

## CHAPTER ONE

It was a cold, bitter wind that howled and swept us into the warmth of the bar room. It was some sort of miracle that the meeting hadn't been called off because of the weather but it had been given the go-ahead by the stewards at around eleven o' clock. Horse racing in the north of England was a hardy sport for hardy sportsmen and punters alike. Throngs of punters gathered in small groups away from the queue for the bar, each holding a plastic pint glass filled with warm beer.

"I'll get 'em," shouted Ron, above the din. He was already on his way to the bar as the words flew from his lips.

The other three of us gathered at a green resting post near the centre of the room, which had half filled ashtrays mounted in it. I wasn't expected to buy a round of drinks, being the youngest, only seventeen years old but they always bought me a half of lager. My father was the driver, so he only drank orange juice, which made it a cheap round.

"What have you got for the next race Bill?" asked Gordon, a late fifty something man, hair greying at the sides with a weathered face, in a flat cap and a blue rain mac .

My father took out his rolled up copy of the *Sporting Chronicle* from the pocket of his dark grey overcoat and opened it.

"Lucky Kiss will win that," he replied confidently. Then he turned to me and said, "How much do you want on it?"

"I'm not backing it," I said quietly.

"What?" said my father, aghast, "Why not?"

“Because I’m backing Uncle Ben,” I answered, a little sheepishly.

The two men guffawed.

“Well you can back it yourself,” said my father, “I’m not putting money on it for you. You’re nearly eighteen anyway. Uncle Ben? I don’t know,” he went on ranting, “I’ve tried to teach you how to read the form book and you don’t take a blind bit of notice.”

Gordon was laughing at me now, with ridicule in his voice. I felt embarrassed. Just then, Ron returned with a handful of drinks, cleverly juggled between his hands.

“Have you heard this Ron?” said my father, pointing at me, “He’s backing Uncle Ben in the next against Lucky Kiss.”

“What’s the matter?” said Ron, now joining in the mockery, “Have you stopped reading the form book?”

I was becoming a little red-faced now, so I quickly finished my half of lager and left the warmth of the bar room. I walked through the wind and the rain, back around the gable end of the grandstand, heading towards the area where the bookmakers had their pitches. As I approached them, I could see that the weather was causing them untold problems. Some of them had plastic sheeting covering them that flapped around violently, while others stood, shivering, in stiff, plastic rain macs. Betting activity was minimal even though the runners were on their way to the post.

A glance at their boards told me that Uncle Ben was trading at 5/1 while Lucky Kiss, the favourite, was around the even money mark.

“Five fivers, Uncle Ben,” I said holding out a five pound note.

The bookmaker took the money and passed me a ticket, calling out the number to his clerk who stood behind, desperately trying to stay on his feet in the face of the appalling conditions. Then I made straight for the grandstand and shelter, climbing the concrete steps quickly. Once under cover, I looked down into the betting ring and saw my father surveying the betting market. After a few minutes he struck a bet, then the three of them joined me.

“Did you back Uncle Ben?” asked Ron mockingly.

I nodded.

“Loser,” he said, cruelly.

The horses were at the post now. The race was a Juvenile Novice Hurdle with ten runners taking part. A few seconds later, they were off, the favourite, going straight into the lead. By the time they passed the grandstand on the first circuit, Lucky Kiss was six lengths clear and travelling well but Uncle Ben had moved into second place. As they turned out of the back straight, the race had developed into a two-horse affair with the favourite still four lengths to the good and going easily but so was the horse that I’d backed.

My dad turned to me and snarled, “Idiot!”

I didn’t speak, I was still hoping for the best. As the two horses jumped the second last, Uncle Ben threw down a serious challenge, gaining ground with every stride and jumping the last they were together. The three men were animated now, shouting with their hands clasped in exhilaration; I just held my breath and my nerve. On the run in, Uncle Ben hit the front and quickly pulled two lengths clear to win comfortably. The three men standing next to me were ashen now, completely drained of emotion. I didn’t say a word as I moved cautiously away from them, down the steps and toward the bookmakers.

The rain was easing off now as I collected my money. Then I walked off to the unsaddling enclosure and stood amongst the crowd watching them lead in the first three.

As I watched, still excited and elated, I heard a voice from behind me.

“How much did you win?” said my father.

“None of your business,” I replied without turning round.

After a momentary pause, he carried on, “I think you can give me some money towards petrol, don’t you? A tenner wouldn’t hurt.”

I turned around to face him. “You know what?” I told him, “I would have done if you hadn’t called me an idiot,” and I walked away in a huff.

The car journey home was a quiet one. There was none of the same boisterous expectation that there had been on the way there. Ron was in the front passenger seat, asleep and Gordon slept next to me in the back. They had all lost money except for me; I had just had the one bet all afternoon.

“How come you backed Uncle Ben?” my dad muttered, with a certain amount of quiet contrition.

“I read the form book like you taught me,” I answered without any emotion.

The estate where I lived was mainly semi-detached houses, a few terraced ones on the periphery and one or two older detached ones. It was very working class with a workingmen’s club at the heart of it and three pubs scattered among it. Each of these places had a betting office, either adjacent or nearby. The main source of employment for people who lived there was either factory work or the local pit. Not me though.

My mother and dad's house was a small semi-detached property that they owned. As you walked through the door into a hallway where we hung our coats on a row of pegs on the wall, there always seemed to be the warm homely smell of gravy and boiling vegetables. There was a small kitchen and two sitting rooms and upstairs, three bedrooms. Outside, there was a modest sized garden with a small strip of lawn down the middle and rustic fencing separating us from the adjoining house.

The next day was a typical Sunday at my parents' house, I slept in until eleven or so, skipped breakfast and headed off to the working men's club to drink a couple of pints of lager. It was an old red brick building, by far the largest on the estate. As I walked through the large double entrance doors I was, as usual, hit by the pungent smell of tobacco smoke and stale beer. That and the deep, booming sound of a band playing in the concert room next door.

My dad was already there, sitting at a table, flanked by four of his friends in a billowing haze of cigarette smoke. I went straight to the bar, avoiding the little group and ordered a drink from the attractive blonde barmaid who, in between chewing her gum insisted on conversation, "Did you go out last night Dan?"

"No luv," I replied, "I was a bit knackered. I went racing with my dad yesterday and the weather was horrible. I'll be outside all next week at work, so I needed a rest."

"You going out with anyone at the moment?" she continued, still pulling the pint.

"No, not since last year."

She gave me the impression that she might be interested, but then, barmaids do that.

I'd had a girlfriend at school, Tracy. We went out together from being in the fifth form right up until last summer when we

had a bust up over something inconsequential one night and that was the end of it, both of us too proud to back down and phone the other one. I had missed her at first but in retrospect, we had both been too young to think of a long-term relationship. “Plenty more fish in the sea,” my friends had told me, so had the blokes on the building site where I worked. I just thought that I’d have been a mug to get settled down at my age, and that was what she had wanted. Save up for the big white wedding in a church with a posh frock and a massive reception that would hock us up to our eyeballs for the next ten years. That wasn’t for me.

After we split up, I threw myself into night clubbing and drinking with my mates although strictly speaking, I was still underage. Now, I didn’t miss her at all. Well, maybe I missed the sex, although that was so sporadic, grabbed whenever we could in our bedrooms when our parents were out. One time, we thought that she was pregnant and that really freaked us both out, me in particular. It looked for a while like we would have to get married and I think that was when I realised that I didn’t want to be with her for the rest of my life. It scared me to death and it was only a few weeks after that it ended.

I’d had a couple of passionate encounters since, just lustful shags up against a wall behind the nightclub on a Saturday night, never to see the girl again. It all seemed a bit empty though, but then, life in Doncaster, the town where I lived, was an empty experience in 1975. The nightlife was stilted, plenty of pubs but only a few proper nightclubs, nothing much else. Any other spare time that I had was spent studying the formbook and following horse racing. It had been the only genuine passion of my life. That had been another problem with my ex girlfriend. She didn’t like gambling. It would have been a massive bugbear if we had ever got married.

Now of course, that wasn't a problem, but in the time that we had been together, it had caused more rows than enough. When we went out on Saturday nights, she would ask me if I had been betting. If I'd won, it would be forgiven, if I had lost, I would have been the scum of the earth, lower than Judas Iscariot. It couldn't have lasted, given that betting on horses was the only thing that interested me.

Some of my friends were great music fans. I'd tried to become interested in that, if only so that I could talk to them on the same level. To me though, music meant nightclubs and that was just a means of pulling birds. Some of my friends liked football. I'd gone with them a couple of times to see the local team, Doncaster Rovers but it was about as exciting as watching paint dry. Compared to the cut and thrust of horse racing it was very dull stuff indeed and it left me cold.

At school, the only thing that I'd been any good at was mathematics. That was partly the appeal of horse racing. Studying the form of a racehorse was like an expression of mathematics in its purest form, reducing it to a number to compare to that of the other runners in any given race. The betting side of it too was all about numbers. The betting jungle on any racecourse, the place where the bookmakers congregate is all about supply and demand, market forces. Getting the best price for the horse that you were going to back could make all the difference between winning or losing in an afternoon at the races. A point here, half a point there could be crucial to anyone who was serious about it.

And I was serious. Every weekend, after working hard on the building site all week, I would go racing with my dad and his friends. The preparation would begin on Wednesday night when the runners for Saturday's racing, or the 'four day acceptors' to

give them their proper terminology, were printed in that morning's racing paper. My dad and I would spend the next two or three nights pouring through the formbook, first sifting out the horses that had no chance, narrowing each race down. On Friday night, the local paper would then have the overnight runners that would reduce the ones with possible chances even further.

By the time we actually went to the meeting on Saturday afternoon, we usually had most of the races down to two or three and sometimes only one. Normally, we didn't bother to bet during the week, concentrating on the meeting that we would be attending, which was invariably in the north of England. The main difference between my dad's approach and mine, was that he and the others who came with us, would bet in every race, whereas I would find the best bet of the day, occasionally two and just wait for them.

I had been going racing since I could remember and betting since I was about twelve years old. I had realised some time ago that you couldn't actually win very much by betting in every race. For a few years, it was a case of, some would win and some would lose and I would leave the meeting, a little up or a little down. This might be all right for some people, but my principal interests always lie in one thing alone, winning, showing a profit.

All through my young life, I seemed to be plagued by people of all ages, telling me that "there's only one winner, the bookmaker," or "you don't see many poor bookies," or some such thing, parrot fashion. When my friends at school found out that I backed horses it made me a target, but the fact that I always had more money than they did, when I only got a fraction of the spending money that they did, spoke for itself. Anyway, unlike me, most of them wasted their money on fags, fully

knowing the health risks involved. The fact that they always referred to cigarettes as “coffin nails,” or “cancer sticks,” told me that.

I, on the other hand, had thought in a different way. I’d been brought up in a house where my father always backed horses and greyhounds. I’ll give him his due, from the moment that I began betting, he took me in hand and showed me how to read a form book and assess form correctly: how races were graded, how many pounds per length at each distance, how the condition of the ground affected the performance of a horse and much more. There was never any pretence though, from my dad, that it could be anything other than a profitable hobby. I had always suspected however that it could be something more than that.

At the races on Saturdays, the others who came with us, like Ron and Gordon had yesterday, followed whatever my dad was backing blindly. Unlike him and me, they were not so keen to put themselves through the rigours of the form selection process, or to go to the expense of buying racing newspapers and formbooks, which in itself was a considerable weekly outlay. They were just happy to hang on Bill’s every word, knowing that it would be well informed. It sickened me to a certain extent, but then Bill, my dad, was more than happy to be the centre of the circle and the centre of attention, in fact, he lapped it up. I preferred to keep a low profile and follow my own path. Mostly, like yesterday, it was the right strategy.

“Did you win yesterday?” asked the barmaid, disturbing my train of thought.

“No, I didn’t,” I said, lying. If I’d told her the truth, I knew that she’d expect me to buy her a drink and I didn’t feel like being generous.

To me, my winnings were mine, not to be thrown around buying drinks for cheap tarts, or anyone else for that matter. I was actually starting to accrue some significant savings in a bank account. It wasn't because I earned a lot. I only got about £40 a week on the building site and my mother took £20 off me for board, so I wasn't exactly flush. In fact, there was no reason on the face of it why I'd been able to accumulate a bank account of nearly a thousand pounds, but that's what I had.

The reasons were two-fold. The money that I'd been winning consistently on the horses for four or five years now and then there was my other little hobby. I went to work in a full-length green parka coat, which had the two pockets ripped and pushed right through to the lining. I would follow the plumbers around in my spare time, picking up bits of lead and copper, shoving it in the deep pockets of my coat and then taking it to the car where I'd store it in the boot. On Saturday mornings, I would take what I'd collected down to the scrap yard at the end of our street in a wheelbarrow, and weigh it in for cash.

I really had no idea what I was saving the money for. While I was going out with Tracy, I suppose I was saving it towards getting married, but now, I wasn't sure. I just knew that there was some purpose for it somewhere down the line.

"Are you coming over here or what?" I heard my father shout from the table where he was holding court. He was a dark haired man, around five foot six inches tall with a craggy face, worn by spending the last thirty years working outside on building sites in all weathers. He had a strong jaw, deep, powerful eyes and a physique that was muscular and powerful. He had fought in the army during the war in North Africa but he never talked about it.

I turned around and walked slowly and reluctantly across. He noticed my less than enthusiastic demeanour as I sat on a stool that had been vacated for me.

“What’s the matter with you?” he said, narkily.

“Nothing, I just didn’t think you’d want to sit with an idiot, that’s all.”

The others around the table looked daggers at me as I sat.

“Ah, well,” said my father feebly, “I didn’t know…” his sentence trailing off in a half made half hearted apology.

“You didn’t know what?” I asked, “That the horse was going to win, is that it?”

He looked away from any eye contact with me.

“Well, neither did I,” I carried on, “That’s how it works, isn’t it? You bet on the horse that you think will win and then they run the race,” I said sarcastically.

I had killed the atmosphere at the table that had existed before I got there.

A little later on when he had recovered the situation, he said, “He had one bet yesterday, won at 5/1,” with a certain amount of parental pride.

I didn’t comment, but I thought, “It’s just a pity that you didn’t.”

After a while, we left the club, the two of us, walking home through tarmac footpaths of the estate. His mood was now a lot more accessible and contrite, although I was still very quiet.

“Still sulking?” he asked.

“I’m not sulking,” I said, objectionably.

“You could have fooled me.”

“I think I’m too much of an idiot to sulk,” I retorted.

“Alright, I’m sorry,” he said, “I shouldn’t have said it.”

“No, you shouldn’t, and you shouldn’t have made me a laughing stock in front of Ron and Gordon either.”

A few paces later, he said, “We ought to share information.”

“WHAT?” I shouted, still walking, “LIKE YOU WOULD LISTEN!”

“I might do,” he said.

“What, so long as I agree with you,” I said, still annoyed, “and if I don’t, you’ll call me an idiot, is that it?”

“Look, I said that I’m sorry,” he said, “can’t we just leave it at that?”

I didn’t answer, but we had reached the gate of our house now.

“Are you coming racing with us next Saturday? It’s Doncaster,” he said.

“I expect so,” I replied grudgingly.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” he asked, putting his key in the lock.

“I thought I might go and do a bit of gardening for Mr. Blackthorn.”

“Can’t be much to do at this time of year can there?”

I hung up my coat and scarf, “Mostly working in his greenhouses, preparing for spring,”

Mr. Blackthorn was an elderly gentleman who lived on the same estate, on the next road. I had known him all my life, but it was only in the last year or so that I’d started going round there to help a bit with the gardening. Since I’d split up with Tracy in fact. The word gentleman certainly applied to Mr. Blackthorn. He always wore a suit, usually a light-coloured cotton one with a different waistcoat, one that was a contrast to the suit, colourful

and bright. In summertime his suits wouldn't just be light, they would actually be white, accompanied by a matching Panama hat. Unlike most people that I knew, he never swore.

He and his wife Elsie had done their own gardening for many years, but then his wife died, more than twelve years ago now and his health wasn't what it was. There was a photograph of her on the wall in his hall, in a gold frame. I had seen him standing with the photo in his hands staring at it, lost in a moment when he didn't know that I was watching.

He had always been a smoker but since he had lived alone his smoking intake seemed to have increased substantially. It was almost as if he was deliberately trying to finish himself off, like he didn't really want to go on without his wife. They had never had any children but had been apparently inseparable.

So, when I had a bit of time, I would go round to his house and do a bit of gardening for him. Pruning his roses, dead heading the flowers, mowing his lawn and trimming his apple trees in the summer and spring months, working in his two greenhouses at this time of year. When I first started doing it, he had offered to pay me, but I had always declined. I didn't earn that much but I wouldn't take money from a pensioner and anyway, he was good company. He made me laugh.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, after a roast beef and Yorkshire pudding dinner, I put my hat and coat back on and headed round the corner to Mr. Blackthorn's house. If I hadn't decided to do something, I would have just nodded off in a chair for the afternoon and to me, that would have been a waste of time.

It only took a couple of minutes to get there. Unlike us, he lived in a detached house at the end of the next street. The front door was shielded by a trellis frame either side which, during

summer, would have bright flowering creepers, clematis trailing, but right now there were no flowers to be seen. I knocked on his door; a solid panelled one with a brass number one in the centre upper panel. A few moments later, it was answered by the old man.

“Ah, Daniel m’boy,” he said cheerily, “I was wondering if you would come today, it’s good to see you, come in, come in.”

I entered his hallway, took off my coat and hung it on the freestanding mahogany coat stand. I went to the cupboard under his stairs and took out the trowel that was in there. “I thought I’d pot some of the seeds.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, lighting the gas ring and putting the kettle on, “If you make a start down there, I’ll bring you a cup of tea.”

His house had two sitting rooms, a kitchen and a hallway although each of these was somewhat larger than our house. A solid oak banister rail ran up the stairs. I had never been up there but from time to time I had heard the sound of at least two different grandfather clocks striking the hour or the half hour.

The kitchen was long, with fitted dark wooden panelled units down both sides although they were quite old. There was a large round wooden table and chairs occupying the centre of the room.

I opened the back door and walked down the yard until I came to a flight of stone steps, which led to his garden. The only colours there now were green and black but in summer it was a mass of gorgeous shades and I loved to be there, so right now, the investment of time and effort was well worth it. I began planting some seedlings in wooden trays, trying to work off the excess of my Sunday dinner. After about ten minutes, Mr. Blackthorn appeared at the top of the steps carrying two drinks

and a plate of biscuits on a tray. Mine was always served in a pint pot, a huge quantity of tea for anyone to consume, but somehow I always managed to drink it.

He entered the greenhouse and sat on a nearby wooden form so that he could talk to me as I worked. He had his hat on but lengths of fine grey hair fell over his ears and the back of his head. His face was lined with age but it was apparent that he had been quite handsome in his youth.

“Did you go racing yesterday Daniel?” he asked.

“Yes, we went to Market Rasen,” I said, without looking up.

“Oh, a lovely course, I used to take Elsie there. We went there many times. And did you win?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I had a five to one winner. Just the one bet.”

“Ha ha!” he laughed exuberantly, “And how did the others do, did they win too?”

“No, they didn’t,” I explained what happened.

He laughed even louder this time, “That’s wonderful m’boy, I like it. You had the confidence to follow your own judgement in the face of what everyone said to the contrary. That really is marvellous. And how did you feel when the horse won and your three companions who had scoffed at you lost?”

“Well,” I said thoughtfully, “I didn’t want to gloat, even though that’s what they would have done, so I didn’t say very much, but I have to admit, it felt good.”

He passed me the plate with biscuits on it, “Yes, I bet it did m’boy, and your attitude is commendable. You were right not to gloat over their downfall. It’s enough for them to know that you won and they didn’t.”

“I just didn’t like they way that my dad spoke to me that’s all,” I said, “He called me an idiot, just because I didn’t agree with him, and that’s not right.”

He sat back. “No, you’re right Daniel, but sometimes you have to be a big enough man to forgive them for their folly.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, “but I’m seventeen, nearly eighteen and I do a man’s job and I just think they should give me the right amount of respect.”

“It’s their loss if they don’t m’boy, you’re clever, you’re good at mathematics and you should be making the most of your talents, in banking or my old profession, accountancy. It’s just a pity that you didn’t do better with your exams at school in other subjects. You got a top grade in Mathematics didn’t you?”

“Yes that’s right, but not much else.”

“What about a career in bookmaking?” he suggested.

“I’d need better qualifications even for that.”

“So,” he considered, “what’s your long term career plan?”

“I don’t have one, I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Well you need to think about it Daniel, a young man as bright as you are shouldn’t be working on a building site for the rest of your life. Let me give you one piece of advice m’boy,” he said, “Don’t waste time. Time is the most precious resource that we have. Don’t waste it, do you understand me?”

He stared at me intently as he said these words and I stared back, having stopped working momentarily. “Yes, I understand.”

“I wish that I was your age Daniel, with all my life stretching out in front of me, and all the possibilities that it holds. You can do anything that you want to, if you set your mind to it, do you know that?”

I nodded, but really, I didn't fully believe what he was saying. I seemed hemmed in with very little chance of escape from the ordinary life that I led.

"You need to start planning your future Daniel, maybe you should think about going back to college, possibly at nights," he said, thinking out loud.

"You must be joking!" I said, "I hated school. There's no way that I'll ever go back there."

"But it wouldn't be like school," he said, "You'd be there for your own ends. You'd be there because you wanted to be there, so it wouldn't be like it was before."

"That's just it, I don't want to go back there, not now, not ever."

The daylight was beginning to fade now, so after a little while longer, he said, "Just finish what you're doing and then call it a day. I'll go and put the kettle on for another brew."

I put the seed trays in their best spot for sunlight, cleaned the tools under a tap that was in the corner of the greenhouse and began to walk back up the garden toward the stone steps. I hadn't noticed until now because I'd been working hard but it had turned very cold, as darkness had fallen. I shivered as I climbed the steps back on to the concrete yard and a few seconds later I walked into the warmth of the old man's kitchen.

There was a boiler in the corner that consumed solid fuel, coke. I kicked off my shoes on the mat and went straight over to it, placing my hands on the shiny, black lid, quickly taking them away again; realizing immediately that it was scorching hot. I carried on warming them at a safer distance.

"I'll fetch you some coke up from the cellar before I go," I said.

“Thank you Daniel, that’s kind of you.”

He poured the tea and then placed my pint pot at my side of the table and a smaller cup at his side.

“Come and drink your tea m’boy, you’ll soon get warm.”

I walked across to the wooden table and pulled out the ladder-back chair, sitting down and cupping the mug of tea between both my hands.

“Is it work for you tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “That’ll be lovely, working outside all day in this weather.”

He drank deeply from his own cup and then he sat right back in his chair, saying thoughtfully, “There’s something that I’ve been meaning to say to you Daniel m’boy. Something very important that I want to talk to you about.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“Oh, what’s that?” I said.

“Well, to be more precise, it’s something that I want to give to you, to pass on to you. The thing is Daniel, I’m eighty-two years of age, and I won’t live forever.”

“You’ve got plenty more years left in you Mr. Blackthorn,” I said, encouragingly.

“Well, I certainly hope so m’boy,” he laughed, “but there is something that I’ve been working on for a very long time, probably something like twelve years now I come to think of it.

You see, my all-consuming passion has always been numbers. I always felt more at home with numbers than anything else. As you know, I was an accountant, but that was only part of it.

I’ve spent many years, all my life I suppose, trying to find ways to, shall we say, beat the system.”

“Beat the system?” I repeated.

“Yes, well, that’s the way that I see it, beating the system. To find that elusive idea, the impossible dream, the holy grail, El Dorado.” He went on, “I was never really interested in drinking. Once I met Elsie, all our pleasure lay in being together, we never wanted children, but there were always my own interests, as I told you, in numbers.”

I was starting to hang on his every word now.

“At first, I spent many years researching roulette. I bought a roulette wheel of my own, a small one, so that I could try out my ideas. In roulette, there is a house edge of between two and three

per cent. The percentage that's factored in favour of the house or the bookmaker. It may not seem much, but it's enough to beat any long-term plan. It took me twenty years of my life to finally come to that conclusion. I read all the books that I could get my hands on, some of them really old books that date back to the last century. There was a couple of systems that I actually took to the casino to play with real cash money. In the case of one of them, I actually thought that I had cracked the code and found a way to beat the bank."

"What happened?" I asked, riveted with interest now.

"I started frequenting the local casino, every night. Sometimes Elsie came with me. It was a good excuse for both of us to dress up and have a night out together. At first I won about £50 every night, it seemed easy. £350 a week in those days was an absolute fortune, a lot more than I earned in fact. That situation carried on for a while and I began to plan for the day when I would stop going to work and just play roulette at nights. Then, the inevitable happened. The system hit a losing run that was totally unpredictable and in two nights, I lost a fortune."

"You lost all the money that you'd won?" I asked, tentatively.

"Yes, I did, Daniel. In the end, overall, I didn't lose anything, but I didn't win anything either. I knew there and then that roulette was not the game to concentrate my attentions on. I then spent the next twenty years or so, trying to beat the bank at blackjack. Again, I read all the books, tried various systems out at home until I narrowed down the field. At first, I believed that card counting was the way, but believe me Daniel, you have to have a very quick mind and even then, there's no guarantee of success. All you can ever hope to do through card counting, is

reduce the house edge that is stacked against you. Then, once again, I thought that I had found the perfect system.”

“What happened?” I said, fascinated.

“It was the same story. For a while, I seemed to win almost every time that I played. Again, I was just beginning to think that I could make a living out of it, and then once again I hit a losing run that wiped me out.”

“Don’t you think that someone was trying to tell you something?” I said.

“Well, maybe you’re right Daniel, but then as I’ve said, my interest has always been in the numerical, and if I had just simply stopped looking, I would never have found the thing that I have indeed found. In fact, I did stop looking for a while, when Elsie died. I was utterly desolate for a good few years. I had no interest in the trivia of things like gambling. In fact, I haven’t had a bet on a card or roulette or a horse since the day that she died.”

I drained the last drop of tea from my oversized mug. “So what is it that you think that you’ve found?”

“Well, it took a long time for me to piece my life together again even if only as a husk of what I’d had before,” he told me, “but then I began to apply my brain to the challenge of horse racing. I started to reason this way, as I said earlier, with roulette, blackjack and other casino games there is always a house edge that will defeat any system in the long term.”

“But there’s a house edge, as you call it with horse racing, isn’t there?” I offered, “it’s the over round that the bookmaker builds in to the betting in each race.”

“I’m impressed that you know that Daniel, did your father teach you that?”

“Yes, he did.”

“I can see that your understanding is well above average for your age,” he said. “The thing that you have to get your head around now is this. Some gambling games are pure chance: roulette, dice, tossing coins and, for the largest part, card games. In roulette, the odds are about 2.7% against the punter, but that is enough to beat every player over a period. Then there are other games such as backgammon and poker where the player with a superior strategy will win in the long term. Horse racing, Daniel, I believe falls into the latter category.”

He took a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, placed one in his mouth and lit the end, inhaling the smoke deeply. I don't know why, but, I had never particularly noticed until that moment, the dark brown tar on his fingers caused by the habit.

He went on. “The odds against the punter in any horse race are more punitive than roulette, around 12% rising to 30-40% in big handicaps. At face value it would appear that horse racing is worse than roulette as a betting medium, but it must be realised that it is only the overall odds about all the runners that are weighted against the punter and not the odds against each individual horse.”

Although I was still waiting for the punch line to his explanation, I was still avidly taking in everything that he was saying.

“After many years of study, watching the horse racing results, buying daily papers and going back through the old formbooks, I came to some not so obvious conclusions. I concluded that there is in fact an abnormal correlation between the number of runners in a race and the price of the favourite, and second favourite in that race. Here, look at this.”

He reached over and took a blue plastic ring bind folder from off the worktop where it was leaning up against the

refrigerator. He turned to a page that was near the front and placed it in front of me. It was a chart, showing the number of runners in a race on the vertical axis and the price of the first two favourites on the horizontal axis. The boxes on the chart read off a figure.

“What do these numbers mean?” I asked.

“Turn to the chart at the back of the folder, there, you see, the figure from the first chart reads off and tells you which horse occupying which position in the betting market that you should bet on.”

“It’s very complex stuff,” I said, “I think I understand the principal, but...”

He cut in, “I don’t expect you to take all of this in right now, just start to familiarise yourself with it a little bit.”

I stared at the two charts for a good few minutes. I could see how they might work, but I had no idea why.

“Now look at this,” he said, leaning over and turning the pages, “here’s a list of all the race meetings for the last nine years. As you can see, the system loses at a meeting only very infrequently, on average about once, occasionally twice per calendar month, usually about nine or ten times per year. Those kinds of results are absolutely phenomenal Daniel. And can you see those figures in red on the right hand side of the page. They are profits Daniel. I don’t know how much money you earn on the building sites.”

I stared at the figures. “I earn about forty quid a week.”

“About two thousand pounds per year then,” he said, “look at that figure just there at the bottom right of the page that you are on now. That’s what you would have won last year if you had followed the system according to the staking plan that I have designed.”

The figure, in red, read £48, 995.

My brain was racing at an abnormal rate now. “That’s nearly £1,000 a week isn’t it?”

“You’re very nearly correct, I can see that I have selected the right person to share my secret with.”

I thought for a few moments. “Have you ever tried this, with real money?”

“No, I haven’t Daniel, the trouble is, my health is not what it was and to operate this system, you would have to stand in a betting office all afternoon. You would also need to be very strong willed to stick to the rules of the system, nerves of steel. It’s a bit like playing the stock market, standing all day on the floor of the stock exchange.”

His words hung in the air now. “What are your first impressions, your feelings?”

“It’s incredible, absolutely amazing.”

“Well, I’ve outlined the thing now, but there’s more to tell,” he said, “and I’ve detained you from your family for long enough now. Would you like to come round here again, say on Wednesday night and I will talk you through the staking plan and how to operate it?”

“Yes, I’ll be here. About 7:30?”

“That will be fine,” he replied. “One more thing, Daniel, not a word of this to anyone, not even your family. This secret is between you and me, understood?”

“Understood,” I repeated.

I stood up and went down his cellar to bring some coke up for him in a brass coalscuttle that looked as if it had been around for years. Then I put my coat and shoes on at the front door before I left.

The short, late afternoon, journey home was a really cold one. I hadn't noticed until right that very moment how chilly the weather had become and so I wasted no time in getting there. After tea, I went out with some of my friends for a drink, round a couple of the local pubs.

"What's the matter with you?" said Barry, a friend since school, "You're really quiet tonight."

"Sorry," I said, "I'm a bit tired Baz, I've been working this afternoon."

"Working? You don't usually work on a Sunday."

"Well," I said, "when I say working, I don't mean paid work, I just did a bit of work in Mr. Blackthorn's garden, but it's still hard work though."

"You must be mad," he laughed, "you wouldn't catch me working for nothing. You want to start charging the old boy. I bet he's worth a bob or two."

"I couldn't do it," I said, "He's such a nice bloke, and he's got no one else, and anyway, I don't mind."

The other two, John and Ken were laughing at me now.

"Well, I wouldn't expect you two to do it anyway," I said annoyed, "I bet you two couldn't even lift a shovel. Bleedin' office workers!"

"Anyway, if you can afford to work for nothing, it's your round," said Barry.

I'd known Barry and Ken since our first day at junior school. They were both civil servants and wore suits for work, so when they went out at night they dressed casually in jeans and tee shirts or sweat shirts. Neither had a girl friend although both, like me, did so at school. John was a friend of Ken's and had never had a girlfriend as far as any of us knew. He worked in a laboratory in Leeds.

At school I'd always been at least as clever as Barry and Ken but they studied hard whereas I didn't. When it came to final exams, they spent months earnestly revising while I studied the formbook.

I went to the bar to get the drinks in. The truth was that I wasn't so much tired but my head was full of thoughts. Mostly about what Mr. Blackthorn had told me that afternoon. Although he hadn't yet fully explained his idea, he had told me enough to make me excited at the prospect. My dad had always told me that there was "no such thing as a system," not one that was infallible anyway.

My dad took a weekly racing paper which I always read and there was a page in it where punters sent in their various systems. There was a bloke who analyzed them. Most of them were exposed as nonsense but occasionally there was one that showed a profit over a long period of time, but nothing as spectacular as Mr. Blackthorn's idea. I had begun to daydream. £1,000 per week was an incredible thought. I had started to think of big cars, a big house of my own, expensive foreign holidays and inevitably, most of all, beautiful women.

I hardly slept that night for thinking about it and that is no good whatsoever for someone who had to be up at 6:00 am and to be hard at work by 8 o'clock? That morning was awful. Labouring for two bricklayers is very labour intensive, up and down ladders with a hod full of bricks or sand and cement mix, or as we called it, gobbo, but when you're knackered to start with, it's hell.

"If you can't keep up with us, we can always find somebody else," said Gordon, my dad's brick laying partner about mid morning as we walked off towards the wooden hut where all the workers congregated for their break. It was a long

building with horizontal rustic planks on each side. It was raised up a couple of feet from the ground so that damp didn't get in when it rained heavily.

Inside the hut, I sat away from my dad and Gordon. I decided to give the plumbers, Ron and Graham my company although they were equally unkind.

"You look like death warmed up, were you out shagging last night?" Ron joked, "Was it that bird of yours?"

"No, I finished with her ages ago, don't you remember?"

"Well you better get yourself together for Saturday, it's Doncaster races this week Dan." Then he turned to Graham, "He backed a 5/1 winner on Saturday and then he wouldn't put his hand in his pocket for petrol."

"I would have done," I said, "but they all called me an idiot."

"Can't you take a fuckin' joke or what?" said Ron.

"It wasn't a joke to me," I said, "I didn't think it was funny at all. And anyway, I won and they all lost, so who was the idiot then?"

That seemed to shut him up, for now at least. Break time ended shortly afterward and we all went back to work. The day dragged on slowly and I barely got the hang of things until it was time to go home. I made sure that I was in bed early to catch up.

The following day, at dinnertime, I sat with the two plumbers again.

"Can I borrow your racing paper?" I asked Ron.

He passed me the paper and I turned to the page that had Monday's results. I wasn't sure at that moment how much information my brain had taken in of Mr. Blackthorn's system, probably not enough, but I had obviously retained some of it. I could see that some of the selections that the system would have

probably thrown up that day had won, at least one at each meeting. I imagined that meant that the system would, in theory at least, have had a winning day. The same thing happened the following day when I checked the results. I couldn't wait now to go round to his house that night to learn all there was to know about it.

That night I hurried round to Mr. Blackthorn's house. It was a clear night, pleasant for the time of year. I knocked on his door and only a few seconds later, there he was.

"Daniel," he said, cheerily, "good to see you m'boy, come in, come in. I'll put the kettle on."

We both went through to the kitchen, where I sat in one of the chairs as he made the tea.

"Have you thought about the things that we discussed, since we last met?"

"Yes, I have, a great deal," I replied. The truth was that I had thought about little else.

He sat down opposite me and opened the blue ring bind folder.

He sipped his tea. "I have given you a rough idea of how my method works, the idea is that the charts that I have shown you provide the selection method for each race. The horse, dependent upon the relevant numbers will either be the favourite, the second favourite or the third favourite. This is not unusual; of course, most races are won by one of these three positions in the market. Most, but not all."

I nodded, intently, waiting for him to carry on.

"The idea is that you back the system at each meeting stopping when you back a winner. So if there are four meetings, you bet at each of the four, do you see? So it's important that if you are going to do this, you need to memorise the contents of

the charts in this file, so that you don't have to keep consulting them the whole time."

Even though I had only had a brief look at them on Sunday, I had the basics already in my head.

"It's also important that when you place your bet, you place it as late as possible so that you make sure that you are on the right horse. As you will know, betting changes and you could very easily be on the wrong horse if you bet too early. Then Daniel, there's the staking plan. On the first race, you bet one unit, on the second race, again you bet one unit. After that, you double up, two, four, eight, sixteen and thirty two units on the last race, the seventh race, do you understand?"

I gulped slightly. The thought of putting, presumably, thirty-two pounds on one race scared me slightly. "Is that thirty two pounds?"

"Yes," he said, "although of course as you build up your betting bank, there's no reason why you can't increase your stake."

"And your records that you showed me," I said, "the ones that won £1,000 a week, is that through betting in pound units?"

"Yes Daniel, it is."

I was silent for a good long time taking in what he had said to me. He was the next to speak.

"It should be obvious even at this stage that to back this system, you would need a betting bank. I have calculated that a bank of £1,000 should be enough to get this off the ground. You have to have enough to cover a day when there's as many as six meetings and you have to have enough to cover that one day when you lose, do you understand?"

I thought about my bank account that I had with just about a grand in it.

“That’s just about what I’ve got in savings,” I said, “I was saving it towards getting married but I won’t be doing that now.”

“That’s interesting,” he mused. “I could put a thousand pounds to your thousand, to give us a betting bank of £2,000. That would be more than enough.”

At that moment I felt very nervous. It had taken me a long time to save up that thousand pounds and although I had no particular purpose for it, the prospect of throwing my life savings in the ring for somebody else’s scheme now worried me greatly and it must have showed on my face.

He sat back. “I can see that you’re not entirely onside with this project Daniel, am I right?”

“I’m just a bit worried that’s all,” I said weakly.

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to do something that you’re not entirely happy with m’boy. If when we’ve talked it through and ironed out all of your concerns, you’re not a hundred percent happy, we can just forget it with no harm done. We’ll still be friends, nothing would have changed there.”

I felt a bit happier, a bit more in control when he said that.

“The other thing Daniel is, at present, you don’t know enough to be able to operate the system,” he carried on, “and also I wouldn’t expect us to go into this full tilt until you had tried it out both in a safe environment and then with a few practice runs.”

I started to feel a little easier now.

“Now Daniel, there’s something else that I need to explain. As I told you, the thing that makes the selection in any race is a ratio between the price of the first two in the betting market and the number of runners, but it’s not just that. If you do just that, you won’t win a red cent. I have built into the figure that you see in the chart here, an equation. Here is that equation.”

He turned to a page near the back of the ring bind folder and turned it long ways round. I studied the equation silently. It was complex but I had done equations at school and understood them quite effectively.

“Can I take this folder home with me to study it Mr. Blackthorn?” I asked, still looking intently at the equation.

“I anticipated your request m’boy,” he said, “and I had a copy made. I ran it off at the local library where I go on Monday mornings. One other thing Daniel, I think that you had better start calling me Jack if we are going to be partners. Do you agree?”

“Yes, all right...Jack.”

“My real name’s John, but ever since I was at school I’ve been Jack.”

I continued to stare at the equation in silence, until suddenly, he broke my concentration. “I think it’s time that you went home now Daniel. Take the folder with you and study it until you have those numbers firmly in your mind. Remember, you won’t be able to refer to those charts in a betting office. Someone will realise that something’s wrong and it won’t be long before they ban you.”

“Can they do that?” I said, surprised.

“Oh yes, they’re not there to be a target, and they don’t like losing.”

I sat for a few moments taking in everything that he had said. My head was spinning.

“Finally,” he said, “there are a lot of notes in the folder. They are mainly a record of how I progressed in finding the system, the blind alleys, the dead ends etc. It wasn’t just a lucky break in stumbling upon this idea, it was many months and even years of calculation and narrowing down the field, honing it until

I had what you see before you. The contents of that folder are my life's work."

I stared at him attentively without even blinking.

He stood up. "So Daniel, I want you to read that folder and take in every nuance therein and when we meet again, let's say next Sunday, I would like you to give me an answer.

Do you wish to participate in this project or not? To use the modern parlance, are you in or are you out? As I said earlier, if you don't want to take part, although I would be disappointed, there would be no harm done between us."

Jack offered me his hand across the table. He had never done this before. I shook it tightly in an act of something approaching a meeting of minds. I took my coat down off the peg, put it on and walked to the door.

"See you on Sunday," I said.

He unlocked the door for me and in a moment, I was gone, walking at a brisk pace through the dimly lit streets with the folder tucked firmly under my arm.

Once I got home, I took my coat off and announced that I was going straight to bed.

"Aren't you going to look at Saturday's race card?" asked my dad.

"No, I'll have to start tomorrow," I answered, disappearing around the stairs door and making my way upstairs. A few moments later, I was in bed with my knees pulled right up to my chest and the ring binder file open, beginning to read the notes that Mr. Blackthorn, or Jack, as I now knew him, had written. They were hand written, and some of the writing was not very legible to me at first, but after a while, with the occasional use of a magnifying glass, the text became easier to understand. I

stayed that way, reading the notes until the early hours of the morning when I finally put the file down and went to sleep.

The following two days at work were just an utter waste of time. I went through the motions just to get to the evenings when I would spend the next few hours in my bedroom, not only going through the notes but getting the contents of the two main charts firmly into my head in the same way as if I was revising for an exam. The funny thing was that I never did revise for exams at all at school; I always treated them with something approaching contempt, which probably explained my poor results. It also explained the fact that I now worked on a building site as a labourer.

On Saturday, my dad and I set off to pick up Ron from his house on the other side of town.

On the way there, he asked me, “What are you backing today?”

The truth was that I hadn’t done any study work, as such on the day’s meeting. I’d spent all my time learning Jack’s system.

“I’ve got one or two possible bets,” I said, largely avoiding the question, “but I’m still thinking about things,”

“Well don’t think too long,” he said sarcastically, “or the meeting will be over.”

I borrowed my dad’s racing paper and I noticed something very interesting. At the four meetings that had taken place the day before, the system would have won at three of them, but at the other one, Newbury, it had lost. I knew that from what Jack had said and from reading his file that when that happened, it usually then didn’t lose again for some considerable time, so rare was a losing meeting.

After we picked Ron up, we drove the short distance to the course, found a parking spot and made our way through bustling

crowds and the turnstiles into the grandstand. We walked around to the inside of the stand area until just before the first race when we grabbed some seats. My dad and Ron backed the winners of the first three races, which put them in great mood, but I kept my money firmly in my pocket. I was testing myself to see if I could identify the system horse in each race without recourse to the charts in the ring bind file and Jack's system hadn't won there yet.

"When are you going to have a bet?" my dad said to me almost angrily, "We're backing winners and you haven't even had a bet."

"All in good time," I replied.

After that, I separated from them, getting lost in the crowd. I didn't want any pressure to be put on me. When the fifth race, the second last, had been run, Jack's system still hadn't won at the meeting. I saw my dad collecting from the bookies after that and realised that they must have had a really good day. I also realised at that moment that whatever Jack's system horse was in the last race must have a huge chance of winning, statistically at least.

I worked it out that the horse was the second favourite. The betting went 6/4 Super Concorde, 4/1 Bank Teller and 6/1 Trojan Marsh. Although Bank Teller was clearly the horse, I waited until the horses were down at the start. I had £50 to win on Bank Teller, the biggest bet that I had ever had in my life, more than a week's wages. Once the money was on, I raced nervously back to the stand where I rejoined my dad and Ron.

"Have you had a bet?" asked my dad.

"I've backed Bank Teller in this race, my only bet," I panted.

“We’ve backed all five winners,” Ron crowed, “and you’ve only just had a bet?”

“What have you backed in this one?” I asked.

“We’ve backed Super Concorde,” he answered, “Bill’s really confident.”

I swallowed hard. If my horse lost, not only would I have blown more than a week’s wages, but also I’d get a right ear bashing on the way home for going against my dad. A thick, dank mist had descended over the racecourse now and once they were off there was only sketchy commentary on the race.

“They’ve jumped the second last and I still can’t see what’s in front,” said the commentator.

As they approached the last, I could see the red colours of Bank Teller apparently several lengths in front. He jumped the flight, spring heeled and sprinted away to beat the favourite by a resounding ten lengths.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” complained my dad angrily.

“Tell you what?” I said, “I don’t know what it was I was supposed to tell you.”

They followed me to the bookmaker, where I stood in the queue and eventually collected £240 in cash before their eyes.

“That’s more than we won all afternoon,” Ron moaned, “did you get a tip or something?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” I said.

That was true all right. I couldn’t explain it at all without betraying Jack’s confidence and I wasn’t about to do that.

The journey home was nothing short of an inquisition. Why had I had all that money on that horse? Why was it such a good thing? Why wouldn’t I tell them? It was all very difficult.

That evening, my dad went out for a drink at his local, but I didn't. The first thing that I did was to press two ten-pound notes into my mother's hand.

"Don't tell him, will you?" I said.

Then, we watched a bit of television. It was her main interest in life, that and reading books. I sometimes wondered how she ever became involved with my father. They were so different. She was quiet, reserved, never wore much make up except on the odd occasion that he took her out, but she must have been quite attractive when she was young. You could still see that beneath the lines of age that were now becoming visible on her face. A few grey hairs were also developing in the wispy brown curls.

She always wore comfortable house clothes, loose fitting drab coloured blouses and skirts with fluffy, flat slippers. Black horn rimmed spectacles were needed for watching TV or her occasional visit to the cinema but that wasn't very often now that I'd grown up.

I think she enjoyed having me in with her for company. It rarely happened these days. At about ten o'clock I went to bed. I re-read the ring bind folder from beginning to end, once again making sure that I'd got the contents including the equation firmly in my head.

The following day, after a pint in the local where my dad gave me another grilling, we sat down for Sunday dinner where again he scowled at me for my lack of communication. After dinner, I put my jacket on and all but ran round the corner to Jack's house where I banged on the door. He answered a few seconds later, staring at me expectantly.

"I'm in," I said.