

TACKLE!

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TACKLE!

JILLY COOPER



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To my grandsons, Jago, Lysander and Acer Tarrant,
and my granddaughters, Scarlett and Sienna Cooper,
with huge love and pride

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JAMIE ABELARD	Gay journalist at the <i>Cotchester Times</i> , likes laying out pages.
EDDIE ALDERTON	Rupert Campbell-Black's grandson, gilded brat, poster boy and flat-racing jockey.
PARIS ALVASTON	Dora Belvedon's boyfriend. Ice-cool Adonis, recent first in Classics at Cambridge, very good writer, also forging highly successful acting career.
MARTIN BANCROFT	Appalling fundraising creep and Etta Edwards's son.
HARMONY BATES	Rupert's very good but rather large Assistant Head Lass.
DORA BELVEDON	Twenty-two-year-old smart cookie, besotted with horses, dogs and Paris Alvaston. Also Rupert's ghostwriter and press officer.
JUPITER BELVEDON	Dora's much older brother. Art dealer and Tory MP for Cotchester.
JAMES BENSON	Rupert's very expensive private doctor, later enlisted to administer to Searston football players.

ALAN BORDESCO	Vermelho's golden-haired goalkeeper.
WILFIE BRADFORD	Very small, whippet-quick Searston Rovers forward who's absolutely crazy about horse racing.
MARY BRADFORD	Wilfie's sweet mother, who has single-handedly raised her children and works all hours as a cleaner to make ends meet.
DOUGIE BRADFORD	Wilfie's vile bully of a father who only returns home to plunder Wilfie's wages and beat him up if he plays badly.
ADRIAN CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert's younger brother, owner of Chelsea Art Gallery.
RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK	Ex-world showjumping champion. Hugely successful owner/trainer/breeder. Tory Minister for Sport in the eighties. Despite reaching sixty and being as bloody-minded as he is beautiful, he's still Nirvana for most women.
TAGGIE CAMPBELL-BLACK	His second wife, an angel. Recently suffered an operation for breast cancer.
BIANCA CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's ravishing adopted Colombian daughter. Lives with Feral Jackson, a rising football star. Party animal and shopaholic, Bianca is not intellectually endowed.
MARCUS CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert's son from his first marriage and a world-famous concert pianist.

RUBEN CARLOS	Sneaky Vermelho midfielder known as the Weasel.
JACKIE CARSLAKE	Editor of the <i>Cotchester Times</i> .
DOLPHY CARTER	Incredibly talented, very young and shy member of Deansgate Football Academy. Formerly in horrendous children's home. Longs above all for a family.
MIDAS CHANNING	Older, rather chubby but smiling Searston striker. Once of great promise, everything he touched turned to goals. Keen gambler, struggling to keep up a huge mortgage.
CHARMAINE CHANNING	Known as Charm. Attempts a more upper-class accent, calling her husband 'Maydus'.
CHARLIE	Searston Rovers masseur, very good at applying man-tan.
CHEFFIE	Chief cook at Searston Rovers.
BASTIAN CLARK-ROGERS	Uppity young Searston Rovers and ex-England Under-Eighteen forward, already writing his autobiography.
DAFFODIL CLARK-ROGERS	Deeply daffy Wag, who later in the story marries Bastian. Daffy gets wildly excited by a sign saying 'POSH CAR BOOT SALE', expecting David Beckham to be manning a stall.

GEMINI COATES	Pretty counsellor at Searston Rovers, employed to sort out players' mental health problems.
ABNER COHEN	Very rich and powerful rabbi.
RUTH COHEN	His loving wife.
ELIJAH COHEN	Their son, who, much to their disapproval, became a football player, and later a manager when a horrific injury put him out of the game. Now manages Deansgate Academy, which caters for players under eighteen.
MADISON COHEN	Elijah's wife and token leftie.
ISAIAH AND NAOMI COHEN	Elijah and Madison's children.
TOMMY DOWNING	Potentially dazzling Searston forward, whose ethos is, 'If you're drowning, swim out to sea.' Given to punching other players and telling the manager and ref they've made a cock-up.
JOSEF DROZA	Brilliant Searston midfielder from the Czech Republic, whom manager Ryan Edwards keeps endlessly on the bench, punishing him for making a pass at Ryan's teenage daughter, Princess Kayley.
LLOYD DUDSBRIDGE	Chief Constable of Rutshire.
LYALL DUDSBRIDGE	His son, who has far-fetched ambitions to be a professional footballer – nicknamed Lout.

VALENT EDWARDS	Yorkshireman of the people, ex-Premier League and England megastar. His hawk-like goalkeeper eyes have since found gaps in every money market, making him a major player on the financial world stage. Later, ace at coaching goalkeepers.
ETTA EDWARDS	His adored second wife, a brilliant gardener. She and Valent are co-owners with Rupert Campbell-Black of flat racing's World Cup winner Master Quickly.
RYAN EDWARDS	Valent's son. Intransigent and very socially ambitious manager of Searston Rovers.
DINAH JEPSON-EDWARDS	Ryan's very bossy, redheaded wife, who refers to herself as Dinah-mite and imposes her will on other Wags.
OTLEY JEPSON-EDWARDS	Dinah and Ryan's teenage son, now at Bagley Hall, a local public school, and shaping up as a moderate footballer.
KAYLEY JEPSON-EDWARDS	Ryan's 'Little Princess'. Also at Bagley Hall.
SIR CRAIG EYNHAM	Chairman and owner of Deansgate Football Club and hugely successful inventor of different products. Highly ambitious, he is determined Deansgate will go up to the Premier League, playground of the world's billionaires.
LADY GRACE EYNHAM	Almost more up herself than Sir Craig. Keen tennis player, bossy-boots and social mountaineer.

ALAN GARCIA	Highly successful but dodgy footballers' agent. Very bung-ho.
FACUNDO GONZALES	Brilliant Argentinian footballer who later joins Searston Rovers on a massive salary and expects other players to provide both goal and girl opportunities.
BOWEN GRIFFITHS (GRIFFY)	Lovely older Searston player, henpecked and utterly exhausted by his model wife, Inez, who expects him to do all the housework and the shopping, look after their children and iron all her expensive clothes.
INEZ GRIFFITHS	A model who is not a model wife.
LADDY HEYWOOD	Brilliant, handsome and priapic Deansgate forward.
BARNEY HUGHES	Ace sports reporter on the <i>Cotchester Times</i> .
FERAL JACKSON	Star striker and playmaker, living with Bianca Campbell-Black. Brave and beautiful but insecure about dyslexia and very troubled background.
NANCY JACKSON	Feral Jackson's mother, fighting drug addiction.
LUDOVIC KING	Older Searston defender. Not prepared to sacrifice his social life, so often takes hangovers on to the field. Adoring fans sing: 'Ludovictorious, happy and glorious.' King of banter. If the manager tells him: 'You were shit today,' Ludovic will crack back: 'That's not what your wife said last night.'

KITSY	Searston kit man.
GAVIN LATTON	Rupert Campbell-Black's assistant trainer. Mutually in love with Gala Millburn, Rupert's leading work rider.
COLONEL TERENCE LIGHTFOOT	Pompous chairman of Drobenham Football Club.
JANEY LLOYD-FOXES	Billy Lloyd-Foxe's widow. A sexy, totally unprincipled journalist, on the hunt for a rich new husband, and hell-bent on bringing down Rupert Campbell-Black.
LOUISA MALONE	Very pretty Penscombe stable lass, known as Lou-Easy because she's so free with her favours.
BRUISER BEN MARTIN	Drobenham's centre forward, massive 6 ft 6 in. brute, known as Big Ben.
ZEUS MARTINEZ	Megastar manager of Portuguese team Vermelho.
EZRA MATTA	Adorable Searston Rovers defender from Nigeria. Great player but scatty and always losing things. Also having had his pin number tattooed on his arm so he can remember it, he cannot understand why he never seems to have any money in the bank.
ANGUS MCLEAN	Searston full back and bully. Known as Anger Management.
MIMI MCLEAN	His lovely wife, who unaccountably adores him. Teaches GCSE English at nearby Larkminster Comp and permanently takes work home, even marking essays during football matches.

MARKETA MELNIK	Gorgeous, volatile, voluptuous Penscombe stable lass from the Czech Republic who dotes on the opposite sex. She and Louisa Malone are inseparable, specialising in threesomes, giggling over escapades: ‘What was he like in bed?’ ‘Can’t remember, I was too busy reading his tattoos. I love reading in bed.’
GALA MILLBURN	Rupert’s leading work rider.
SUSAN MORECAMBE	Executive Chair of the Integrity Committee of the General Football Council.
JARRED MORELAND	Ruthless, crooked, sadistic Director of Football at Deansgate.
AHMED NELSON	Heroic Searston midfielder from Sierra Leone.
MILES NEWALL	Senior Searston defender. Frightful bore, known as Know-All because he’s always banging on about past achievements.
EAMONN O’CONNOR	Horse and football-mad Irish charmer who moves into Penscombe as bouncer, chauffeur and general factotum.
SHELAGH O’CONNOR	Eamonn’s adored and adoring wife, ex-cancer nurse at Cotchester hospital, who joins her husband at Penscombe Court to look after Taggie and help run the house.

ORION ONSLOW	Very gifted Searston forward. Own clothes range with a million followers. Hates training, prefers to rely on natural talent. Outlandish behaviour redeemed by a sense of humour.
ALPHONSO PACHINO	Freelance South American pilot.
PETER PARKINSON	Known as Parks. Searston Rovers captain and one-time great defender but slowing up. Warrior on the pitch, nicest person off it.
ROSALIE PARKINSON	Parks's incredibly tactless wife. Always tells Wags their husbands are about to be sacked or are being unfaithful. Rosalie, who runs a boutique in Cotchester High Street, gets asked to parties because everyone loves her husband. When she and Dinah-mite Edwards arrive at a party at the same time, it's known as a 'bitch invasion'.
WILSON PHIPPS	Known as Topsy Phipsy. Manager of Deansgate, who drinks heavily to relieve the stress of the job.
BARRY PITT	Known as Pitt Bully. Searston goalkeeper. Very vocal, famous for his distribution skills as well as his goal-stopping abilities.
SANDRA PITT	His cuddly, blonde wife, known as Sand Pitt, who doesn't work but has had a lot of work done on her.
TIMON AND SAPPHIRE RANNALDINI	Rupert's eight- and six-year-old grandchildren.

GALGO RODRIGUES

Lightning-fast Spanish forward playing for Searston Rovers, who's very slow at learning English.

NARCISCO ROMANO

Vainest player. Deansgate forward, known as Moan of the Match because he's always grumbling.

MITCHELL SIMPSON

'Groundsy', brilliant groundsman, keeps Deansgate pitch like a billiard table. So attractive he's also known as Grounds for Divorce Man, but loves his wife and children.

HARRY
STANTON-HARCOURT

Very promising member of the football team at Bagley Hall. Winner of numerous 'Fastest Boy' medals. Quiet and gentle manner conceals burning ambition. Nicknamed Hooray Harry.

LADY EMMA
STANTON-HARCOURT

Harry's beautiful, divorced mother who lives in a crumbling stately home. Reluctant to marry again as it would mean relinquishing her title.

ERIC STEVAS

Hugely rich initial chairman of Searston Rovers. Refuses to invest in the club. Trousers any takings.

BYRON STOCKWELL

A glamorous and accomplished Deansgate goalkeeper known as Stopwell.

LARK TOLLAND

Very pretty and loving Penscombe stable lass, blissfully betrothed to Eddie Alderton.

GHENGIS TONG	Hong Kong aeroplane trillionaire, creator of the Green Galloper, a little plane that can carry one horse and several humans.
JAN VAN DAVENTER	A handsome South African who helped Taggie Campbell-Black at Penscombe Court. Now in prison for many years for trying to murder Rupert and fatally sabotaging so many of his horses.
JEAN JACQUES VOLTAIRE	Vermelho's star striker.
PETER WAINWRIGHT	Very successful, recently retired football manager of Larkminster Rovers, gave Feral Jackson his first break.
SEPTEMBER WEST	Nicknamed Tember, adorable secretary to the chairman of Searston Rovers. Possessor of lovely long red hair and a tawny-gold complexion, reminiscent of autumn. Cherishes any unhappy player.
CADENZA WESTERHAM	Glamorous, talented and opportunistic photographer on the <i>Cotchester Times</i> .

1

Rupert Campbell-Black, despite being one of the most successful owner/trainers and one of the handsomest men in the world, was in the darkest of places. His adored wife, Taggie, had just endured a gruelling operation for breast cancer and would shortly undergo chemotherapy.

He had also recently discovered that Jan Van Daventer, his dotty father's South African carer, who'd helped run Rupert's very large Penscombe Court, had only ingratiated himself into the household because he was convinced one of Rupert's ancestors in the eighteenth century had robbed him of his birthright, consisting of a vast estate and fortune.

As a result of Jan's clandestine sabotage, the stud psychopath, a stallion called Titus Andronicus, had been let out of his pen and savaged to death Rupert's beloved leading sire, Love Rat. Jan had also orchestrated the kidnapping of Rupert's other favourite horse, the yard mascot, Safety Car, sending Safety on a nightmare journey across Europe before he was rescued in the nick of time from a slaughterhouse in Italy.

Finally, Rupert's equally beloved black Labrador, Banquo, was suffering from a broken leg, having been chucked down a ravine in a nearby wood. This had happened when Jan had tried to murder Rupert because he was madly in love

with – and determined to marry – Rupert’s wife, Taggie. Luckily, Jan had only succeeded in cracking Rupert’s ribs and puncturing his lungs, before a tipped-off local CID stormed in and arrested him.

Rupert, an accomplished gambler, had some years ago had a successful bet that, as a very mature student, he could pass a GCSE in English Literature. Having acquired a B grade as well as a fondness for Shakespeare, he now recalled Scene Five, Act IV of *Hamlet*:

‘When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.’

It was a measure of Taggie’s extreme unselfishness that she had been so desperate not to distract Rupert when one of Love Rat’s last colts, Master Quickly, was competing in the World Cup in Dubai, that she had not revealed to him that she’d been diagnosed with cancer, not even that she was undergoing a lumpectomy operation. But, wised up to this in Dubai by one of his work riders, an utterly devastated Rupert had jetted straight home to Taggie in hospital. The only redeeming feature being that although Rupert had missed the World Cup, Master Quickly had won the race.

As so many of Rupert’s other horses had come first in earlier races in Dubai, he had been reluctantly persuaded to attend a parade of Master Quickly and other victorious horses and riders through the nearby Cotswold villages, ending up with a big party at Rupert’s local, the Dog and Trumpet, which was attended by a mass of media.

Escaping from the revels to get back to Taggie, Rupert drove through the little village of Penscombe, with its church spire and ash-blond cottages, and swung into his long drive, which was lit on either side by the white candles of an avenue of horse chestnut trees. Below on the left, a lake glittered azure in the late April sunshine.

Ahead, dominating the valley, was Penscombe Court, his beautiful gold Queen Anne house, sheltered from behind by a great green halo of beech woods, which were carpeted by

bluebells fighting for space against a Milky Way of white wild garlic flowers.

Beyond the house and garden, stretching down the valley, lay a huge yard for horses in training and half a dozen royal-blue-and-emerald-green lorries bearing the words 'Rupert Campbell-Black Racing'. Further on was a stud where his stallions lived and strutted their stuff; barns for visiting mares, mares in foal or with foals; cottages for staff and tenants; and a helicopter pad and hangar. Beyond stretched a tangle of flat and downhill gallops for all weathers and distances, and all around were lush paddocks with plenty of shade for every kind of racehorse.

Penscombe Court had been in the Campbell-Black family for more than 250 years but it had been Rupert, with his vision and unceasing and stupendous labours, who had created this empire. But what was the point of an empire, Rupert thought with a shiver, without its empress. *Oh, please God, keep Taggie safe.*

Reaching home, however, Rupert found his wife, who'd only just returned from hospital, sitting out on the terrace in a pale-blue poncho, her mane of black hair lifting in the breeze, her huge silver eyes sparkling, looking happier than she had in weeks.

'Look, Rupert, look at the old boy,' Taggie called out as she pointed to the field below, where a miraculously recovered favourite horse, Safety Car, dark brown with one ear and a straggly tail, was gingerly playing football with Rupert's yapping Jack Russells, Cuthbert and Gilchrist.

An equally delighted Rupert was just asking Taggie whether she was warm enough and had she had any lunch, when the telephone rang in the kitchen.

'I'll answer it,' cried Taggie.

'I'll just check the yard. Don't let Safety Car overdo it,' said Rupert. 'Then I'll be in.'

The call was from their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Bianca,

who lived in Australia with a Black English footballer called Feral Jackson. Bianca was ecstatic that Ryan Edwards, the son of World Cup-winning Master Quickly's co-owner, Valent Edwards, and the manager of nearby football club Searston Rovers, wanted to buy Feral to help Searston – nicknamed the Gallopers – go up to the Premier League next season.

'Several other Premier League teams are putting out feelers for Feral,' crowed Bianca, 'and he and I can come back and live in Gloucestershire and look after you and Daddy.'

'Also,' Bianca added, 'I know Daddy's heartbroken over Love Rat dying, but it would give him a huge new interest to take shares in Searston Rovers, co-manage the club with Valent and Ryan and help them buy some really good players.'

'Only if he can sign up Safety Car,' said Taggie.

Visits to the yard always took longer than intended. Rupert returned to the kitchen, which had low beams, windows overlooking the valley and yard, and every surface weighed down by 'Get well soon, Taggie' cards and even yellow buckets from the yard filled with flowers. Here, he found his wife sharing a dilapidated rust-brown sofa with Forester, her brindled greyhound; Purrpuss, a fluffy black cat who was Master Quickly's stable companion; and poor Labrador Banquo, with his leg in plaster, who thumped his tail as Rupert approached.

'Isn't it brilliant, darling,' cried Taggie, putting down the telephone, then, in her deep voice with its soft Irish accent, relaying the conversation she'd had with Bianca.

'Everyone wants Feral, he and Bianca would come home again, and you'd have fun running a football club.'

Although pleased to see Taggie looking even happier, with a flush of colour in her pale, wasted cheeks, Rupert was less keen on the idea. Now bloody Jan Van Daventer was inside, he'd have to find someone to run their very large house, because the most important thing was to keep the pressure off Taggie, particularly as she was soon to go through chemo. Bianca was a sex-and-shopping party animal who'd fill the place with chaos

and A-lister friends. And his daughter Tabitha and Taggie's sister Caitlin would use this as an excuse to dump their children as well.

Rupert, whose cracked ribs were killing him, topped up the dogs' bowls and his own large glass of whiskey with water, and said he was extremely fond of Bianca's boyfriend, Feral, 'but not of football – all those players skipping around like ballerinas and having group sex every time someone scores a goal'.

And with Feral having been brought up in a nearby slum area, the Shakespeare Estate, with a mother who was a temporarily reformed heroin addict, and her lover, a pernicious drug pusher who was currently inside, Rupert felt Feral and Bianca were much safer in Perth. Whereupon Taggie brimmed up: 'I know it sounds awful, but once I found out I had cancer, I panicked that I might die and never again see Bianca or Xav' – Bianca's brother, who lived in Pakistan.

Disentangling her from the menagerie on the sofa, taking her sobbing into his arms, Rupert was appalled by the corrugated sharpness of her ribs. How could he be so fucking selfish? As soon as Ryan Edwards's father, Valent, was back from China, where he had been investigating the bloodstock market, he'd go and see him about Searston Rovers buying Feral.

2

Valent Edwards, now in his seventies, was a football legend, still remembered for his last-minute save which enabled his team, West Riding, to win the FA Cup. Having retired from the sport, he now lived in Badger's Court, a beautiful eighteenth-century house, whose garden his wife, Etta, had transformed, and which was now a rainbow riot of spring flowers.

Valent was a modest man, so the extent of his football glories was confined to an extended cockpit at the bottom of the garden, which was where he welcomed Rupert two days later. Here, every cabinet was filled with glittering trophies, dominated by a replica of the FA Cup trailing blue and white West Riding ribbons, signed footballs, Player of the Year accolades and Golden Glove awards for goalkeeping, and shirts swapped with Bobby Moore, Rodney Marsh and Bobby Charlton. The walls were covered in medals and photographs of victories, including one of the triumphant West Riding team on an open-topped bus tour through Wharfedale, all wearing dark glasses.

'We'd been partying all the night before,' explained Valent, 'so we were bluddy hoong-over.'

Having kept more 'clean sheets', football slang for matches where he hadn't let in any goals, than any other England

keeper, Valent, on retirement, had found niches in markets all over the financial world and become exceptionally rich.

Rupert was very fond of Valent, who for some years had kept horses with him, including co-owning Master Quickly and a grey stallion, Master Quickly's brother, called New Year's Dave. Black-browed, square-jawed, handsome in a strong-featured, friendly bulldog way, Valent made no attempt to hide his Yorkshire accent, but had disguised the fact he had put on weight since his marriage by wearing his red-checked shirt outside his trousers. Madly in love with Etta, his newish wife, he displayed her photograph on his desk, beside a vase of red roses. Rupert thought Etta was a drip but hid the fact from Valent. Also on the desk was a picture of Ryan, Valent's son from his first marriage.

'I gather your son wants to buy my future son-in-law, for Searston Rovers,' said Rupert, accepting a cup of black coffee.

'Correction,' countered Valent, 'Ryan wants to buy *back* your future son-in-law. Feral, as you know, played for Ryan before he went to Perth. Ryan thinks the world of Feral – he's just the striker Searston need, and when Stevie Gerrard and Alan Hansen were playing in some testimonial there recently, they made a special journey to watch the lad. Ryan needs to nail him before the Premier League do.'

'He'd do better in the Premier League; he'd get more money. Bianca's wildly expensive, although she claimed to Taggie that Searston would soon be up in the top rung anyway.'

Valent shook his head. Bianca, who never listened, had got everything wrong. Searston were actually bottom of the third rung, League One, with only four games to go in the season ending on 22 May, and therefore the bookies' favourite for relegation.

'Even more reasons for Feral to go to some club miles away,' said Rupert. 'He's a lovely boy, but he's got some very unsavoury connections – mother a drug addict, in and out of rehab, went on the game to support Feral and his brothers and sisters. They're all grown up now, but Feral sends them all money.'

‘He’s a local boy,’ said Valent, ‘the fans like that.’

‘Not coming from the Shakespeare Estate, where they can hardly afford tickets, and the place is so rough – needles and chewing gum all over the pavements – that none of the fast-food firms will deliver there. Feral also has a police record,’ Rupert added. ‘He was in a young offenders’ unit for several months for mugging passers-by and pulling knives on other pupils, and we don’t want the press digging that all up.’

Valent, however, was not to be deflected.

‘Let’s go and have a spot of lunch at Searston and watch the match,’ he said, donning a blazer and threading a red rose from the vase into the buttonhole.

‘Etta created this rose for me,’ he added proudly. ‘It’s called Valent Edwards and it’s in all the catalogues.’

‘“My love is like a red, red rose,”’ observed Rupert. ‘Should be white, as you’re from Yorkshire. Who owns Searston Rovers?’

‘Chap called Eric Stevas. English football’s the world’s leading playground for billionaires. Stevas made a bomb in hedge funds, got a jet, five houses and several companies. But he longs to be a celeb, like a lot of businessmen, and get asked to charity balls, mix with A-listers on the red carpet and have fans singing his name.’

When Rupert had been Tory Minister for Sport back in the eighties, he had dramatically reduced football hooliganism, which had consisted of riots after both semi-finals in the FA Cup, petrol bombs being thrown at the police, two policemen stabbed, cars overturned and endless people rushed to hospital. But, coming out of politics, he had lost interest in the game. Now he asked:

‘What sort of money would Feral get in the Premier League?’

‘If he’s any good – which he is – a hundred thousand, perhaps two hundred thousand pounds.’

‘A year?’

‘No, a week.’

‘Christ, he can keep me! It’s more than Titus Andronicus gets for a shag. Mind you, Bianca could spend that in a day.’ He

grinned at Valent. ‘I could sell the more successful players some horses and introduce them to failure. No wonder you’re so rich.’

‘Different in my day,’ said Valent, waving at Etta in the kitchen window as he and Rupert climbed into his dark-blue Bentley. ‘Lucky if you got two hundred pounds a week when I started. Stevas assumed Searston would go up to the Championship in his first season and the Premier League in the next, and he’d make a fortune. Now he’s paying himself five million a year, and refusing to let Ryan refurbish the squad and buy Feral. Sponsors have all dropped out. Merchandise sales are non-existent. He’s just sold a player for ten million and trousered the lot. He’s already halved the players’ wages and hasn’t paid for the two lads bought in January. Even had the fooking cheek to suggest I put in twenty million so he could trouser that too. The fans detest him. He’s got his own song but not one he wants.’

“‘Oh, Mr Stevas,’” Valent sang in a deep baritone, “‘we think you’re grievous, why don’t you leave us.’” Morale’s rock bottom and if they go down, my Ryan’s bound to get the sack, and he’s a first-rate manager. On the other hand, the club’s favourite for relegation so we might pick it up very cheap in a couple of days and, galvanised by new owners, they might win or draw the next three games and stay up.’

As they drove out of Valent’s village of Willowood, with its thousand willows rippling in the late-April sunshine, celandines and primroses were starring the verges, but a bitter east wind was stripping the cherry trees, so their white petals snowed down on the car.

‘The only other footy club round here is Deansgate, four from the top in League One and very likely to go up to the Championship. It’s owned by Craig Eynsham.’

‘That prat,’ snapped Rupert.

‘Done well,’ said Valent. ‘Three hundred and something in the *Sunday Times* Rich List. Copies all over his house, opened at his name.’

‘Bastard wants to slap des res on everything,’ said Rupert.

Valent, whose hugely successful housing company, Attractive and Affordable, had cleaned up with first-time buyers, didn't respond.

'Bastard's always claiming great chunks of our adjoining land are his and wants to divert a motorway through mine,' went on Rupert.

'He can have a prat race with Searston's Stevas, then.'

As they drove through the lovely town of Cotchester, the assault on the High Street was noticeable: shops shut or closing down, even charity shops and cafes empty.

'That hotel's going belly up,' said Valent. 'University's very undersubscribed. *Cotchester Times* is losing circulation. Needs a good football team to pull in the punters. When Brighton and Hove were promoted the year before last, the contribution to the city's economy was two hundred and twelve million. This would be a bluddy miracle for Cotchester.'

Searston itself, two miles on, had pretty Cotswold gold houses round a village green, a post office, an antiques shop and a pub called the Running Fox. Searston's ground, named Deep Woods, lay half a mile away, in a wooded valley with tall trees lining the rickety East Stand, which looked across to a green hillock on which a flock of sheep were grazing above another row of larches lining the back of an even more rickety West Stand. The pitch itself looked almost as much brown mud as green.

As they left Valent's Bentley in the players' car park, however, Rupert expressed surprise at the number of Ferraris and Porsches.

'Looks more like a Formula One rally.'

'Footballers can always afford cars,' said Valent.

Inside, the dilapidated club had paint peeling everywhere, doors loose on their hinges, scuffed carpets and dark and cramped dressing rooms.

An hour before kick-off, Searston, in ruby and purple colours, and opposition Crowfield, in dark green, were gently limbering up, rolling on their backs on the grass, stretching different muscles and dancing back and forth across the pitch.

With their streaked blond curls, flying dreadlocks and white partings across dark hair like aeroplane trails, Rupert again thought how poncy they looked, particularly as so many of them had necks and arms so heavily tattooed that they appeared to be wearing women's paisley dresses beneath their short-sleeved shirts.

Three match officials in black shirts were jogging round the pitch – keeping fit so they could scarper if things got nasty, thought Rupert.

Quite a crowd had already gathered. Valent always felt upstaged, both mentally and physically, when he went to the races with the outstandingly handsome and famous Rupert. Now he enjoyed being the star of the show as onlookers nudged each other and nodded in his direction, and rushed forward for selfies. Even the players looked over in excitement.

Second sets of goalposts had been temporarily added at each end, to enable the players to practise shooting into them and not further rough up the ground between the main goalposts. And when Valent went down to chat to the Searston team and stood in goal, idly stopping every ball with his lace-up leather shoes, everyone laughed and cheered.

As Rupert waited on the touchline, a player with a shaved head called out:

'Didn't you used to play for Wolves?'

'No, but I was one,' shouted back Rupert.

The laughter that greeted this died as Ryan Edwards came out of the tunnel and barked at his players that they'd better get kitted out. He then turned to greet his father and Rupert, handing them programmes and a team sheet and telling them that their pre-match lunch was ready in the Directors' Lounge.

Ryan was indeed good-looking, with glossy dark-brown hair, a high smooth forehead and features less pugnacious than Valent's. There were also black circles under his slightly-too-close-together dark-brown eyes, and a muscle flickered in his clenched jaw. *Not someone who sleeps well at night*, reckoned Rupert.

‘Rupert’d luv to talk about Feral,’ murmured Valent.

‘Not now,’ snapped Ryan. ‘Later in the week – that’s if I’m still here.’

All around the ground, spectators were reading reports on their iPhones, predicting Ryan’s demise.

Valent put a hand on his son’s arm.

‘Won’t coom to that. Is Stevas cooming?’

‘No, he’s in the States. Doesn’t bother to attend matches any more.’

Ryan had a very put-on voice, decided Rupert.

In the Directors’ Lounge, which had an entire window looking over the pitch, directors from both Searston and Crowfield stood around, forking up food, but not mixing with each other. The home-side top brass, however, immediately drew Valent aside.

Rupert was starving, having had only two cups of black coffee for breakfast. Seeing him standing alone, a tall girl with long gold-red hair, large hazel eyes, tawny freckled skin and a full, sweetly smiling mouth, came over and introduced herself.

‘I’m September West; everyone calls me Tember. I work for the chairman. Would you like a drink?’

‘I could murder a triple whiskey,’ admitted Rupert.

‘I’m afraid we don’t offer alcohol. Ryan doesn’t like the players drinking, but hang on a sec.’

She returned a couple of minutes later, saying, ‘Black tea,’ and handing him a mug full of whiskey.

Almost worse, on offer for lunch were only quinoa and avocados, with totally bland chicken and pasta. After a couple of mouthfuls, Rupert put down his plate, vowing that if he and Valent bought the club, they would provide booze and decent grub.

‘Ryan’s passionate about diet,’ confided Tember, ‘particularly for the players.’ Then she whispered, ‘I bought some salmon and cream cheese sandwiches on the way in. Would you like some?’ And she handed him a plate covered with a napkin.

‘Thanks, angel,’ said Rupert, vowing Tember would certainly stay on if they bought the club.

When it was time for kick-off, Valent sidled up, saying he wanted to go on networking with the non-playing staff and other directors.

‘I don’t want you to appear too involved, or Stevas will jack up the price, so I’ll leave you with luvly Tember.’

‘That’s no hardship,’ said Rupert.