemingly switched off inside on the Friday, and then he had expired on the Sunday evening. The post-mortem pathologist couldnt say why he had died. All his bits had apparently been working quite well and his brain had been sharp. I was sure he had simply willed himself to death.But he wasnt very old, said the man.Seventy-eight, I said. And two days.Thats not old, said the man, not these days.It was old enough for him, I said.The man looked at me quizzically.My grandfather decided that his time was up, so he lay down and died.Youre kidding? he said.Nope, I said. Absolutely serious.Silly old bugger, he said, almost under his breath.Exactly how well did you know my grandfather? I asked him.Im his son, he said.I stared at him with an open mouth.So you must be my uncle, I said.No, he said, staring back. Im your father.2But you cant be my father, I said, nonplussed.Ican,he said with certainty, and I am.My fathers dead, I said.How do you know? he asked. Did you see him die? How do you know? he asked. Did you see No, I said. I just . . . know. My parents died in a car crash.Is that what your grandfather told you?My legs felt detached from my body. I was thirty-seven years old, and I had believed for as long as I could remember that I was fatherless. And motherless too. An orphan. I had been raised by my grandparents, who had told me that both my parents had died when I was a baby. Why would they lie?But Ive seen a photo, I said.Of what? he asked.Of my parents, I said.So you recognize me, then?No, I said. But the photo was very small and at least thirty-seven years old, so would I actually recognize him now?Look, he said. Is there anywhere we could go and sit down?In the end I did have that beer.We sat at a table near the bar overlooking the pre-parade ring while the man in the cream linen suit told me who I was.I wasnt sure what to believe. I couldnt understand why my grandparents would have lied to me, but, equally, why would this stranger suddenly appear and lie to me now? It made no sense.Your mother and I were in a road accident, he told me. He looked down. And then she died. He paused for a long time as if wondering whether to carry on.I sat there in silence, looking at him. I didnt feel any real emotion, just confusion.Why? I asked.Why what? he said.Why have you come here today to tell me this? I began to feel angry that he had chosen to disrupt my life in this way. Why didnt you stay away? I raised my voice at him. Why didnt you stay away as you have done for the past thirty-seven years?Because I wanted to see you, he said. You are my son.No, Im not, I shouted at him.There were a few others enjoying a quick drink before making their way home, and they were looking in our direction.You are, he said quietly, whether you like it or not.But how can you be so sure? I was clutching at imaginary straws.Edward, dont be stupid, he said, picking at his fingers.It was the first time he had used my name, and it sounded odd. I had been christened Edward, but Id been known as Ned all my life. Not even my grandfather had called me Edward, except, that is, when he was cross with me or I had done something naughty as a child.Whats your name? I asked him.Peter, he said. Peter James Talbot.My fathers name was indeed Peter James Talbot. It said so in green ink on both my birth certificate and his. I knew by heart every element of those documents. Over the years the handwritten details on them had somehow been the only tangible link to my parents, that and the small creased-and-fading photograph that I still carried with me everywhere.I removed my wallet from my pocket and passed the photo over to him.Blackpool, he said with confidence, studying the image. This was taken in Blackpool. We were there for the illuminations in November. Tricia, your mother, was about three months pregnant. With you.I took the photo back and looked again closely at the young man standing next to a dark green Ford Cortina, as I had done hundreds of times before. I glanced up at the man in front of me and then back down at the picture. I

couldnt say for sure that they were the same person, but, equally, I couldnt say they werent.It is me, I assure you, he said. That was my first car. I was nineteen when that picture was taken.How old was my mother? I asked.Seventeen, I think, he said. Yes, she must have been just seventeen. I tried to teach her to drive on that trip.You started young.Yes . . . well. He seemed embarrassed. You werent actually planned, as such. More of a surprise.Oh thanks, I replied somewhat sarcastically. Were you married? I asked.Not when that picture was taken, no.How about when I was born? I wasnt sure that I wanted to know.Oh yes, he said with certainty. We were by then.Strangely, I was relieved that I was legitimate and not a bastard. But did it really matter? Yes, I decided, it did. It meant that there had been commitment between my parents, maybe even love. They cared, or, at least, they had then.Why did you leave? I asked him. It was the big question.He didnt answer immediately but sat quiet, still looking at me.Shame, I suppose, he said eventually. After your mother died, I couldnt cope with having a baby and no wife. So I ran away.Where to? I asked.Australia, he said. Eventually. First I signed onto a Liberian-registered cargo ship in the Liverpool docks. I went all over the world for a while. I got off one day in Melbourne and just stayed there.So why come back now?It seemed like a good idea, he said.It wasnt.What did you expect? I asked. Did you think I would just welcome you with open arms after all this time? I thought you were dead. I looked at him. I think it might be better for me if you were.He looked back at me with doleful eyes. Perhaps I had been a bit hard.Well, I said, it would definitely have been better if you hadnt come back.But I wanted to see you, he said.Why? I demanded loudly. You havent wanted to for the last thirty-seven years.Thirty-six, he said.I threw my hands up in frustration. Thats even worse, I said. It means you deserted me when I was a year old. How could a father do that? I was getting angry again. So far my own life had not been blessed with children, but it was not from a lack of longing.Im sorry, he said.I wasnt sure it was enough.So what made you want to see me now? I said. You cant just have decided suddenly after all this time. He sat there in front of me in silence. You didnt even know that your own father was dead. And what about your mother? You havent asked me about her.It was only you I wanted to see, he said.But why now? I asked him again.Ive been thinking about it for some time, he said.Dont try and tell me you had a fit of conscience after all these years, I scoffed at him with an ironic laugh.Edward, he said somewhat sternly, it doesnt befit you to be so caustic.The laughter died in my throat. You have no right to tell me how to behave, I replied with equal sternness. You forfeited that right when you walked away. He looked down like a scalded cat. So what do you want? I asked him. Ive got no money.His head came up again quickly. I dont want your money, he said.What, then? I asked. Dont expect me to give you any love.Are you happy? he asked suddenly.Deliriously, I lied. I leap out of bed each morning with joy in my heart, delighting at the miracle of a new day.Are you married? he asked.Yes, I said, giving no more details. Are you?No, he replied. Not anymore. But I have been. Twicethree times, if you count your mother.I thought I probably would count my mother.Widowed twice and divorced once, he said with a wry smile. In that order.Children? I asked. Other than me.Two, he said. Both girls.I had sisters. Half sisters anywayHow old are they?Both in their twenties now, late twenties, I suppose. I havent seen them for, oh, fifteen years.You seem to have made a habit of deserting your children.Yes, he said wistfully. It appears I have.Why didnt you leave me alone and go and findthem?But I know where they are, he said. They wont see me, not the other way round. They blame me for their mothers death.Did she die in a car crash too? I said with a touch of cruelty in my voice.No, he said slowly. Maureen killed herself. He paused, and I sat still watching him. I was made bankrupt, and she swallowed enough tablets to kill a horse. I came home from the court to find bailiffs sitting in the driveway and my wife lying dead in the house.His life was like a soap opera, I thought. Disaster and sorrow had been a constant companion.Why were you made bankrupt? I asked.Gambling debts, he said.Gambling debts! I was astounded. And you the son of a bookmaker.Prsentation de l'diteurEven Money is the gripping Dick Francis novel by Dick Francis and Felix Francis.Royal Ascot's first day, and bookmaker Ned Talbot watches helplessly as a string of favourites come in. With the punters totting up their winnings, he counts his losses. Then an old man steps forward with a very different claim. The father Ned never knew - long ago believed killed in a car crash - is standing before him.Barely an hour later, Ned's newly-found father is dying in Ascot's car park. Stabbed by an unknown assailant, he warns Ned 'be very careful'. But of whom? Of what? Ned races to discover the truth behind his father's disappearance and sudden reappearance. It's not just money on the line now. It's lives.From Felix Francis and Dick Francis, the bestselling co-authors of Dead Heat comes Even Money, the latest Dick Francis novel. Packed with all the hair-raising suspense and excitement readers know and love from Dick Francis, Even Money is the most thrilling yet. Praise for the Dick Francis novels:'The Francis flair is clear for all to see' Daily Mail'Spare, efficient and unflashy . . . inexorably draws you in' Daily Telegraph'The

master of suspense and intrigue' Country Life'Still the master' Racing PostDick Francis was one of the most successful post-war National Hunt jockeys. 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 and the biography of Lester Piggott. Dick Francis died in February, 2010, at the age of 89, but he remains one of the greatest thriller writers of all time.Felix Francis is the younger of Dick's two sons. Since 2006, Felix has taken a more significant role in the writing, first with Dead Heat and then increasingly with the bestsellers, Silks and Even Money. Crossfire is the fourth novel of this father-and-son collaboration.