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Jilly Cooper was a journalist, author and media superstar. The author of many number one bestselling books, she lived in Gloucestershire where her groundbreaking Rutshire Chronicles series was set.

Awarded honorary doctorates by the Universities of Gloucestershire and Anglia Ruskin, she also won the inaugural Comedy Women in Print lifetime achievement award in 2019, and was appointed DBE in 2024 for services to literature and charity. She died in 2025.

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By Jilly Cooper

FICTION	*The Rutshire Chronicles:* Riders Rivals Polo The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous Appassionata Score! Pandora Wicked! Jump! Mount! Tackle!
NON-FICTION	How to Stay Married How to Survive from Nine to Five Jolly Super Men and Supermen Jolly Super Too Women and Superwomen Work and Wedlock Jolly Superlative Super Men and Super Women Super Jilly Class Super Cooper Intelligent and Loyal Jolly Marsupial Animals in War The Common Years Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with Patrick Lichfield) How to Survive Christmas Turn Right at the Spotted Dog Angels Rush In Araminta's Wedding Between the Covers
CHILDREN'S BOOKS	Little Mabel Little Mabel's Great Escape Little Mabel Wins Little Mabel Saves the Day
ROMANCE	Emily Bella Harriet Octavia Prudence Imogen Lisa & Co.
ANTHOLOGIES	The British in Love Violets and Vinegar

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RIVALS

Jilly Cooper



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DEDICATION

To Annalise Kay
who is as wise as she is
good and beautiful

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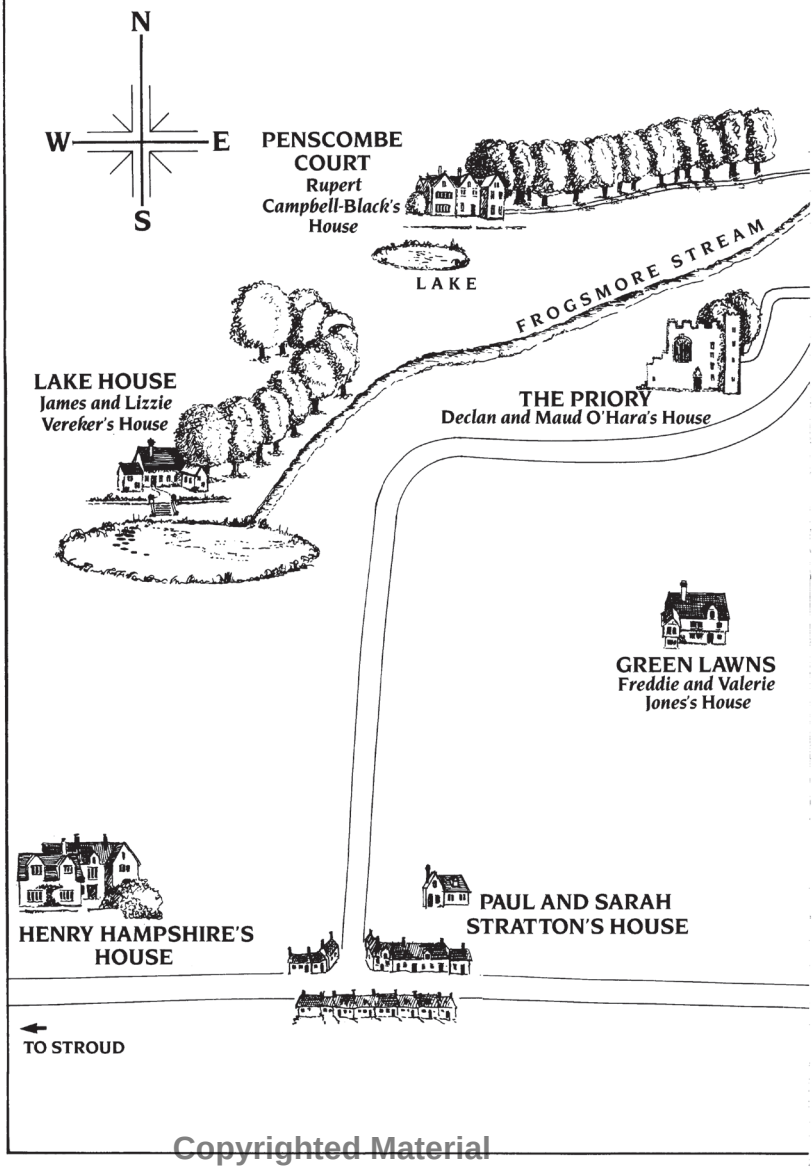

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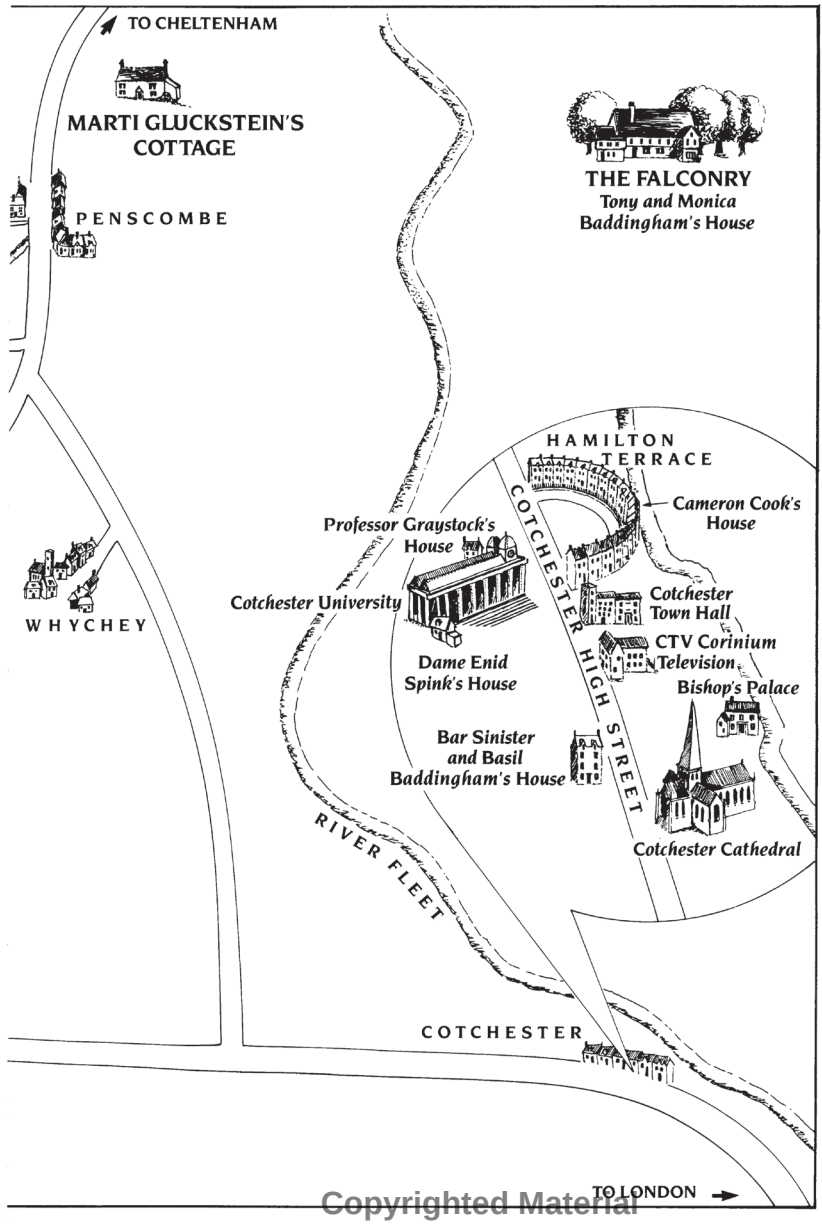

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Bisley, Gloucestershire
1987.

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CHARACTERS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

JOHNNY ABRAHAMS	Head of News and Current Affairs, BBC.
GEORGIE BAINES	Sales Director, Corinium Television.
LADY BARNSLEY	A member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), late of the White Fish Authority.
BIRGITTA	A comely but bolshie nanny working for the Verekers.
HARDY BISSETT	A franchise expert. Late of the IBA.
MR AND MRS BODKIN	Rupert Campbell-Black's couple.
SIR CEDRIC BONNINGTON	Chairman of Mid-West Television.
HUBERT BRENTON	Bishop of Cotchester.
ANTHONY, SECOND BARON BADDINGHAM	Chairman and Managing Director, Corinium Television.
MONICA BADDINGHAM	His wife.
ARCHIE BADDINGHAM	His elder son.
BASIL BADDINGHAM	Tony's illegitimate brother, ace polo player, and owner of the Bar Sinister in Cotchester High Street.
SEBASTIAN BURROWS	A news reporter, Corinium Television.
DAYSEE BUTLER	A very beautiful, stupid PA, Corinium Television.

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RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK	Minister for Sport. Tory MP for Chalford and Bisley. Ex-member of the British show-jumping team.
MARCUS CAMPBELL-BLACK	His son.
TABITHA CAMPBELL-BLACK	His daughter.
CAMERON COOK	Producer/Director, NBS, New York. Later Head of Drama, Corinium Television.
CHARLES CRAWFORD	Retiring Chairman of the IBA.
JUDGE DAVEY	A member of the IBA.
OWEN DAVIES	Leader of the Opposition.
WESLEY EMERSON	Gloucester and England bowler.
SUZY ERIKSON	An American ex-girlfriend of Rupert Campbell-Black.
LADY EVESHAM	An early feminist, and non-executive Director, Corinium Television.
CHARLES FAIRBURN	Head of Religious Broadcasting, Corinium Television.
JOHNNY FRIEDLANDER	American actor and megastar.
MARTI GLUCKSTEIN	A brilliant East End accountant.
MALISE GORDON	Ex-*chef d'équipe* of the British show-jumping team.
HELEN GORDON	His wife. Ex-wife of Rupert Campbell-Black and mother of Marcus and Tabitha.
LADY GOSLING	Chairman of the IBA.
GRACE	Declan O'Hara's housekeeper.
CRISPIN GRAYSTOCK	Professor of English at Cotchester University and a disgusting lecher.
HENRY HAMPSHIRE	Lord-Lieutenant of Gloucestershire – a much less disgusting lecher.
SIMON HARRIS	Controller of Programmes, Corinium Television.

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GEORGINA HARRISON	An undergraduate.
RONNIE HAVEGAL	Head of Co-Productions, NBS, New York.
HAZEL	A BBC make-up girl.
RALPHIE HENRIQUES	An undergraduate at Trinity Dublin.
IVOR HICKS	Corporate Development Controller, Corinium Television.
JILLY	Yet another Vereker nanny, but for once a dependable boot.
BEATTIE JOHNSON	Fleet Street columnist, ghosting Rupert Campbell-Black's memoirs.
GINGER JOHNSON	Financial Director, Corinium Television. No relation to Beattie.
FREDDIE JONES	A multi-millionaire in electronics.
VALERIE JONES	His wife, a nightmare.
SHARON JONES	His overweight daughter.
DEIRDRE KILPATRICK	A researcher at Corinium Television.
LAVINIA	Patrick O'Hara's girlfriend.
BILLY LLOYD-FOXE	Sports Presenter, BBC.
JANEY LLOYD-FOXE	An author and national newspaper columnist.
DERMOT MACBRIDE	A playwright and Angry Not-So-Young man.
JOYCE MADDEN	Lord Baddingham's secretary, Corinium Television.
MRS MAKEPIECE	A 'treasure' who cleans for Valerie Jones and Lizzie Vereker.
KEVIN MAKEPIECE	Her son.
TRACEY MAKEPIECE	Her daughter.
SALLY MAPLES	Head of Children's Programmes, Yorkshire Television.
MIKE MEADOWS	Head of Sport, Corinium Television.
MRS MENZIES-SCOTT	Ex-head of the Women's Institute, a member of the IBA.

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GERALD MIDDLETON	Parliamentary Private Secretary to Rupert Campbell-Black.
DECLAN O'HARA	A television megastar.
MAUD O'HARA	His ex-actress wife.
PATRICK O'HARA	His son, an undergraduate at Trinity Dublin.
AGATHA (TAGGIE) O'HARA	His elder daughter.
CAITLIN O'HARA	His younger daughter.
ORTRUD	Yet another of the Verekers' comely nannies.
CYRIL PEACOCK	Lord Baddingham's PA and sometime Press Officer, Corinium Television.
THE VERY REVEREND FERGUS PENNEY	An ex-Prebendary of the Church of England, and a member of the IBA.
PERCY	Lord Baddingham's chauffeur.
PASCOE RAWLINGS	The most powerful theatrical agent in London.
BARTON SINCLAIR	Director of *The Merry Widow*.
SKIP	A beautiful American lawyer.
LORD SMITH	An ex-Secretary of the TGWU.
DAME ENID SPINK	A distinguished composer and Professor of Music at Cotchester University.
PAUL STRATTON	Tory MP for Cotchester. An ex-Cabinet Minister.
SARAH STRATTON	His ravishing second wife and ex-secretary.
SYDNEY	Rupert's driver.
URSULA	Declan O'Hara's secretary.
JAMES VEREKER	Anchorman of 'Cotswold Round-Up', Corinium Television.
LIZZIE VEREKER	His wife, a novelist.
ELEANOR VEREKER	His daughter.
SEBASTIAN VEREKER	His son.
HAROLD WHITE	Director of Programmes, London Weekend Television.
MAURICE WOOTON	A bent Gloucestershire property millionaire.

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RIVALS

1

Sitting in the Concorde departure lounge at Heathrow on a perfect blue June morning, Anthony, second Baron Baddingham, Chairman and Managing Director of Corinium Television, should have been perfectly happy. He was blessed with great wealth, a title, a brilliant career, a beautiful flat in Kensington, houses in Gloucestershire and Tuscany, a loyal, much-admired wife, three charming children and a somewhat demanding mistress, to whom he had just bidden a long farewell on the free telephone beside him.

He was about to fly on his favourite aeroplane, Concorde, to his favourite city, New York, to indulge in his favourite pastime – selling Corinium's programmes to American television and raising American money to make more programmes. Tony Baddingham was a great believer in using Other People's Money, or OPM as he called it; then if a project bombed, someone else picked up the bill.

As a final bonus, neatly folded beside him were the morning papers, which he'd already read in the Post House Hotel, and which all contained glowing reports of Corinium's past six months' results, announced yesterday.

Just as he had been checking out of the Post House an hour earlier, however, Tony's perfect pleasure had been ruined by the sight of his near neighbour and long-term rival, Rupert Campbell-Black, checking in. He was scribbling his signature with one hand and holding firmly on to a rather

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grubby but none-the-less ravishing girl with the other.

The girl, who had chipped nail polish, wildly tangled blonde hair, mascara smudges under her eyes, and a deep suntan, had obviously just been pulled out of some other bed and was giggling hysterically.

'Ru-pert,' she wailed, 'there simply isn't time; you'll miss the plane.'

'It'll wait,' said Rupert, and, gathering up his keys, started to drag her towards the lift. As the doors closed, like curtains coming down on the first act of a play, Tony could see the two of them glued together in a passionate embrace.

A deeply competitive man, Tony had felt dizzy with jealousy. He had seldom, particularly since he had inherited the title and become Chief Executive of Corinium, had any difficulty attracting women, but he'd never attracted anything so wantonly desirable and desiring as that grubby, vaguely familiar blonde.

'More coffee, Lord Baddingham?' One of the beautiful attendants in the Concorde Lounge interrupted Tony's brooding. He shook his head, comforted by the obvious admiration in her voice.

'Shouldn't we be boarding?' he asked.

'We'll be a few minutes late. There was a slight engineering problem. They're just doing a last-minute check.'

Tony glanced round the departure lounge, filled with businessmen and American tourists, and noticed a pale, red-headed young man in a grey pinstripe suit, who had stopped his steady flow of writing notes on a foolscap pad and was looking apprehensively at his watch.

Boarding the plane twenty minutes later, Tony found himself sitting up at the front on an inside seat with a Jap immersed in a portable computer on his right. Across the gangway next to the window sat the young man in the pinstripe suit. He was even paler now and looking distinctly put out.

'Good morning, Lord Baddingham,' said a stewardess, handing Tony that day's newly-flown-in copy of the *Wall Street Journal*.

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'Engineering fault sorted out?' asked Tony, as the engines started revving up.

Not quite meeting his eyes, the girl nodded brightly; then, looking out of the window, she seemed to relax as a black car raced across the tarmac. Next there was a commotion, as a light, flat, familiar drawl could be heard down the gangway:

'Frightfully sorry to hold you all up; traffic was diabolical.'

All the stewardesses seemed to converge on the new arrival, fighting to carry his newspaper and put his hand luggage up in the locker.

'Won't you be needing your briefcase, Minister?' asked a male steward, shimmying down the gangway.

Rupert Campbell-Black shook his head. 'No thanks, sweetheart.'

'Have a nice zizz then,' said the male steward, going crimson with pleasure at the endearment.

As the doors slammed shut, Rupert collapsed into the seat across the gangway from Tony. Wearing a crumpled cream suit, a blue striped shirt, dark glasses and with an eighth of an inch of stubble on his chin, he looked more like a rock star than one of Her Majesty's ministers.

'Terribly sorry, Gerald,' he murmured to the pale young man in the pinstripe suit. 'There was a terrible pile-up on the M4.'

Smiling thinly, Gerald removed a blonde hair from Rupert's lapel.

'I really must buy you an alarm clock for Christmas, Minister. If you'd missed that lunchtime speech, we'd have been in real stück. Good of them to hold the plane.'

'Thank Christ they did.' Looking round, Rupert saw Tony Baddingham and grinned. 'Why, it's the big Baddingham wolf.'

'Cutting it a bit fine, aren't you?' said Tony disapprovingly.

Both men required each other's goodwill. Rupert, as an MP within Tony's television company's territory, needed the coverage, whereas Tony needed Rupert's recommendation to the Government that he was running a respectable company. But it didn't make either like the other any better.

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'Bloody good results you had this morning,' said Rupert, fastening his seat belt. 'I'd better buy some Corinium shares.'

Slightly mollified, Tony congratulated Rupert on his recent appointment as Tory Minister for Sport.

Rupert shrugged. 'The PM's shit-scared about football hooliganism – seems to think I can come up with some magic formula.'

'Setting a Yobbo to catch a Yobbo perhaps,' said Tony nastily, then regretted it.

'I was at Thames Television yesterday,' said Rupert icily, as the plane taxied towards the runway. 'After the programme I had a drink with the Home Secretary and the Chairman of the IBA. They were both saying that you'd better watch out. If you don't spend a bit more of that bloody fortune you're coining from advertising on making some decent programmes, you're going to lose your franchise.'

As Rupert leant forward so Tony could hear him over the engines, Tony caught a whiff of the scent the girl had been wearing in the Post House foyer earlier.

'And you ought to spend some time in the area. How the hell can you run a television company in the Cotswolds, if you spend all your time in London, hawking your ass round the advertising companies?'

'The shareholders wouldn't be very pleased if I didn't,' said Tony, thoroughly nettled. 'Look at our results.'

Rupert shrugged again. 'You're also supposed to make good programmes. As your local MP I'm just passing on what's being said.'

'As one of your more influential constituents,' said Tony, furiously, 'I don't think you should be checking into the Post House with bimbos half your age.'

Rupert laughed. 'That was no bimbo, that was Beattie Johnson.'

Of course! Instantly Tony remembered the girl. Beattie Johnson was one of the most scurrilous and successful women columnists – dubbed by *Private Eye* 'the First not-quite-a-lady of Fleet Street'.Copyrighted Material

'She's ghosting my memoirs,' added Rupert. 'We were doing research. I always believe in laying one's ghost.'

Below the blank stare of the dark glasses, his curved smiling mouth seemed even more insolent. As the plane revved up, both men turned to look out of the window, and Tony found himself trembling with rage. But not even the splendid, striped-silk-shirted bosom of the air hostess, which rose and fell as she showed passengers how to inflate their life jackets, could keep Rupert's eyes open. By the time they were airborne, he was asleep.

Tony accepted a glass of champagne and tried to concentrate on the *Wall Street Journal*. He didn't know which he resented most – Rupert's habitual contempt, his ability to sleep anywhere, his effortless acquisition of women, or the obvious devotion of the palely efficient Gerald, who was now sipping Perrier and polishing the speech Rupert was to deliver to the International Olympic Committee at lunchtime.

There had hardly been a husband in Gloucestershire, indeed in the world, Tony reflected, who hadn't cheered four years ago when Rupert's beautiful wife, Helen, had walked out on him in the middle of the Los Angeles Olympics, running off with another rider and causing Rupert the maximum humiliation.

But, infuriatingly, Rupert had appeared outwardly unaffected and had risen to the occasion by winning a show-jumping gold medal despite a trapped shoulder nerve, and going on two years later to win the World Championship, the only prize hitherto to elude him. Then, giving up show jumping at the pinnacle of his fame, he had moved effortlessly into politics, winning the Tory seat of Chalford and Bisley with ease. Even worse, he had turned out a surprisingly good MP, being very quick on his feet, totally unfazed by the Opposition or the Prime Minister, and prepared to fight very hard for his constituency.

Although scandal had threatened eighteen months ago, when Rupert's then mistress, Amanda Hamilton, wife of the Foreign Secretary, had withdrawn her patronage on finding out that Rupert was also sleeping with her teenage daughter,

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by this time, in the eyes of a doting Prime Minister, Rupert could do no wrong. Now, as Minister for Sport, with Gerald Middleton as an exceptional private secretary to do all the donkey work, Rupert was free to roam round exuding glamour, raising money for the Olympic team here, defusing a riot against a South African athlete there. Responsibility, however, hadn't cleaned up his private life at all. Divorced from Helen, he could behave as he chose, hence his cavorting with Beattie Johnson in the Post House that morning.

Glancing at Rupert, sprawled out on the pale-grey leather seat, taking up most of Gerald's leg room, beautiful despite the emergent stubble, Tony felt a further stab of jealousy. He couldn't remember a time in his forty-four years when he hadn't envied the Campbell-Blacks. For all their outlandish behaviour, they had always been looked up to in Gloucestershire. They had lived in the same beautiful house in Penscombe for generations, while Tony was brought up behind net curtains in a boring semi in the suburbs of Cheltenham. Tony also had a chip because he only went to a grammar school, where he'd been teased for being fat and short, and because his conventional colourless father (although subsequently ennobled for his work in the war) had been considered far too valuable as a munitions manufacturer to be allowed to go off and fight, unlike Rupert's father, Eddie, who'd had a dazzling war in the Blues.

Even when Tony's father had been given his peerage, Eddie Campbell-Black and his cronies had laughed, always referring to him dismissively as Lord Pop-Pop, as they blasted away slaughtering wild life with one of his products on their large estates.

Growing up near the Campbell-Blacks, Tony had longed to be invited to Penscombe and drawn into that rackety, exciting set. But the privilege had been bestowed on his brother Basil, who was ten years younger and who, because Tony's father had made his pile by then, had been given a pony to ride and sent to Harrow instead of a grammar school, and had there become a friend of Rupert's.

As a result of such imagined early deprivation, Tony had

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grown up indelibly competitive – not just at work, but also socially, sexually, and at all games. Spurning the family firm when he left school, he'd gone straight into advertising and specialized in buying television air time. Having learnt the form, from there he moved to the advertising side of television. A brilliant entrepreneur, who felt he was slipping unless he had a dozen calls from Tokyo and New York during Christmas dinner, by changing jobs repeatedly he had gained the plum post of Chief Executive at Corinium Television eight years ago.

Having shot up to five feet ten and lost his puppy fat in his twenties, Tony had in middle age grown very attractive in a brutal sort of way; although with his Roman nose, heavy-lidded charcoal-grey eyes, coarsely modelled mouth and springy close-cropped dark hair, he looked more like a Sicilian wide boy than an English peer. He chose to proclaim the latter, however, by wearing coronets on absolutely everything. And on the little finger on his left hand gleamed a massive gold signet ring, sporting the Baddingham crest of wrestling rams, above the motto chosen by Lord Pop-Pop: Peaceful is the country that is strongly armed.

Considerably adding to Tony's sex appeal was a hunky bull-necked body, kept in shape by self-control and ruthless exercise, and a voice deliberately deep and smooth to eradicate any trace of a Gloucestershire accent. This only slipped when he went into one of his terrifying rages, which flattened the Corinium Television staff against the cream-hessianed walls of his vast office.

In fact, it irritated the hell out of Tony that, despite his success, his fortune and his immense power, Rupert still refused to take him seriously. He would not have been so upset by Rupert's sniping if it had not echoed a warning last night from Charles Crawford, the rotund and retiring Chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (or IBA as they were known). The IBA's job was to grant franchises to the fifteen independent television companies every eight years or so, monitor their programmes and generally beat them with a big stick if they stepped out of line.

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After his programme with Rupert and the Home Secretary at Thames Television yesterday, Charles Crawford had gone on to the Garrick to dine with Tony.

'As an old friend,' said Charles, greedily pouring the cream Tony had rejected together with his own supply over his strawberries, 'I don't see what else we can do but give you a stinking mid-term report. You promised us Corinium would provide at least ten hours' drama a year for the network, and all you've produced is one lousy cops-and-robbers two-parter, totally targeted at the American market. Why can't you provide some decent programmes, like Patrick Dromgoole does at HTV?'

For a second Tony gritted his teeth. He was fed up with having Patrick Dromgoole and HTV held up to him as models of perfection. Then pulling himself together he filled up Charles Crawford's glass with priceless Barsac.

'Things are going to change,' he said soothingly. 'I've just poached Simon Harris from the BBC as Programme Controller. He's very hot on drama, and has dreamed up a terrific idea for a thirteen-parter, a cross between James Herriot and "Animal House".'

'Well that's a start,' grumbled Charles, 'but your regional programmes are quite awful too. Your territory – which you conveniently seem to have forgotten – stretches from Oxford to Wales, and from Southampton to Stratford. And you're supposed to cover the whole area. That's why we gave you the franchise.

'We also know you've been spending Corinium advertising profits, which should have been spent improving your programmes, buying up . . .' Charles ticked the list off with his fat fingers, 'a film production company, a publishing firm, a travel agency, a cinema chain, a film library, and a safari park, and what's this I hear about plans to buy an American distribution company? American, for Christ's sake.'

'That's fallen through,' lied Tony. 'It was only an idea.'

'Well, keep it that way. Finally you've got to spend more time in your area. Many of your staff have absolutely no idea what you look like. I could understand if you had to live in

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the middle of Birmingham or even Manchester, but Cotchester must be the most delightfully civilized town in the country. We awarded you the franchise to reflect the region responsibly, and we've given you a very easy ride up till now.'

And I've given you some bloody good dinners, thought Tony sourly, as Charles sniffed appreciatively at a passing plate of welsh rarebit.

'But when Lady Gosling takes over from me in the autumn,' went on Charles, spooning up the last drop of pink cream, 'you're all going to feel the chill cloud of higher education across the industry. Lady G believes in quality programmes and lots of women at the helm. Go on producing your usual crap, and you'll be out on your ear.'

Having brooded on this conversation and on Rupert Campbell-Black's contumely the entire flight, the only thing that managed to cheer Tony up was when the limousine that met him at Kennedy turned out to be at least three feet longer than Rupert's and twice as plush.

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RIVALS
2

Tony's rule, once he got to America, was never to check what time it was in England. To compensate for such an unsatisfactory start to the day, he spent the next few hours in a heady spate of wheeling and dealing, selling the format of two sit-coms and a game show for such a large sum that it wouldn't matter even if they bombed. It was only when he got back to the Waldorf and found three messages to ring his very demanding mistress, Alicia, and, checking the time, realized that he couldn't because it was long after midnight and she'd be tucked up in bed with her husband, that he suddenly felt tired.

He kicked himself for agreeing to dine with Ronnie Havegal, Head of Co-Productions at NBS, particularly as Ronnie had asked if he could bring some producer called Cameron Cook.

'Cameron's a good friend of mine,' Ronnie had said in his Harvard drawl. 'Very bright, just done a documentary on debutantes, up for a Peabody award, real class; they like that sort of thing in England.'

With his royal-blue blazers, butterscotch tan, and streaked hair, Tony had often wondered about Ronnie's sexual preferences. He didn't want to spend an evening avoiding buying some lousy programme from one of Ronnie's fag friends. Yanks always got class wrong anyway.

Christ, he was tired. Unable to master the taps in the

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shower, he shot boiling lava straight into his eyes. Then, forgetting to put the shower curtain inside the bath, he drenched the floor and his only pair of black shoes.

Tony spent a lot of money on his clothes and ever since he'd seen Marlon Brando in *Guys and Dolls* as a teenager tended to wear dark shirts with light ties. The new dark-blue silk shirt Alicia had given him for his birthday would be wasted on two fags. He would keep it for lunch with Ali MacGraw tomorrow. Dressed, he fortified himself with a large whisky and put the presentation booklet of 'Four Men went to Mow', Simon Harris's new idea for a thirteen-part series, on the glass table, together with a video of possible exteriors and interiors to give the Americans a taste of the ravishing Cotswold countryside.

He was woken by Ronnie ringing up from downstairs. But when Ronnie came through the door, Tony suddenly didn't feel tired any more, for with him was the sexiest, most truculent-looking girl Tony had ever seen. Around twenty-six, she was wearing a straight linen dress, the colour of a New York taxi, and earrings like mini satellite dishes. She had a lean, wonderfully rapacious body, long legs, very short dark hair sleeked back from her thin face, and a clear olive skin. With her straight black brows, angry, slightly protruding amber eyes, beaky nose and predatory mouth, she reminded him of a bird of prey – beautiful, intensely ferocious and tameable only by the few. She gave out an appalling sexual energy.

She was also so rude to Ronnie, who was very much her senior, that at first Tony assumed they must be sleeping together. He soon realized she was rude to everyone.

'This is Cameron Cook,' said Ronnie.

Nodding angrily in Tony's direction, Cameron set off prowling round the huge suite, looking at the large blue urn in the centre of the living-room holding agapanthus as big as footballs, the leather sofas and arm chairs, the vast double bed next door, and the six telephones (with one even in the shower).

'Shit!' Her voice was low and rasping. 'This place is bigger

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than Buckingham Palace; no wonder you Brits need American co-production money.'

Tony, who was opening a bottle of Dom Perignon, ignored the jibe, and asked Cameron where she came from.

'Cincinnati.'

'City of the seven hills,' said Tony smoothly. 'But you must have bought those legs in New York.'

Cameron didn't smile.

'You don't look like a Lord, more like a Mafia hood. What do I call you: Your Grace, Sir, my Lord, Baron, Lord Ant?'

'You can call me Tony.' He handed her a glass.

Cameron picked up the presentation booklet of 'Four Men went to Mow'. Kicking off her flat black shoes, she curled up, looking very tiny on the huge pockmarked red leather sofa.

'What's this shit?'

'Cameron!' remonstrated Ronnie.

'Corinium's latest thirteen-parter,' explained Tony. 'We aim to start shooting in October.'

'If you get American finance,' said Cameron, sharply.

Tony nodded. 'We'll put it out early in the evening; should appeal to kids and adults.'

'Dumb title. What the shit does it mean?'

'It's the line of an English song,' said Tony evenly.

'Thought it was a series about back yards.'

'It's about four agricultural students living in a house.'

'I can read, thank you,' snapped Cameron, running her eyes down the page. 'And someone finds someone in bed with someone in the first episode. Jesus, and you're expecting this shit to go out as wholesome family entertainment in Middle America, where we haven't seen a nipple on the network for years.'

'Don't listen to Cameron,' said Ronnie. 'She needs a muzzle in the office to stop her savaging her colleagues.'

'Shut up and let me read it.'

Ronnie then proceeded to update Tony on the recent changes at NBS. 'They axed twenty people last week, good

Copyrighted Material

people who've been there fifteen years. The new business guys are running the place like a supermarket.'

But Tony wasn't listening. He was watching this incredibly savage girl with her skirt rucked up round her thighs. Christ, he'd like to screw all that smouldering bad temper out of her.

As if aware of his scrutiny, she glanced up.

'There's too much air in this glass,' she said, holding it out for a refill.

'You're too old for TV at twenty-five these days,' Ronnie rattled on obsessively. 'I work with a guy of fifty. He lives in such constant fear of his age getting out, he keeps on having his face lifted.'

Ronnie looked desperately tired. Beneath the butterscotch tan, there were new lines round the eyes. Cameron chucked the presentation booklet back on the glass table.

'Well?' Tony raised his eyebrows.

'Schmaltz, schlock, shit, what d'you want me to say? It's utterly provincial, right, but the dialogue's far too sophisticated. If you're going to appeal to Alabama blacks, Mexican peasants and Russian Jews in the same programme, you can't have a vocab bigger than three hundred words. And I don't know any of the stars.'

'No one had heard of Tim Piggott-Smith, or Charles Dance, or Geraldine James before "Jewel".'

'They'd heard of Peggy Ashcroft. Your characters are so stereotyped. And you've got the wrong hero, Johnny's the guy the Americans will identify with. He's got drive, he comes from a poor home, he's going to make it. The Hon Will's got it already. What's an Hon anyway?'

'A peer's son,' said Tony.

'Well, make him a Lord. Americans understand Lords. And they're all far too wimpish. Americans are pissed off with wimps. We've seen too many guys crying in pinnies. You can't wear your sensitivity on your silk shirtsleeve any more.'

Tony, who'd never done any of these things, warmed to this girl.

'Go on,' he said.Copyrighted Material

'As a nation, we're getting behind the family and the strong patriarch again. There's a large part of the population that want men to reassert themselves, be more aggressive, more accountable, more heterosexual. And you've got a marvellous chance with four guys in a house together to explore friendship between men, I don't mean faggotry; I mean comradeship. It was a great Victorian virtue, but no one associated it with being gay. Today's man shoots first, then gets in touch with his feelings later.'

'Is that how you like your men?' said Tony, getting up to put the video into the machine.

'Shit no, I'm just talking about the viewers. You've got one of the guys ironing the girl's ball gown for her; yuk!'

Tony filled up her glass yet again.

'Have a look at this.'

Up on the screen came a honey-coloured Cotswold village, an ancient church, golden cornfields, then a particularly ravishing Queen Anne house.

'We plan to use this as Will's father's house,' said Tony.

'Bit arty-farty,' snapped Cameron, as the camera roved lasciviously over a lime-tree avenue, waterfalls of old roses, and a lake surrounded by yellow irises.

'Beautiful place,' said Ronnie in awe.

'Mine,' said Tony smugly.

'Don't you have a wife who owns it as well?' said Cameron, feminist hackles rising.

'Of course; she's a very good gardener.'

'Looks like fucking Disneyland,' said Cameron.

Switching off the video machine, Tony emptied the bottle into Cameron's glass and said, 'Corinium did make more than twelve million pounds last year selling programmes to America, so we're not quite amateurs. Some of the points you made are interesting, but we do have to appeal to a slightly more sophisticated audience at home.'

'We ought to eat soon,' said Ronnie. 'You must be exhausted.'

'Not at all,' said Tony, who was looking at Cameron, 'must just have a pee.'

Copyrighted Material

Alone in the bathroom, he whipped out his red fountain pen and in the memo page of his diary listed every criticism Cameron had made. Then he brushed his hair and, smiling at his reflection, hastily removed a honey-roast peanut from between his teeth. Fortunately he hadn't been smiling much at that bitch.

Even in a packed restaurant swarming with celebrities Cameron turned heads. There was something about her combative unsmiling beauty, her refusal to look to left or right, that made even the vainest diners put on their spectacles to have a second glance.

Immediately they'd ordered, Ronnie went off table-hopping. 'Nice guy,' said Tony, fishing.

'Very social register,' said Cameron dismissively. 'Watch him work the room, he makes everyone feel they've had a meaningful intimate conversation in ten seconds flat.'

'Seems a bit flustered about the blood-letting at NBS.'

Cameron took a slug of Dom Perignon. 'He needs a big success. Both the series he set up last year have bombed.'

'Given him an ulcer too.'

Cameron looked at Tony speculatively.

'I guess you've never had an ulcer, Lord Ant.'

'No,' said Tony smoothly. 'I give them to other people. How do the NBS sackings affect you?'

Cameron shrugged. 'I don't mind the sackings or the rows, but now the money men have moved in, I figure I'll have less freedom to make the programmes I want.'

'How d'you get into television?'

'My mother walked out on my father at the height of the feminist revolution, came to New York hell-bent on growth. The only thing that grew was her overdraft. She was too proud to ask for money from my father, so I went to Barnard on a scholarship, and got a reporting job in the Vac to make ends meet. After graduation, I joined the *New York Times*, then moved to the NBS newsroom. Last year I switched over to documentaries, as a writer/producer. At the moment I'm directing drama.'

'Your mother must be proud of you.'

Copyrighted Material

'She thinks I'm too goal-orientated,' said Cameron bitterly. 'She's never forgiven me for voting for Reagan. I don't understand my mother's generation. All that crap about going back to Nature, and open marriages, and communes and peace marches. Jesus.'

Tony laughed. 'I can't see you on a peace march. What are your generation into?'

'Physical beauty, money, power, fame.'

'You've certainly achieved the first.'

'Sure.' Cameron made no attempt to deny it.

'How d'you intend to achieve the rest?'

'I aim to be the first woman to run a Network Company.'

'What about marriage and children?'

Cameron shook her head so violently she nearly blacked her own eyes with her satellite dish earrings.

'Gets in the way of a career. I've seen too many women at NBS poised to close a deal, being interrupted by a phone call, and having to rush home because their kid's got a temperature of 104.'

The waiter arrived with their first course. Escargots for Cameron, gulls' eggs for Tony. Ronnie, who hadn't ordered anything, returned to the table, buttered a roll, but didn't eat it.

'Anyway,' went on Cameron angrily, 'what's the point of getting married? Look at the guys. New York is absolutely crammed with emotionally immature guys quite unable to make a commitment.'

'They're all gay,' said Tony. He peeled a gull's egg, dipped it in celery salt, and handed it to Cameron.

'Bullshit,' she said, accepting it without thanking him. 'There are loads of heterosexuals in New York. I know at least three. And what makes it worse, with the men being so dire, is that New York is absolutely crawling with prosperous, talented, beautiful women in a state of frenzy about getting laid.'

'Give me their telephone numbers,' said Tony lightly.

'Don't be fatuous,' snarled Cameron. 'Guys are turned off by achieving women; they make them feel inferior. What

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beats me is why women are so dependent on men. You see them everywhere, with their leather briefcases, and their dressed-for-success business suits, rabbiting on about independence, yet clinging onto a thoroughly destructive relationship rather than be without a guy.'

Furiously she gouged the last of the garlic and parsley butter out of her snail shells. The lady, reflected Tony, is protesting too much.

Ronnie was off table-hopping again. The head waiter was now making a great song and dance about cooking Cameron's steak Diane at the table, throwing mushrooms and spring onions into the sizzling butter. The champagne having got to Cameron's tongue, she was also spitting away like the hot fat:

'TV people have no idea what's important. Ask them about their kids, they just tell you what private schools they're enrolled in. That's a very subtle way of telling you how well they're doing. What's the point of having kids? Just as a status symbol.'

'You're a bit of a puritan at heart.' Tony filled her glass yet again. 'Your ancestors didn't come over on the *Mayflower* by any chance?'

'No, but my father was British. I've got a British passport.'

Better and better, thought Tony.

The head waiter was pouring Napoleon brandy over the steak now and setting fire to it. The orange purple flames flared upwards, charring the ceiling, lighting up Cameron's hostile, predatory face. Another waiter served Tony's red snapper, which was surrounded by tiny courgettes, sweetcorn and carrots.

'They employ one guy here to sharpen the turnips,' said Cameron, pinching a courgette from Tony's plate. For a second, she looked at it. 'Tiny,' she added dismissively. 'Like the average New York cock.' And with one bite she devoured it.

Tony laughed, encouraging her in her scorn.

'Enjoy your meal,' said the head waiter, laying the steak in front of Cameron with a flourish.

Copyrighted Material

I wonder if I'm reading her right, thought Tony; anyone that aggressive must either be desperately insecure or impossibly spoilt. Maybe her mother had felt guilty about splitting up from her father, and let Cameron get away with murder.

Ronnie's sole was cold when he returned to the table, shaking his head. 'I hear you had a row with Bella Wakefield this afternoon.'

Cameron raised her eyes to the charred ceiling. 'She's so fucking useless.'

'She *is* the Vice-President's daughter.'

'She pisses me off. Every time she's got a line, which is about once a year, she teeters up on her spike heels, saying, "Cameron, what's my motivation in this scene?" So finally I flip and say: "Pay day on Friday." She went kinda mad.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Ronnie disapprovingly.

The head waiter glided up. 'Everything all right, sir?'

'Perfect,' said Ronnie, who hadn't touched his sole.

'Steak as madam likes it?'

Cameron tipped back her chair. 'If you want the honest truth, it tastes like moderately flavoured socks.'

The smile was wiped off the waiter's face. 'I beg your pardon.'

'Cameron,' hissed Ronnie.

'Like chewing my own laundry. I cannot figure why you waste such expensive ingredients producing something so disgusting. I'd rather drink the brandy straight.'

The head waiter looked as though he was going to cry.

'Would madam like something else?'

'I'll pass,' said Cameron, ostentatiously putting her knife and fork together. 'It's not even worth a doggie bag.'

Copyrighted Material

RIVALS
3

As they came out of the restaurant, limos for Ronnie and Tony glided up. Cameron paused between the two.

'I haven't seen your deb programme yet,' said Tony. 'Why don't we go back to the Waldorf and look at it?'

Ronnie shook his head. 'You guys go. I'm pooped.'

Back in Tony's suite, an almost unbearable tension developed between them. Having poured large brandies, Tony removed his coat. Despite the air conditioning, he could feel damp patches of sweat forming under his arms and trickling down his spine. In silence they watched Cameron's tape. Within five minutes, Tony realized its outstanding quality.

The commentary was cut to a minimum; Cameron had let the debs and their mothers speak for themselves. But you could feel her fierce egalitarian scorn, in the way she had highlighted their silliness and pretension, and the compassion she displayed for the *noveau riche* who tried to break in, and for the wallflower who sat unfêted through ball after ball.

Despite the fact that Cameron had been vile about 'Four Men went to Mow', Tony knew when to be generous.

'They'll adore it in England,' he said at the end. 'I'll ring the Film Purchasing Committee tomorrow and insist they look at it.'

'Thanks.' Cameron got up to rewind the tape. 'I'd better go. I got up at six this morning, and you must be reeling from Concorde lag.'

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With that sleek Eton crop, thought Tony, it'd be like making love to a boy. Putting out a hand to halt her he encountered a huge shoulder pad.

'Sit down. I want to talk to you. You got a regular boyfriend?'

'Until three months ago.' She sat down on the far end of the leather sofa.

'What did he do?'

'He was a threat analyst. Spent all day looking at the Soviets, and saying: "They're a threat".'

Tony laughed, edging down the sofa.

'I don't need a man to look after me,' said Cameron defensively. 'Just someone to make the sparks fly. If I'm not having a good time, I quit. Are you happily married?'

'Not overwhelmingly.'

'She a dog?'

'Not at all. It's a marriage of extreme public convenience. We get on very well when we don't see too much of each other.'

This girl is exactly what I need to wake them all up at Corinium, he was thinking. She's superbright, ambitious, aggressive. The IBA would adore the deb programme, it had quality and universal appeal; and being a woman, Cameron would appeal to the incoming chairman, Lady Gosling. Even more important, from the way she had carved up Simon Harris's treatment, she was capable of seeing what was wrong with a programme and subtly gearing it towards the American market without making it too bland. And finally, as she had a British passport, there wouldn't be the usual ghastly hassle about work permits.

'How'd you like to work in England?'

'How much?'

'Thirty grand.'

'You've got to be joking. I'm on a hundred thousand dollars here.'

'It's cheaper living in England, and we could pick up a few bills.'

'I'd have to have somewhere to live,' said Cameron, think-

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ing longingly of the honey-coloured houses she'd seen on the video.

'We can arrange that.'

'If I'm stuck in the country, I'll need a car.'

'Of course.'

For a minute she glared at him. 'How soon do I get on the Board?'

'Cameron,' said Tony gently, 'I'm the boss of Corinium. I decide that.'

'I'll kick it around,' she said indifferently. 'You'd better sleep with me first.'

Not by a flicker did Tony's swarthy face betray his surprise.

'Why? D'you think afterwards I might not want to offer you the job?'

Cameron smiled for the first time that evening. 'No, I might not want to take it.'

Even in the bedroom she didn't stop fighting, promptly switching on the television.

'God is love,' a lady in a shirtwaister, with very long royal blue eyelashes, was saying, 'not a guy with a stick; He wants us all to enjoy ourselves.'

'And so say all of us,' said Cameron.

Tony turned off the television and, with remarkably steady hands, removed her huge earrings, and massaged the reddened lobes.

'D'you get a good satellite picture from these?'

There wasn't much else to take off. Just the yellow dress and a pair of yellow pants. Tony never dreamed that anyone with such a sinewy, well-muscled body could have such a smooth skin.

'Those Y-fronts went out with the ark,' said Cameron, throwing them in the wastepaper basket. 'I'm going to buy you some boxer shorts.'

Bearing in mind that it was eight o'clock in the morning in England, Tony thought he acquitted himself with honours.

'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,' sang Cameron as she finally climbed off him.

Copyrighted Material

'Still fighting the American War of Independence,' murmured Tony into her shoulder.

But just as he was falling asleep, he realized she was rigid and shuddering beside him. Reaching down, he found her hand in her bush.

'I thought you'd come as well,' he said, outraged.

'If you figured that, Buster, you've got a lot to learn.'

'Come here, you bitch.'

Tugging away her hand, he knelt over her, kissing her navel, then very slowly progressing downwards. Lying on the floor, tangled in each other's arms, they were interrupted much later by the telephone.

It was Corinium's sales director, Georgie Baines.

'I thought you'd like the monthly revenue figures, Tony. I didn't wake you?'

'I've been up for hours.'

'You can say that again,' said Cameron, wriggling out from under him.

'They're up four million on last year,' said Georgie jubilantly. For five minutes they discussed business, then Georgie said that Percy, Tony's chauffeur, would like a word.

'Good morning, my Lord,' said Percy. 'We won the Test match by four wickets.'

Tony was almost more delighted by that than by the advertising figures. Hearing water running in the shower, he was about to jump on Cameron once more, when the telephone rang again. After that it kept ringing, ending up with a call from Alicia, Tony's beautiful and demanding mistress.

'Do you spend all your life on the telephone?' she screamed.

There was a knock on the door. Tony hung up and, wrapping a towel round his waist, went to answer it. It was the breakfast he'd ordered before going out last night.

Having signed the bill, he found Cameron in the bathroom, drying her pants with the hair dryer. She was wearing Tony's dark-blue silk birthday shirt, with one of his red paisley ties wound round her waist. Her hair was wet from the shower; she looked sensational.

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'Come back to bed.'

'Can't. I've got a breakfast meeting. Got to get there early to check the room isn't bugged.'

The telephone rang again.

'You answer it,' said Tony evilly.

Cameron picked it up.

'Someone called Alicia,' she said.

'Say I'm in the shower.'

'She didn't sound very pleased,' said Cameron, putting down the receiver.

Scooping up the mini-bottles of shampoo, conditioner, bath gel, and cologne, she dropped them into her bag. Then, peeling the shoulder pads out of her yellow dress, she fixed them into the shoulders of Tony's dark-blue shirt. As she went into the bedroom, she removed a strawberry as big as a cricket ball from the grapefruit on Tony's breakfast tray.

'What are your plans?' asked Tony.

'I'm in the studios from ten o'clock onwards. I should be through around eight. And you?'

'I've got people to see. I'm lunching with Ali MacGraw – more my age group, sweetie.' He kissed Cameron on the forehead. 'And I want that shirt back.'

'You can wear my yellow dress. If I wear it, Ronnie'll know I haven't been home.' Taking a mirror from her bag, she winced at her reflection in the bright sunlight. 'He'll know it anyway.'

'I'll call you later,' said Tony.

The moment she'd gone, he showered, dressed and, having summoned one of the secretaries from Corinium's American office on 5th Avenue, dictated a completely new treatment for 'Four Men went to Mow'.

In the middle, Alicia rang and demanded who had answered the telephone.

'Your successor,' said Tony, without a trace of compassion, and hung up.

By midday he had a new and beautifully bound presentation booklet for 'Four Men went to Mow', containing a character analysis of the new hero, who was now the working-class boy

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and not the peer's son (who had become a lord), plus a new list of possible stars, suggested locations, story lines, and a couple of pages of simplified dialogue, all based entirely on Cameron's recommendations.

Ronnie called up as Tony was reading it through.

'How d'you like Cameron?'

'Like wasn't the operative word. What's bugging her?'

'More enfant than terrible,' said Ronnie, who wanted to do business with Tony very badly, 'but she's too ambitious for her own good, and too upfront. There's a streak of idealism which makes her scream and shout till she gets what she wants; and if you're as sexy as she is you antagonize not only women but also the men who don't get to pull you.

'Don't tell anyone I told you, but the programme controller's going to axe her last documentary, and she's been so rude to Bella Wakefield she's being taken off the series. But she's bright,' Ronnie sighed. 'Sadly they don't give a shit about talent here any more. But that's off the record.'

'We haven't spoken,' said Tony.

'As a quid pro quo, can we be the first people to see "Four Men went to Mow?" ' asked Ronnie. 'I know Cameron carved it up, but it looked great to me.'

'Of course,' said Tony smoothly.

After an exceptionally affable lunch with Ali MacGraw, who was an old friend, to discuss a long-term project, Tony strolled down to see USBC, the deadly rivals of NBS.

At the plaza of the Seagram building tourists and office workers sat on the walls, eating sandwiches and pizza, trying to woo the blazing sun down between the office blocks on to their bare arms and legs. The flowers in the centre strip of Park Avenue wilted in the heat as Tony sauntered past General Motors and the Pan Am building with their thousand glittering windows, admiring the coloured awnings outside the houses and the beautiful, loping New York girls with their briefcases, who looked back at him with flattering interest. Maybe Cameron was right about the paucity of real New York men.

The Head of Co-Production at USBC and the Daytime

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Programme Controller were enchanted by the video of the honey-coloured houses and the Cotswold countryside.

'This series,' Tony told them, his deep, beautiful voice flowing on like vintage port glugging out of a priceless decanter, 'will be a cross between James Herriot and "Animal House", but in a way it's much, much more. We intend to explore real friendship between real men; not homosexuality, but that Victorian virtue, comradeship. The hero, a poor boy from a deprived background, doesn't inherit the earth or the girl, but he finds his integrity. The story, despite its depths, is simple enough to appeal to a Mexican peasant or to an Alabama black.'

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the extremely influential VPICDT Prog. (which stood for Vice-President In Charge of Daytime Programming) had just entered the room. Tony warmed to his subject.

'In England,' he went on, 'we are sick of wimps who wear their sensitivity on their silk shirtsleeves. The guys in our story are kind to animals and women, but they shoot from the hip first and get in touch with their feelings later. Nor would they be seen dead in an apron. Let us have men as men again, and bring back dignity and chivalry to our sex.'

Thinking he'd gone slightly over the top, Tony switched briskly to finance. 'We can do it for three-quarters of a million an hour,' he said. 'It'll be thirty per cent cheaper if we make it in England; we'll put up twenty per cent of the cost against Europe and the UK.'

Admiring the discreet blue coronet on Tony's dark-green shirt, the VPICDT Prog., who'd just been bawled out on the phone by his wife for forgetting to collect the suit she'd had altered at Ralph Lauren, reflected that Lord B had real class. And he was right – it was high time men were men again.

'Very interesting, Tony,' he said. 'We'd like to kick the idea around. You in New York for a few days?'

'Yes,' said Tony.

'Showing it to other people?'

'Of course.'

'We'll get back to you as soon as possible.'

Copyrighted Material

Outside it had rained. The trees had taken on a deeper greenness. The city had the warm wet smell of a conservatory. Park Avenue was a solid yellow mass of honking taxis. Quivering with the excitement of wheeler-dealing, Tony knew he ought to ring Ronnie and show him the treatment. Let him sweat, he thought, let Cameron sweat. He went back to the Waldorf, checked out and, without leaving a forwarding address, flew to Los Angeles.

Cameron lived in an eleventh-floor apartment on Riverside Drive with a glorious view of the Hudson River. She got home at about nine after a hellish day, punctuated with screaming matches which had finally culminated in Bella Wakefield turning up on the set wearing two-inch false eyelashes and half a ton of purple eyeshadow to play a Victorian governess. When Cameron had ordered her to take her make-up down, Bella had stormed out, presumably to sob on the Vice-President's already sodden shoulder.

The moment she got in, Cameron played back her recording machine, but there was no message from Tony, not even a click to show he'd rung and hung up because she wasn't there. He hadn't left any messages at NBS either.

Cameron, however, had done her homework. As Tony had learnt from Ronnie that she was brilliant but unbalanced, she in turn had discovered that Tony was an unprincipled shit, much more interested in making money than good programmes, masterly at board-room intrigue, and so smooth he could slide up a hill. Convinced she could handle him, Cameron wasn't at all put out by this information, and decided to accept the job.

She'd always wanted to work in England and track down her English relations. She admired British television, and she'd bitterly envied all those rich girls at Barnard who'd travelled to Europe so effortlessly on Daddy's income. It would also give her a chance to get away from her mother and her mother's appalling lover, Mike. Cameron gave a shudder; she had recurrent nightmares about Mike.

She turned on the light. She would be sad to leave her

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apartment, which was painted white throughout, with yellow curtains and rush matting on the polished floors. Furniture in the living-room included a grand piano, a dentist's chair upholstered in red paisley like Tony's tie, a dartboard, and a gold toe, one foot high, which had been surreptitiously chipped from the foot of a cherub in the Metropolitan Museum. Books lined most of one wall, but half a shelf was taken up with videos of the programmes she'd made. These were her identity. Cameron only felt she truly existed when she saw her credits coming up on the screen.

And now this English lord had come along and thrown her into complete turmoil because he hadn't called. Denied a father in her teens, Cameron was always drawn to older men. She was attracted by Tony's utter ruthlessness, and, despite her sniping, sexually it had ended up a great night.

Then why didn't the bastard call? Lord of the Never Rings. Collapsing on the sofa, she gazed out of the window. On the opposite bank, lights from the factories and power stations sent glittering yellow snakes across the black water. Watching the coloured Dinky cars whizzing up and down the freeway, she fell asleep.

When she woke next morning, very cold and stiff, the Hudson had turned to a sheet of white metal, with the power stations smoking dreamily in the morning mist. Perhaps Tony had only offered her a job as a ruse to get her into bed, but she didn't think he was like that. If he'd just wanted to screw her, he'd have said so. Yet when she rang the Waldorf to accept, she was outraged to be told that Tony had checked out, leaving no forwarding address.

'This guy's mighty popular,' said the operator. 'Everyone's been ringing him.'

Nor would Corinium's New York office tell her where Tony had gone, and, even worse, the morning paper had a charming picture of him coming out of the Four Seasons with Ali MacGraw.

In Los Angeles, when he wasn't spreading the word about 'Four Men went to Mow', or finalizing the deal to buy the

Copyrighted Material

American distributors, which he'd had to acquire through a holding company so as not to upset the IBA, Tony thought about Cameron.

Back in New York, two days later, ignoring the increasingly desperate messages from NBS, he went to USBC and after screwing another quarter million dollars a programme out of them on the grounds that Disney were madly interested, he closed the deal.

He returned to the Waldorf, sweating like a pig, had a shower, poured himself an enormous whisky and rang Cameron. He had to hold the telephone at arm's length.

'Where the fuck have you been, you bastard?' she screamed.

'Busy,' said Tony and, when she started to give him an earful, very sharply told her to shut up and calm down.

'I've raised the cash for "Four Men went to Mow".'

'Who put it up?' demanded Cameron.

'USBC. The lawyers are thrashing out the nuts and bolts at the moment.'

'Poor Ronnie. NBS aren't going to be very happy – we didn't even get to see it.'

'Well, there you go.'

'He probably will, right out of the front door, and never come back after this. Ronnie's right – you are a shit.'

'That's no way to address your new boss.'

Cameron's heart was hammering so hard, her palms were suddenly so damp, that the receiver nearly slid out of her hand.

'Hullo, hullo,' said Tony. 'Have you thought about that job I offered you?'

'You just fuck off like that. How do I know I can trust you?'

'Give me the address. I'll be over in half an hour and we'll talk terms.'

Yet when he arrived at Cameron's flat, armed with a bottle of champagne, he was outraged to find an impossibly handsome young man lounging in the dentist's chair, holding a glass that definitely didn't contain mouthwash.

'Who the hell's he?' snarled Tony.

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'This is Skip, my lawyer. He dropped by to draw up my contract of employment,' said Cameron.

'Why the hell's he wearing my shirt and tie?'

Cameron laughed. 'Since I'm moving to England, I figured he deserved a leaving present.'

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RIVALS
4

On a cold Friday in February, exactly twenty months after he'd signed up Cameron Cook in New York, Tony Baddingham made an infinitely more dramatic and controversial addition to his staff. Having exchanged contracts in the utmost secrecy in the morning, he popped into the IBA headquarters in Brompton Road for a midday glass of sherry with the new chairman, Lady Gosling, to dazzle her with the secret news of his latest acquisition before setting out on the two-hour drive down to Cotchester.

Even on a raw blustery February afternoon, Cotchester's wide streets and ancient pale gold houses gave off an air of serenity and prosperity. To the north of the town, in the market square, a statue of Charles I on his horse indicated that Cotchester had once been a Royalist stronghold. Round the plinth, pigeons pecked among the straw left by the sheep and cattle sold in the market earlier in the day. To the south soared the cathedral, its great bell only muted during rush hour, the shadow of its spire on bright days lying like a benediction over the town.

Dominating the High Street was a fine Queen Anne building, once the Corn Exchange, now the headquarters of Corinium Television. Although, over the last twenty years, the building had been considerably extended at the back to include studios, dressing-rooms, an imposing new board room, and a suite of splendid offices for the directors, nothing

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except pale-yellow rambler roses had been allowed to alter its imposing façade. On the roof the vast dark red letters CTV could be seen for miles around, letters topped by a splendid ram standing four-square, with a Roman nose and curly horns. Originally chosen as a symbol of the wool trade which once characterized the area, according to some of Corinium's more uncharitable employees the ram could now be used to symbolize Tony Baddingham's sexual excesses.

At the back of the building an entire wall of the board room consisted of a huge window looking out on to the cathedral close, water meadows and willows trailing their yellow branches in the River Fleet, a peaceful scene totally at variance with the tensions and feuds within Corinium Television itself.

These tensions had been exacerbated that particular Friday by Tony returning unexpectedly from London and calling a programme-planning meeting at three o'clock, when he knew most of his staff would be hoping to slope off early.

Tony had actually returned in an excellent mood. His meeting with Lady Gosling had been decidedly satisfactory. Simon Harris, the ex-BBC Golden Boy, and Cameron Cook had so improved Corinium programmes over the last twenty months that he was no longer seriously worried that his franchise would be taken away in mid-term. But, in case there were rival groups who might pitch for the Corinium franchise when it came up for renewal next year, he had made the decision on the way down to clean up Corinium's act well in advance.

Until that time therefore, until Corinium were officially re-selected, he was determined not only to trail some of the most glittering names in television and the arts in front of the IBA, but also to put on some really worthy regional programmes.

It was to map out ideas for these programmes that he'd called the impromptu meeting. Unfortunately half the staff were away. The Head of News was in Munich on a freebie, the Head of Documentaries was in Rome getting a prize, the

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male Head of Light Entertainment and the comely female Head of Kids' Programmes were both away with gastric flu, which caused a few raised eyebrows, as they had been seen looking perfectly healthy the day before.

Tony took the chair, but was instantly summoned to take an urgent call from Los Angeles. The only people in the room who didn't appear terrified or at least extremely wary of him were Charles Fairburn, Head of Religious Programmes, who'd got pissed at lunchtime, and Cameron Cook, now Head of Drama.

The Head of Sport, Mike Meadows, a once-famous footballer with ginger sideboards, whose muscle-bound shoulders had grown too big for his shiny blue blazer, smoked one cigarette after another.

Simon Harris, the Controller of Programmes, who was principled and intelligent and always saw both sides of every problem, and was therefore labelled indecisive, trembled on Tony's right. He kept his hands under the table to hide a nerve rash he had scratched raw. His thin face twitched. In an attempt to gain some kind of authority he had recently grown a straggly beard. When he took off his coat – Tony always kept the central heating tropical – you could hear the rattle of the Valium bottle, and see the great damp patches under his arms.

Beyond Simon was Tony's PA, Cyril Peacock, DFC, Corinium's ex-Sales Manager, once a stocky, jolly, assertive fellow, sensational at his job. The point of a PA, however, is that he should be utterly loyal. Some Chief Executives in television buy this loyalty with money, which is dangerous, because someone else can buy it with more money. Tony bought it with fear. After making Cyril his PA, and sometime publicity officer, Tony had encouraged him to invest his savings in a company that promptly went broke. Now the terror of the Luftwaffe was someone Tony hung his coat on – a poor old dodderer in his early sixties, with loss of job and pension hanging over his head like a sword of Damocles. Tony took great pleasure in making Cyril do his dirty work – he had four people for him to fire on Monday.

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On Tony's left was Miss Madden, his secretary, also in her sixties, plain, and utterly dedicated, whose chilblains were itching because of the central heating, and who never let anyone into Tony's office without an appointment except Cameron Cook, on whom she had a love–hate crush.

Finally, down the table, opposite Cameron sat James Vereker, the impossibly good-looking, beautifully coiffeured Anchorman of the six o'clock regional news programme, 'Cotswold Round-Up'.

James should have been in the newsroom getting ready for the evening's programme, but, hating to miss anything, he had muscled in on the meeting and was now using Tony's absence to rewrite the links he would have to say later on air to fit his own speech patterns.

Glancing across at Cameron, James wondered if she and Tony had rehearsed the whole meeting in bed earlier this week, turning each other on by seeing who could be the most gratuitously bloody to everyone else. He looked at Cameron's dark-brown cashmere jersey, snugly fitting the lean body, the pale-brown suede skirt, the Charles Jourdan boots and the lascivious unmade-up face, and felt a wave of loathing. Today her short hair had been coaxed upwards in gelled spikes, like a hedgehog who'd rolled in chicken fat.

James pointedly moved the arrangement of Spring flowers left over from Wednesday's board meeting up a couple of inches to obscure his view of her and, getting out a packet of Polos, handed one to Miss Madden, who went slightly pink as she accepted it.

James offered Polos to no one else. He knew who to suck up to. Properly courted, Miss Madden would sing his praises to Tony and admit him to the inner sanctum when necessary.

As Tony walked back into the room, everyone rose from their chairs except Cameron, who pointedly ignored him. Perhaps they've had a bust-up, thought James Vereker hopefully.

The good thing about Tony, reflected Charles Fairburn, Head of Religious Programmes, was that he did cut out the

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waffle. There was a good chance that Charles, who was going to the ballet at Covent Garden that evening, would be out of the building by five.

'I'd like to start,' said Tony briskly, 'by congratulating Cameron on being nominated for a BAFTA award. As you all know, "Four Men went to Mow" has not only been a huge network success, and sold everywhere overseas, but also because of the exceptional camera work, attracted scores of tourists to the area, and last month toppled "Howard's Way" in the ratings. We're looking for more programmes like this that project the area into the network.'

'Hear, hear,' said Cyril Peacock, his false teeth rattling with nerves.

Tony's conveniently forgotten that 'Four Men went to Mow' was my idea in the first place, thought Simon Harris bitterly. Cameron, still ignoring Tony, gazed sourly at the framed photograph on the wall of him smilingly assisting Princess Margaret to plant a cherry tree on the Corinium front lawn.

Christ, they *have* had a row, thought James.

'I'd like to give the go-ahead for a second series,' Tony went on. 'We've got the co-production money again from USBC, but I think it would be a good idea, Cameron, if you introduced perhaps a black unmarried mother into the cottage of the agricultural students to appeal to the IBA.'

Charles Fairburn suppressed a grin. The IBA were crazy about minority groups. Cameron looked outraged.

'Black unmarried mothers don't become agricultural students,' she snarled.

'There's always a first time,' said Tony smoothly. 'She could be the girlfriend of one of the four boys.'

'For Chrissake, why not have a gay shepherdess with one leg?' said Cameron.

'Why not a deaf, unemployed merry peasant?' suggested Charles Fairburn with a hiccup. 'Or a handicapped harvester?'

'That's enough,' snapped Tony.

He then went on to OK plans for an obscure Michael Tippett opera, which Cameron also scowled at, detecting

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Lady Baddingham's influence (Tony's wife was crazy about opera) and a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* as a sop to Stratford-on-Avon which was just within the Corinium boundary.

Now it was the turn of James Vereker, who, having finished re-writing his links, helped himself to a glass of Perrier and then suggested Corinium ought to show its 'caring face, Tony' and do a series on poverty and the aged.

'Jesus, how turgid,' said Cameron, glaring at him through the screen of fading daffodils. 'Of all the boring . . .'

Tony raised his hand for silence, his huge signet ring catching the light.

'Not a bad idea. We could do a very cheap pilot to impress the IBA. We don't have to make the series. Perhaps Cyril,' he smiled malevolently at his PA, 'could front it. He's been looking rather old and poverty-stricken lately.'

Cyril Peacock cracked his twitching face, trying to smile back. Thus encouraged, James suggested they should do something 'very strong, Tony' on rioting and drug abuse at Cotchester University. Swiftly Cameron swooped, the falcon Tony had trained, tearing into James:

'What a crappy awful idea,' she screamed. 'D'you want to antagonize the entire Tourist Board because everyone's scared to visit Cotchester any more? No one will want to invest money here. We're trying to boost the area for Chrissake.'

'What about a programme on the role of women in Cotchester town hall?' stammered Simon Harris, tugging at his straggling yellow beard.

'And have the town halls at Bath, Southampton, Oxford, Winchester, Stratford, et cetera et cetera in an uproar because we haven't done programmes on them,' said Cameron crushingly.

'I thought your idea, Tony, of interviewing the wives of celebrities living in the area looked a winner,' said Cyril Peacock, desperate to get back into favour.

' "Behind Every Famous Man"?' Cameron turned on Cyril furiously. 'That was my idea.'

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'We could start with one of our director's wives, or perhaps,' Cyril lumbered on, 'even Lady Baddingham.'

Tony looked not unpleased. 'I think that would be a bit close to home.'

'Why not do a series on the very very rich?' said Charles Fairburn, who had not quite sobered up, 'They're far more of a minority group than anyone else. We could start with you, Tony.'

He was quelled by an icy glance from Tony, who, aware that the meeting was slightly lacking in carnage, suddenly realized that his Head of Operations, whose role was to tell creative people what they could not do, was missing.

'Where's Victor Page?' he said ominously.

'Gone to his grandmother's funeral,' said Miss Madden, her lips tightening.

'But he killed off two grandmothers during Wimbledon last year.'

'This was his step-granny,' said Miss Madden. 'His mother married twice.'

'No doubt his other step-grandmother will pop off during next Wimbledon,' said Tony, making a note on his memo pad. That would be five people for Cyril to fire on Monday.

Tony then turned to the points made during his talk with Lady Gosling that morning. There was no need to let his production staff get complacent.

'Several viewers,' he said, 'have complained about field mice copulating too long on our "Nature at Night" programme.'

Charles Fairburn, who had a round red face like a Dutch cheese, suppressed another smile. He'd better do his expenses. He hadn't been anywhere this week, but he needed some cash to buy drinks for his airline-steward friend at the ballet tonight.

'Cloakroom and gratuities £5,' wrote Charles Fairburn. 'Drinks with the Archdeacon £15.' That was pushing it; the Archdeacon was teetotal, but the Accounts Department didn't know it. They'd be shut if Tony didn't wrap up this meeting soon. Copyrighted Material

'On the kids' programmes front,' went on Tony, 'we've also had complaints about too much violence in "Dorothy Dove".'

'What kind of violence?' asked Simon Harris.

'Pecking Priscilla Pigeon and pulling out all her feathers.'

James was tempted to say his children had absolutely adored that particular episode, but decided not to. The Head of Kids' Programmes had rejected his advances at the Christmas party; he didn't owe her any favours.

'Dorothy Dove is supposed to be a symbol of peace,' said Tony.

'Peaceful is the dove that is strongly armed – or beaked in Dorothy's case,' murmured Charles Fairburn and regretted it.

'There have been complaints,' went on Tony nastily, 'about insufficient religious content in our religious programmes. I'll talk to you after the meeting, Charles, and the IBA are very unhappy about "Rags to Riches".'

Simon Harris turned dark red. It was he who had bought the format for 'Rags to Riches' from America and adapted it for the British network.

'But the ratings are sensational,' he protested.

'I know, but the IBA have pointed out that the contestants are far too glamorous and upmarket. We do need a few unemployed frumps to add a touch of reality, and please remember our ethnic minorities.'

'You can borrow my black unmarried mother,' said Cameron, shooting Tony a venomous look.

'The IBA,' went on Tony, squinting down the polished table, like a daily looking for smears, 'also feel we should have more women on the Corinium Board. After all, Lady Evesham's nearly sixty-five, so we must all wrack our brains for some powerful ladies.'

The men in the room exchanged glances of horror. Would Tony use this as an excuse to put the appalling Cameron Cook on the Board?

'And,' went on Tony swiftly, 'they feel we still haven't enough directors who live in the area.'

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That, thought James savagely, also includes Cameron, and her exquisite Regency house on the outskirts of Cotchester.

Now Tony was saying, not without complacency, that Freddie Jones, the electronics multi-millionaire, and Rupert Campbell-Black, the Minister for Sport, who both lived in the area, would be coming in his party to the West Cotchester Hunt Ball that evening, and he would be sounding them out as possible directors.

For a second, outrage overcame the Head of Sport's terror of Tony: 'But Rupert Campbell-Black's been consistently vile about our coverage,' he spluttered. 'You'd think it was our fault Cotchester was bottom of the Third Division.'

'Good name on the writing paper. We've got to keep our local MPs sweet, with the franchise coming up,' said Tony. 'Anyway he's far too tied up with football hooligans to come to more than a couple of meetings a year, so he won't get a chance to make a nuisance of himself.'

'Don't you be too sure of it,' spat Cameron. 'Macho pig.'

Smug in the knowledge that he was the only member of the staff who'd been asked to join Tony's party at the hunt ball that evening, James Vereker couldn't resist saying, as the meeting broke up, how much he and Lizzie, his wife, were looking foward to it, and what time would Tony like them for drinks.

'About eight,' said Tony, gathering up his papers.

James could feel the laser beams of loathing and jealousy directed at him from all around the table, particularly from Cameron. That should rattle the stuck-up bitch, he thought. Since she'd been nominated for a BAFTA, she'd been getting much too big for her Charles Jourdan boots.

As Tony went out of the room, straightening the photograph of himself and Princess Margaret as he passed, James glanced at his watch. Four-thirty. He was on the air in an hour and a half and they would wrap up the programme by seven. If he had to drive the eleven miles home, bath and change, he'd be pushed for time. He'd better have a quick shower and blow dry his hair beforehand; then he could legitimately keep on his make-up on – just bronzing gel, a bit of

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creme puff and dark brown mascara – for the ball. One got so pale in February.

He considered whether to wear his turquoise evening shirt, which brought out the blue-green in his eyes, or a white one with a turquoise bow-tie, then decided on the former. The gel might show up on the white shirt.

Wandering into the newsroom, he selected the secretary who was most in love with him and handed her twenty pages of longhand, entitled 'Poverty and the Aged: A Treatment', by James Vereker.

'I think you'll have rather fun with this one,' he told her. 'Could you centre the title in caps? I don't need it till first thing Monday morning.'

Entirely sobered up now, Charles Fairburn followed Tony into his office. He'd never get to Covent Garden and his airline steward now. But, to his amazement, Tony greeted him warmly: 'Ratings aren't bad, Charles. Wheel in the Bishop of Cotchester, a few Sikhs and a woman priest next week to talk about the meaning of self-denial and Lent; that should keep Lady Gosling happy. Look, I'm reading the lesson in church on Sunday. Rather tricky phrasing, I want to get the sense right. Could you just run through it with me?'

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RIVALS
5

James Vereker drove home in his Porsche, warmly aware that 'my programme', as he always referred to it, had gone well. James Vereker's outstanding qualities, apart from his dazzling good looks, were his total egotism and chronic insecurity. In order not to miss himself on television, he had even been known to take a portable television into a restaurant. A huge local celebrity, much of whose time was spent opening fêtes and PAs' legs, he disliked going to London, or even worse abroad, because no one recognized him. When he'd worked in radio, he used to dread some crisis blowing up in Southern Europe or the Middle East in case he couldn't pronounce it.

Aware that he was dismissed as a popinjay by the editors, journalists and researchers who got 'Cotswold Round-Up' on air, and who were jealous of his inflated salary and his celebrity status, he was given to little tantrums, yet couldn't resist seeking constant reassurance. Cameron Cook had even suggested the parrot used in Corinium's Christmas production of *Treasure Island* should be given a permanent squawk-on part, telling James he was wonderful after every programme. He kept his job because he was quite good at it and because he always won the fight for viewers from the BBC.

Back at James's house, Birgitta, the children's curvaceous nanny, had just lovingly finished ironing both James's white and turquoise evening shirts, and was scenting herself and putting on make-up for James's return.

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I wish Birgitta would spend slightly more time putting the children to bed, thought James's wife, Lizzie, as they swarmed into her study demanding attention. Lizzie had had two novels published and well reviewed. A third was on the way, but it was causing a great deal of morning sickness.

She and James had been married eight years, and Lizzie had supported James on her publishing salary in the early days when he was trying to break into television. Once very pretty (she had the bright eyes and long questing nose of a vole, and the shaggy light brown hair of a clematis montana clambering over an old apple tree in winter), she had recently put on too much weight.

The Verekers lived in a large messy house with a large messy garden two miles down the valley from Rupert Campbell-Black, where the Frogsmore stream hurtled into a large reed-fringed lake. They had bought Lake House, as it was called, five years ago, just after James had got the job at Corinium, when it had seemed ridiculously cheap. Viewing it in high summer, they had only seen its romantic aspect, not realizing that for at least five months of the year it was so low in the valley that it never saw the sun and would be quite inaccessible when the snows came in winter.

This mattered little to James because he spent so much time at Corinium. When the house got snowed up, he simply didn't come home for several days. But it was not good for Lizzie, who wrote there all day, eating too many biscuits to keep out the cold, or for the children who caught one cold after another, or for the nannies who found it dank and depressing, except when James was at home.

For Lizzie life turned on the children not getting ill, and nannies not leaving so that she had time to write. Unfortunately James couldn't resist pulling the prettier nannies, who invariably walked out, when he moved on to someone else. Lizzie always found out the score by reading the nannies' diaries when they were shopping in Cotchester or nearby Stroud. Birgitta, the current nanny, wrote her diary in Swedish, which Lizzie couldn't understand. But with the aid of a Swedish dictionary she was beginning to crack the

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code, and the word 'James' appeared rather too often. In fact you only had to see the way Birgitta perked up when James came through the door. Lizzie was used to his infidelity. She realized he needed little adventures to boost his ego, but they still upset her. She would have liked an admirer herself, but felt she was too fat to attract anyone.

Lizzie nearly had a fit when she heard James banging the front door. She'd stopped writing far too late, wrestling to get at least a draft of the first chapter down on paper. Still struggling mentally with her plot, she'd spent too long washing her hair and in the bath. Then she discovered that the long low-cut black silk ball dress which she'd decided to wear was far too tight. Not even shoe horns or the disdainful tugging of Birgitta could get her into it, so she had to wear another dress, dark red velvet to match her distraught face, and calf-length so it wouldn't conceal her ankles which had swelled up in the bath.

Finally, because she couldn't see out, she'd cut her fringe with the kitchen scissors, not realizing that Birgitta had just used them to cut rind off the children's bacon, so now her fringe stuck together and reeked of bacon. She was about to wash it again when James arrived. He hadn't been home so early in months; usually he hung around the Corinium bar mopping up adulation.

'Have a bath, darling,' shouted Lizzie, desperately trying to tone down her face with green foundation.

'I had a shower at the studios,' said James, 'so I've only got to change. We ought to leave in five minutes. How did you think my programme went?'

'Wonderful,' lied Lizzie, who hadn't watched it, starting to panic. As it was dark outside, she couldn't even make up in the car.

'I'll read you an extra story tomorrow, darlings,' she told the children as they clung whining to her on the landing. 'Or perhaps, Birgitta,' she raised her voice hopefully, 'will read you one before you go to bed.'

But Birgitta was watching James, who had decided on the white shirt after all, putting a pink carnation in his button-

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hole. Poor Mr Vereker, she thought, looking so handsome in his dinner jacket, going out with such a frump. How much better would she, Birgitta, be in Lizzie's place. James, however, hardly noticed his wife's appearance. His was the one that mattered.

'You look absolutely lovely, James,' said Lizzie dutifully.

Low sepia clouds obscured the moon. As the headlamps lit up grey stone walls, acid green tree trunks and long blonde grasses, Lizzie tried abortively to apply eye liner as James described every little triumph of the planning meeting and his programme afterwards.

'Anyone interesting in our party tonight?' asked Lizzie as he paused for breath.

'Rupert Campbell-Black, Beattie Johnson his mistress, Freddie Jones.'

'Who's he?'

'Don't you ever read the papers?' said James, appalled. 'Mr Electronics.'

Oh God, sighed Lizzie to herself. I daren't ask what electronics are, and I bet I'm sitting next to him at dinner.

'And Paul Stratton and his new wife.'

'Oooh,' squeaked Lizzie. 'That's exciting.'

Three years ago, just after the Conservatives won the last election, Paul Stratton, the Tory MP for Cotchester and the very upright Minister for Home Affairs, with a special brief to investigate sex education in schools, had rocked his constituency and the entire nation by walking out on Winifred, his solid dependable boot of a wife, and running off with his secretary half his age.

Not that his constituents were prudish (having Rupert Campbell-Black in the next door constituency, they were used to the erotic junketing of MPs), but as Paul Stratton had not only used his political career to feather his nest financially, but also set himself up as a pillar of respectability and uxoriousness, constantly inveighing against pornography, homosexuality, easier divorce and the general laxity of the nation's morals, they had found it hard to stomach his hypocrisy.

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'Evidently, they've bought a place in Chalford,' said James, 'and Paul and Sarah, I think she's called, are planning to spend weekends down here, re-establishing themselves with the local community.'

'I suppose Tony inviting them this evening heralds the official return of the prodigal son,' said Lizzie. 'I wonder if she's as beautiful as her photographs. I bet Rupert makes a pass at her. He's always enjoyed bugging Paul.'

'Don't be fatuous, they're only just back from their honeymoon,' snapped James, steering round a sharp bend and bringing the conversation neatly back to himself.

'I've got a gut feeling tonight is going to mark a turning-point in my career,' he said importantly. 'Tony's been exceptionally nice to me recently. And when I popped into Madden's office later this evening to find out exactly who was in the party, there was a confidential memo on Tony's desk about the Autumn schedules, which I managed to read upside-down. It appears Corinium are committed to a series of prime time interviews for the Network. I didn't dare read any more, in case Madden got suspicious, but I suspect Tony's got me in mind, and that's why he's asked us this evening.'

Tony Baddingham soaked in a boiling Floris-scented bath, admiring his flat stomach. For once the cordless telephone was mute, giving him the chance to savour the prospect of the evening ahead. One of the joys of becoming hugely successful was that it gave you the opportunity to patronize those who, in the past, had patronized you. Paul Stratton, for example. It was going to be so amusing tonight extending the hand of friendship to Paul and his bimbo wife. How grateful and subservient they'd be.

Then there was Rupert. Tony was not given to fantasy, but more than anything else in the world he longed to be in a position when an abject, penitent, penniless Rupert, who'd somehow lost all his looks, was seeking Tony's favour and friendship. The only reason Tony really wanted Rupert on his Board was in order to dazzle him with his brilliant business acumen.

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In wilder fantasy, Tony dreamt of flaunting an undeniably sexy mistress, who would be impervious to Rupert's charms.

'Can't you bloody understand,' he imagined Cameron screaming at Rupert, 'that Tony's the only man there'll ever be in my life?'

Tony added more boiling water to his bath to steel himself against the arctic climate of the rest of the house. There was a running battle between Tony who liked the heat, and whose office, according to Charles Fairburn, provided an excellent dress rehearsal, both physically and mentally, for hell fires, and Monica, his wife, who regarded central heating as a wanton extravagance which ate into one's capital.

'I still feel dreadfully guilty not telling Winifred about Paul and Sarah coming tonight,' said Monica, when later, fully dressed, Tony went into his wife's bedroom and found her sitting at her dressing table vigorously brushing her short fair hair. She was wearing the same emerald-green taffeta she'd worn for the last four hunt balls, which went beautifully with Tony's diamonds, but did nothing to play down the red veins that mapped her cheeks, as a result of gardening and striding large labradors across the Gloucestershire valleys in all weathers. Yet, in a way, her rather masculine beauty, splendid on the prow of a ship or as a model for a Victorian bust of Duty, needed no enhancement.

Monica had once been head girl of her boarding school and had remained so all her life. Winifred Stratton, Paul's ex-wife, had been her senior prefect. Together they had run the school firmly and wisely, diverting the headmistress's attention away from a plume of cigarette smoke rising from the shrubbery, but gently reproaching the errant smoker afterwards. All the lower fourths had had crushes on Monica. Sometimes, even today, unheard by Tony who slept in a separate room, she cried, 'Don't talk in the passage,' in her sleep.

Known locally as Monica of the Glen because of her noble appearance and total lack of humour, she was the only woman to whom Tony was always polite, and also a little afraid. In

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the icy, high-ceilinged bedroom, opera and gardening books crowded the tables on either side of the ancient crimson-curtained four-poster which Tony visited perhaps once a week. But even after eighteen years of marriage, these visits gave him an incredible sexual frisson.

On the chest of drawers, which contained no new clothes, were silver-framed photographs of their three children. With her sense of fairness, Monica would never let the other two know that she loved her elder son Archie, sixteen last week, the best. Nor that she loved her two yellow labradors, and her great passions, opera and gardening, often a great deal more than her husband.

Running Tony's life with effortful efficiency, she never had enough time for these two passions, but if she was disappointed by the hand life had dealt her, she never showed it. She was not looking forward to this evening, which would involve talking until three o'clock in the morning to all those people Tony considered so important, but she would treat them with the same impersonal kindness whether they were Lords-Lieutenant or electronics millionaires. Always anxious to help humanity collectively (she did a huge amount for charity), Monica was not interested in people individually, or what made them tick or leap into bed with one another, but she was worried about Winifred. Even after she'd married Tony, and Winifred had married the much more brilliant, handsome and ambitious Paul Stratton, they had remained friends and gone to the opera and old school reunions together.

When Paul had run off with his secretary, in a scandal that rocked Gloucestershire almost as much as Helen Campbell-Black walking out on Rupert, Winifred had been utterly devastated, but like a building sapped by dry rot, one couldn't initially see the damage from outside. After Winifred had moved to Spain with her two daughters in a desperate attempt to rebuild her life, Monica missed her friendship desperately, and now, to crown it, Tony had asked Paul and Sarah to join the party tonight, and she, Monica, was expected to smooth over Sarah's first public outing in Gloucestershire.

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'I just feel it's revoltingly disloyal to Winifred,' repeated Monica.

She had applied Pond's vanishing cream and face powder, and a dash of bright-red lipstick, which was the extent of her daytime make-up, and was now adding her night make-up: brown block mascara put on with a little brush.

'I swore to Winifred I'd never have that little tramp' – Monica spat on her mascara – 'over the threshold.'

Tony's brows drew together like two black caterpillars.

'Paul is still our local MP, even if he has been booted out of the Cabinet,' he said patiently. 'With the franchise coming up next year, I have to entertain whatever wife he chooses. At least I waited until after they were married.'

As Tony moved forward to do up the clasp of her diamond necklace, Monica caught sight of her husband's reflection. The red tailcoat with dove-grey facings made him look taller and thinner, and gave a distinction to his somewhat heavy good looks, but Monica hardly noticed.

'I still ought to telephone Winifred and tell her.'

'She's in Spain. Let it rest. I'd better go down; they'll be here in a minute.'

Monica glanced at her diamond watch. *Lohengrin* was about to start on Radio 3. If only she could stay at home and listen to it, she thought wistfully. As she slotted a three-hour blank tape into her radio cassette and pressed the record button, she called after Tony, 'Can you tell Victor to up the proportion of orange juice in the Buck's Fizz. We don't want everyone arriving at the town hall plastered like last year.'

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RIVALS

6

An hour later, downstairs in the huge dark panelled drawing-room hung with tapestries, members of the party were beginning to unthaw and retreat from the fierce red glow of the beech logs smouldering and crackling in the vast fireplace. Lizzie Vereker, sustained by at least six glasses of Buck's Fizz, had perked up and forgotten her extra pounds and her straining red dress.

Neither Rupert nor Beattie Johnson had arrived yet, but there was plenty to gaze at. Paul Stratton's new wife, for example, was absolutely gorgeous. She had entered the room looking little girlish and apprehensive, eyes cast down, clinging to Paul's arm and hardly speaking. She was wearing a yellow silk dress which matched her thick piled-up gold hair, and a beautiful tobacco-brown fringed silk shawl covering her shoulders and wound high round her neck.

After replying in shy monosyllables to Tony and Monica's questions, she had allowed herself to be introduced to James and also to Tony's youngest brother, Bas, who was a terrific rake with black patent-leather hair, a smooth olive complexion, and a very overdeveloped little finger from twisting women round it. Now a small smile was beginning to play around Sarah's full coral lips at Bas's extravagant compliments, and the shawl was beginning to slip to reveal the most voluptuous golden shoulders and bosom. She and Paul must

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have been somewhere hot for their honeymoon, decided Lizzie.

Paul didn't seem to have reaped the same benefit. His dark hair, which he'd once brushed straight back, had gone silver grey and been coaxed forward, almost to his eyebrows, and in little commas over his very pink ears. Sarah, being young, had obviously encouraged him into a Paisley bow-tie and a wing collar, the points of which kept being bent over by a new double chin. His once hard angular face seemed to have softened and weakened. He still, however, had the same all-embracing smile that passed over you like a lighthouse beam, and still liked the sound of his own voice. He was now talking to Freddie Jones, the electronics multi-millionaire.

'Three million unemployed,' he boomed, 'is a Mickey Mouse figure. Didn't you see that article about that factory manager who was offering people two hundred and twenty pounds a week merely to stuff mattresses, and simply couldn't get staff? The working classes just don't want to work. They're shored up by moonlighting and the great feather bed of the welfare state.'

Paul made the mistake of thinking that someone with such capitalist instincts would automatically vote Tory. Freddie Jones listened to him carefully but didn't say anything. He was plump and jolly, with rumpled red-gold curls, round, merry grey-blue eyes, a snub nose and an air that life was a tremendous adventure. Lizzie thought he looked much more fun than anyone else.

Across the room, she noticed, James had broken swiftly away from Sarah Stratton, and was now talking to a very slim woman with dimples and short brown curls tied up by a blue bow. She was wearing a pale-blue midi dress with a full skirt and a top, of which the satin lining was the strapless bodice, and the gauze over it covered her arms down to her wrists and her shoulders and tied in a pussy-cat bow at the neck. It was the most ghastly dress Lizzie had ever seen. But the woman, who Lizzie deduced must be Freddie Jones's wife, seemed frightfully pleased with herself, and was laughing

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away, rolling her eyes and gazing up at James's beautiful bronzed face with excessive admiration.

Apart from Sarah Stratton, Lizzie decided hazily, the men looked much more glamorous than the women this evening, gaudy peacocks in their different tail coats, red with grey-blue facings for the West Cotchester Hunt, red with crimson for the neighbouring Gatherham Hunt, dark blue with buff for the Beaufort. If he hadn't been so good-looking, James in a dinner jacket would have been outclassed.

Helping herself to another Buck's Fizz, Lizzie wandered somewhat unsteadily over to the seating plan for dinner at the Town Hall. She was sitting next to Freddie Jones. James was on Monica Baddingham's right. Maybe his predictions about his brilliant future were about to come true.

Laughing uproariously, two handsome young bloods in red coats now rushed up and started marking the seating plan with red asterisks.

'What *are* you doing?' asked Lizzie.

'Singling out the worst gropers,' said one. 'We're starting with Bas Baddingham and Rupert Campbell-Black.'

'Better put one beside my husband,' said Lizzie.

'Who's he?'

'James Vereker.'

'We were just about to.' They all collapsed with laughter.

'Have some more fizz,' yelled Monica Baddingham in her raucous voice, arriving with a jug which contained almost straight orange juice now. 'I can't think what's happened to Rupert. We'll have to leave in a sec, or we'll be late for dinner.' She drifted off.

'Do we dare put an asterisk by Tony's name?' said one of the young bloods.

'Of course,' said the other, seizing the Pentel.

Giggling, Lizzie glanced across the room to see James beckoning imperiously.

He's had enough of Mrs Jones, so he wants to palm her off on me and press the flesh, thought Lizzie.

Ignoring James, she turned back to the seating plan. Next minute James had crossed the room and seized her wrist.

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'May I borrow her?' he asked coldly.

'Of course,' said the young bloods, 'as long as you bring her straight back.'

James dragged Lizzie away. 'Do pay attention when I signal.'

'I was having a nice time.'

'This is work,' hissed James. 'I want you to meet Valerie Jones. She's opening a boutique in Cotchester next month. You must go and buy something.'

Never, never, thought Lizzie sulkily, if she sells dresses like that blue thing she's wearing.

'Lizzie writes novels,' James told Valerie Jones, as if to explain his wife's scruffy appearance.

'I'd laike to wraite novels if I had the taime,' said Valerie Jones, in an incredibly elocuted voice, 'but Ay'm so busy with the boutique and the kids and moving in and we do have to entertain a lot. People are always saying, You should wraite a book, Mrs Jones, you've had such a fascinating laife.'

She screwed her face up in what she obviously thought was a fascinating smile.

Close up, Lizzie noticed that Valerie Jones had very clean nails, perfectly shaved armpits and the very white eyeballs of the non-reader and non-drinker. She was tiny and very pretty in a doll-like way, but Lizzie suddenly understood the expression: blue with cold. Valerie's china-blue eyes were the coldest she'd ever seen. The pink and white skin also concealed the rhinoceros hide of the relentless social climber.

'I'll leave you girls to get acquainted,' said James. 'Better have a word with Paul Stratton, or he'll think I'm avoiding him. We must have a dance later,' he added admiringly to Valerie. 'I bet you're as light as thistledown.'

'Seven stone on the scales this morning,' simpered Valerie.

And six-and-a-half of that's ego, thought Lizzie. 'Where d'you live?' she asked.

'At Whychey,' said Valerie.

'Quite near us,' said Lizzie. 'We're at Penscombe.'

But Valerie wasn't remotely interested in where Lizzie lived.

'And only quarter of an hour from the boutique, so Ay can

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rush down there, if there's any craysis, or a special client comes in. They always ask for me.' Valerie put her head on one side. 'Ay don't know why. Ay think Ay tell people the truth. Ay mean, what is the point of selling somebody a gown that doesn't suit them? It's such a bad advertisement for the boutique.'

'Which house in Whychey?' asked Lizzie.

'Oh it's lovely; Elizabethan,' said Valerie. 'We had to do an awful lot though, ripping out all that horrid dark panelling.' Lizzie winced. 'And of course we've completely re-landscaped the garden, but it'll be a year or two before Green Lawns is the paradise we want.'

Lizzie looked puzzled. 'The only Elizabethan house I know in Whychey is Bottom Hollow Court.'

'We changed the name,' said Valerie. 'We thought Green Lawns sounded prettier.'

'Where did you live before?'

'Cheam,' said Valerie, with the flourish of one saying Windsor Castle. 'We never thought we'd find anywhere as perfect as Cheam. All our help broke down and crayed when we left. But Gloucestershire has so much to offer.'

At that moment Monica came up.

'I was just saying, Monica, that Gloucestershire has so much to offer, particularly,' Valerie raised her untouched glass, 'on a gracious evening like tonight.'

'Not if we don't get any grub,' said Monica briskly. 'We've decided not to wait for Rupert. Do either of you need a loo?'

Outside it had turned bitterly cold. Valerie came out of the house smothered in an almost floor-length mink. I hope hounds get her, thought Lizzie savagely, as she watched Freddie open the door and settle Valerie in, before going round to the driving seat.

'Isn't she a poppet?' said James. 'Knew so much about my programme.'

'Sarah Stratton?' asked Lizzie.

'No, Valerie Jones. I do hope Freddie joins the Board. We could do with a few caring wives like Valerie at Corinium.'

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Lizzie was dumbfounded. Was James such a dreadful judge of character?

'What did you think of Sarah Stratton?' she asked.

'Not a lot. Didn't even know who I was. You'd have thought Paul would have briefed her.'

Off they set in convoy, cars with silver foxes on the bonnet skidding all over the road, rattling the cattle grids, lighting up the last grey curls of the traveller's joy and the last red beech leaves. Flakes of snow were drifting down as they arrived at Cotchester Town Hall.

'It's already fetlock-deep in Stow,' bellowed a woman who'd just driven up with a white windscreen. 'But of course you're a coat warmer down here.'

Cotchester Town Hall, a splendid baroque edifice, two hundred yards down on the other side of the High Street from Corinium Television, had been built in 1902 to replace the old Assembly Rooms. The huge dining-rooms on either side of the ballroom were filled with tables, packed with laughing, chattering people. But in a noisy, glamorous gathering easily the most glamorous, scrutinized table belonged to Corinium Television. The Krug was circulating (Tony was always generous when the evening was deductible) and dinner was now well underway, but Rupert and Beattie Johnson still hadn't turned up and Sarah Stratton, who should have been on Rupert's right, and Tony, who should have had Beattie on his left, were trying to hide their irritation and disappointment.

Lizzie Vereker, however, was having a lovely time sitting next to Freddie Jones. Totally unpompous, instinctively courteous, noisily sucking up his bortsch, rattling off remarks in a broad Cockney accent at a speed which must tax the most accomplished shorthand typist, he was also, despite a scarlet cummerbund strained double by his wide girth, curiously attractive.

'I don't know anything about electronics,' confessed Lizzie, taking a belt of Krug, 'but I know you're very good at them. James says you're one of the most powerful men in England.'

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'My wife doesn't fink so,' said Freddie. 'It's a fallacy women are attracted to power. No one's fallen in love wiv me for years. I'd like to be tall like your 'usband. But I got my height from my muvver and my shoulders from my Dad, and the rest 'ad to go somewhere.' He roared with laughter.

At the head of the table Monica listened politely to James Vereker talking about his programme and his ideas for other programmes, and surreptitiously gazed at Sarah Stratton. Her tobacco-brown shawl had slid right off her golden shoulders now. Her piled-up blonde hair emphasized her long slender neck. The seat beside her, which should have been Rupert's, had now been taken by Bas, Tony's wicked brother, who was chatting her up like mad.

She's so beautiful, thought Monica. What chance could poor Winifred have stood?

She felt jolted and uneasy. She wished she were at home reading gardening books and listening to *Lohengrin*.

Valerie Jones had one aim in life – to rise socially. She had therefore done her homework. Knowing James was coming this evening, she had watched his programme all week so she could comment on every item. She was now sitting next to Paul Stratton, whose recent speech in the House on the proposed Cotchester by-pass she had learnt almost by heart. But Paul was less flattered by her obvious homework than James. He, like Monica, was surreptitiously watching his wife flirting with Bas, and experiencing a tightness round his heart, a jealousy never felt when he was married to Winifred.

Lizzie's and Freddie's conversation had noisily progressed to hunting.

'It was Rupert who got me going,' said Freddie. 'Put me up on a really quiet 'orse last March. I was cubbing by August, and huntin' by November.'

'Weren't you terrified?' asked Lizzie in awe.

'I needed three ports and lemons to get me on to the 'orse for the opening meet, I can tell you. But I reckoned if I fell orf I'd bounce anyway.' He roared with laughter again. 'I'm going to take up shootin' next.'

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Huge oval silver plates of roast beef were now coming round.

'How's Rupert getting on with Beattie Johnson?' asked Lizzie, helping herself.

Freddie shrugged. 'Not very well. She keeps 'earing wedding bells, and we all know Rupe's tone-deaf. He said the other day he fort the relationship would last till Cheltenham.'

Lizzie giggled. 'What a typically Rupert remark. Has she finished ghosting his memoirs yet?'

'Probably providing material for the last chapter at the moment,' said Freddie. Digging a serving spoon into a creamy mass of potato dauphinoise, he gave a big helping to Lizzie, and was just helping himself when Valerie called sharply down the table, 'No tatties, Fred-Fred.'

'It's Friday,' said Freddie, the Cockney accent wheedling, as the spoon edged towards his plate.

'No tatties, I said.' Valerie's voice was pure steel.

Freddie put back the potatoes.

Looking across at Lizzie, Sarah Stratton gave her a ghost of a wink.

'You can have my roll, Fred-Fred,' she said, lobbing it across the table to him.

Valerie opened her rosebud mouth and shut it again. She knew one must behave like a lady at all times, and not brawl with one's hubby in public. Then she suddenly noticed that James, who'd ground to a halt with Monica, was looking very put out.

'What's your programme about on Monday?' Valerie asked him across the table.

Paul Stratton, on Monica's left, seized his opportunity. Turning to her, he said in a low voice, 'It's awfully good of you to take Sarah under your wing this evening. I know how close you were to Winifred.'

Monica almost choked on her roast beef. She didn't want to talk about Winifred.

'It meant so much to Sarah,' went on Paul. 'She was so worried about coming tonight.'

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She doesn't look worried now, thought Monica, watching Sarah laughing up at Bas.

'I felt guilty at the time,' said Paul rather heartily. 'But we are all sinners, are we not? What happened to Sarah and me was part of a loving relationship. All sides behaved with dignity. I feel I can now walk down Cotchester High Street with my head held high.'

Do you indeed, thought Monica furiously.

'But one can't destroy something that's lasted twenty-five years over-night,' said Paul, spearing a piece of Yorkshire pudding. 'I still miss Win and the girls, particularly when I see old friends like you and Tony.'

He wants my sympathy, thought Monica incredulously. He's utterly destroyed my best friend, and he wants me to feel sorry for *him*.

'Do you correspond with Win?' asked Paul.

Fortunately deliverance appeared in the form of one of the hall porters, who whispered a message in Monica's ear.

'Thank you so much,' she said, and banging the table with her spoon, yelled down to Tony at the other end, 'That was a message from Rupert. He can't make it after all. Something urgent has come up.'

'Probably Rupert's cock,' said Lizzie idly, earning herself a thunderous look of disapproval from James.

'Pity,' said Sarah lightly. 'I was *so* looking forward to meeting him.'

'There'll be other occasions,' said Bas, leaning back as a waitress removed his plate.

Tony, for a minute, was unable to disguise his rage.

'Of all the fucking bad manners,' he exploded.

Rupert's defection put a considerable dampener on the evening. It was not until the syllabub had been handed round in tall glasses that Bas Baddingham, who was among other things a partner in a local estate agents, made an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

'Has anyone else heard a rumour that Declan O'Hara's bought Penscombe Priory?' he asked.

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For a second there was a stunned silence. Then all the women acted with the frantic excitement of dogs when their leads are rattled.

'I'm going on a crash diet tomorrow,' squeaked Lizzie, dropping her spoon with a clatter.

'Oh why didn't we buy a house in Penscombe rather than Chalford?' wailed Sarah Stratton.

'How much did he pay for it?' asked Valerie Jones.

'Half a million' said Bas.

There was a long pause as everyone did frantic sums to work out how much that now made their houses worth.

'That's an awful lot,' grumbled Valerie.

'But it's such a romantic house,' sighed Lizzie, 'and that lovely wild garden.'

'Hellishly cold,' shuddered James.

'And faces North,' said Valerie.

'So does Declan O'Hara,' said Sarah dreamily, earning herself a sharp look from Paul.

'Rather a lot to pay for a weekend retreat,' said James, looking put out.

To hell with impressing Rupert with the secret he'd been hugging to himself all day, thought Tony. He had a good enough audience as it was, and it was too late for any of them to leak the story to the press tonight.

'Declan's going to live here,' said Tony, looking slowly down the table. 'He's joining Corinium in September.'

There was a gasp of excitement, followed by another stunned silence.

Troublesome, tetchy, but monumentally talented, Declan O'Hara was simply the BBC's hottest property. His weekly interviews with the great and very famous went out at prime time and were avidly watched and discussed by the entire nation. Nothing like the normal chat show host, he indulged in no back slapping, nor drinking in the green room, nor bandying round of Christian names before a programme. Nor did he bounce around on long pastel sofas, cosily exchanging confidences.

His victims sat facing him, and, once on air, like a Jesuit

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