

TOOTER: I don't have time to hang about. I've another four properties to assess before five pm. (*He exits Upstage Left.*)

BUTLER shrugs, makes sure TOOTER has gone and takes out his phone again. He is about to speak again when CEDRIC, still wearing his overalls, enters Downstage Right.

CEDRIC: You're the butler, I presume?

BUTLER: I am, and may I ask –

CEDRIC: - no you may not ask, demand, or get on your high horse. Are you acquainted with that woman in the kitchen, the cook?

BUTLER: Not personally, but we are both employees of the same agency.

CEDRIC: Then it's to be hoped that you have a better grip on your temper than she has. She just threw a rolling pin at me and screamed at me to get out of her kitchen and report to the tradesman's entrance. She nearly took my bloody head off, the vicious harridan.

BUTLER: And who are you?

CEDRIC: I am Lord Cedric Fforde.

BUTLER: She obviously mistook you for a plumber or such, Sir Cedric.

CEDRIC: And if I were a plumber, I could be quite legitimately employed here and perfectly entitled to enter and exit through the kitchen, Sir Cedric's kitchen, not hers. Just because a man is wearing a pair of overalls, doesn't make him fair game for some menopausal maniac. If she's typical of staff today, I'm glad I don't have any.

BUTLER: I'm so sorry, sir, I shall go and reprimand her straight away.

CEDRIC: See that you do, er... what's your name?

BUTLER: Butler, sir.

CEDRIC: I know that but what's –

BUTLER: - Butler, by name *and* profession, sir.

CEDRIC: Ah, I see.

BUTLER: By the way, sir, a Mr. Tooter is here and presently assessing your residential situation, and also –

CEDRIC: - he's what? Who?

BUTLER: Mr. Tooter, sir. He says he's from The Department of Redistribution and that you were expecting his visit.

CEDRIC: Did he, and where is he now?

BUTLER: Making his way upstairs, I believe.

CEDRIC: Then fetch him down again, forcefully if necessary. The bloody nerve of these people!

CODIE enters Upstage Right. She has changed into a very revealing dress and carries a huge jewellery pouch. BUTLER takes a long look at the pouch as he exits Upstage Left. CODIE poses provocatively against the door frame.

CODIE: And what have we here?

CEDRIC is in no mood for a flirtatious female.

CEDRIC: Madam, I might ask you the same question, except the answer's in very little doubt. Let me guess – slutty outfit, dumplings boiling over, you're playing the erotic version of Hamlet's mother as a degenerate nymphomaniac trollop. Good God, how many times must I ask you film lot to stay away from this wing? Either stay in the West Wing or go jump in the lake with the rest of them.

Whilst CODIE tries to make sense of this, TOOTER is heard Offstage, protesting. During the following, CODIE becomes entranced by CEDRIC.

TOOTER speaks Offstage.

TOOTER: Take your hands off me. This constitutes assault and you *will* be reported for it.

TOOTER enters Upstage Left, propelled by BUTLER.

BUTLER: Mr. Tooter, sir.

CEDRIC: I think you owe me an explanation, Tooter. What's your game? How dare you march into my home and help yourself?

TOOTER: You were informed of my visit by letter. I'm a representative of the government and you are hindering me from carrying out official business. I'm afraid you can't do that.

CEDRIC: Watch me.

TOOTER: I represent Her Majesty's government and must be allowed to proceed without obstruction.

CEDRIC: Tough! You've just come up against your first one.

TOOTER: But I am authorised to make an actual count of all spare bedrooms, slash, suites.

CEDRIC: For what reason?

TOOTER: You will find out in due course when full details of names and numbers will be allocated to you.

CEDRIC: Names and numbers of what?

TOOTER: Asylum seekers needing urgent accommodation whilst their claims are processed.

CEDRIC is temporarily robbed of speech.

CEDRIC: Have I suddenly been transported to the middle of some third-rate farce? *Asylum seekers! Allocated here, in my home!*

TOOTER: Don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking the common or garden everyday asylum seeker. I'm talking about those either with, or laying claim to an aristocratic title. Obviously the usual three or four starred hotel would not be up to *their* expectations, hence the European Court of Human Rights has upheld their claim to be housed in the manner to which they have been, or expect to be, accustomed.

CEDRIC: Am I hearing correctly? Are you trying to tell me that the government is planning on requisitioning Hooton House to house asylum seekers?

TOOTER: Not just Hooton House, Longleat, Chatsworth, Blenheim, Woburn, most of the larger stately homes. You're in very good company. It's the perfect solution to an ever increasing backlog.

CEDRIC: Is it really?

TOOTER: Absolutely. Every day the United Kingdom welcomes a swelling number to our shores, and accommodating them has become paramount. Any reasonable expenses would be met on submission of the appropriate forms of course.

CEDRIC: Oh of course... It's bloody outrageous!

TOOTER: Not at all. It's a very level playing field. You're perfectly free to expect the same treatment if you choose to seek asylum in any of the representative countries.

CEDRIC: I'm an Englishman! Why, in God's name, should I want to travel anywhere to seek asylum unless it's to escape being turned into the pub landlord in my own home? *My home!* Mine, thanks to five hundred years worth of Fforde blood sweat and tears, so I think I've earned the right to choose who sleeps under my roof, and I don't choose to share it with hordes of bloody foreigners.

TOOTER: I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter sir, and please do not raise your voice, use inappropriate language, or racist terminology, as it will attract a hefty fine. Count this as your first and final warning.

CEDRIC struggles for self-control.

CEDRIC: I'll tell you what I'll do, Tooter. I'll pretend this never happened. I'll close my eyes and count to ten and meanwhile you just disappear the way you came, and when I open my eyes again I'll put you and your preposterous utterings down to ghastly imagining. *(He turns his back on TOOTER and starts to count.)*

TOOTER: You can be as childish as you like. It alters nothing. I have already done a chimney count.

CEDRIC: My God! The man's a carbon footprint expert as well as a government pimp. Can this get any more surreal? So am I to be further harried for exorbitant amounts of cash based on your expert estimation of how much monoxide I pump into the air?

TOOTER: No, that's not my area, but you are on file with the Department of Uncommercial Pollution who will be contacting you shortly regarding your personal contribution to the same.

CEDRIC: Well let's save them the trouble shall we? You can tell them that I don't use even one of my fifteen chimneys because I can't afford to buy coal to light a fire, that's if there were any coal mines left in this country to produce the bloody stuff. In fact I can't afford any other kind of fuel in anywhere near enough quantity to heat one single room in the place for one single day, so beetle off back to HQ and stick that up your files.

TOOTER makes a tick on his clipboard.

TOOTER: Fifteen chimneys tallies exactly with my count, so from that, I'll simply estimate that you have at least twenty-four spare rooms. You can expect your first guests very soon.

CEDRIC grabs him by the lapels.

TOOTER: Assault! Assault! I have witnesses.

CEDRIC: Believe me my boy, if I had assaulted you, you wouldn't be standing upright bleating about it. This is just to make sure I have your undivided attention. Do I?

TOOTER nods.

CEDRIC: Then listen very carefully because I shall say this only once. Primus Ultimusque in Acie.

TOOTER: What?

CEDRIC: It's Latin. It has been my family motto for nearly five hundred years, and it translates as, 'First and Last in Battle'. I'm starting the battle right now and if I have any more of Europe's brazen nonsense thrust at me, it will turn into a very bloody battle indeed, and there will be only one winner. Got me?

TOOTER nods.

CEDRIC: Good. Butler, I'll see Mr. Tooter out myself, thank you.

CEDRIC leads TOOTER Upstage and they exit Upstage Right. CODIE is almost swooning in admiration.

CODIE: Oh boy! Now that's what I call a man!

End of Scene 2

Suggested Interval

ACT 2 SCENE 1

Around 9pm the same evening

CEDRIC, in evening suit, sits alongside CODIE on the couch. ISHBEL sits in the armchair, wearing an unremarkable evening dress and a single strand of pearls. CODIE wears a shimmering, very revealing evening dress and is smothered in diamonds. BUTLER is pouring small glasses of port at the sideboard and hands them out on a drinks tray throughout the conversation. After that, he ensures the brandy and three glasses are to hand on the sideboard before exiting Downstage Right.

CODIE: Oh man, that was a fabulous dinner. I'm stuffed fatter than a prize pork belly. Ishbel honey, I'm gonna steal your cook and take her Stateside. What do you say to that, Ced? Would you miss her?

CEDRIC: Desperately. I'm not sure I could exist without her.

CODIE: In that case, Ishbel, you must persuade her to email her recipes to my cook in L.A. starting with her Roasted Beef and Yorkshire Pie. I know it must be death for a girl's waistline, but a little of what you fancy never does any harm. Huh? What do you think, Ced? *(She looks seductively at CEDRIC. None of her flirting with him goes unnoticed by ISHBEL.)*

CEDRIC: I'm all for it.

CODIE: What a top specimen you got here, Ishbel. If you had only seen him telling that smug little government squirt where to get off. I was so impressed.

CEDRIC: What's much more impressive is the gracious way you have forgiven me for my appalling behaviour towards you just before that.

CODIE: It's very easy to forgive a gentleman as charming as yourself, Cedric, and of course, once you'd explained about your chronic insomnia, and how lack of sleep causes you to experience terrifying daytime hallucinations, well there's no way I could be offended. Tell me Ishbel, has he ever taken you for a Shakespearian nightmare?

ISHBEL: Frequently.

CODIE: Do you take anything for your insomnia, Cedric?

CEDRIC: Not as a rule. I'm not fond of pumping chemicals into myself.

CODIE: Neither am I. I prefer natural methods every time, and if you were to call into my suite tonight, just before you hit the sack, I'll personally guarantee you sleep like a baby.

CEDRIC: Sounds rather interesting.

CODIE: Oh my, what are you like? I'm talking about my homeopathic sleeping solutions, you naughty lord. Has he always been such a randy dog, Ishbel?

ISHBEL: Always.

CEDRIC is beginning to enjoy himself.

CEDRIC: Steady on Ishbel. You'll be giving the wrong impression to Miss Polaine.

CODIE: Now that's enough of the Miss Polaine thing. *(She pats his knee.)* You call me Codie now. It's amazing how at home I feel here, just like I belong. Maybe Fate brought me here for a reason. I strongly believe in Fate. Wanna know somethin'? My personal clairvoyant has told me that my life is about to change completely.

ISHBEL: How interesting. What did she say would change?

CODIE: She didn't specify, but she did say that the spirit world is already working on it, and when the time was right, they would point the way.

ORLA enters Downstage Right with a coffee set on a tray. She puts it on the sideboard and proceeds to pour it into three cups which she places on each side table.

ISHBEL: Well it's not very often that Fate brings a Hollywood A lister to Hooton House. .. Codie.

There is a pause which ISHBEL feels she must fill.

ISHBEL: I can't tell you how much I admired your films... all five of them.

CODIE: No kidding! Did you have a favourite?

ISHBEL: Oh let me see. Perhaps, 'The Revenge of the Red Hot Bitch' or maybe 'Love in the Sands of the Sahara'.

CODIE: The Kalahari, and it was lust, not love. 'Lust in the Sands of the Kalahari.'

ISHBEL: Of course, that was it. Then there was... –

CODIE: - 'Annie Get Your Man', 'It Came From Hell' and 'I'll Make You Mine.' And they were all one hundred percent total crap. Aw, come clean Ishbel. You've googled me, yea? You'd be insulting yourself to pretend you watched, much less liked any one of those bozos, but at the time I was very young, very broke and very naive... as far as acting went anyway. *(She winks at Cedric.)*

ISHBEL: So I presume you don't miss anything about the film industry.

CODIE: Not after I found something I was so much better at, like marrying millionaires. Even so, once you've been an actor, any sort of actor, you never completely lose the ambition. I'll let you in on a little secret. I've always had a hankering to play Lady Macbeth. She's so dramatic. I've even learned whole speeches of hers in the hope that maybe one day... but I guess I'll never get to play her now, so I'll just have to sparkle in the best way I can. *(She indicates her jewellery.)* And speaking of sparkle, would you bring me a lip gloss from my suite, Orla?

ORLA: Certainly, madam. *(ORLA, carrying her tray, exits Right.)*

CODIE: That girl is a credit to you, Ishbel. She's so efficient.

ISHBEL: Thank you.

There is a pause which ISHBEL feels she must fill again.

ISHBEL: Your diamonds are beautiful, absolutely breathtaking.

CODIE: Why, thank you. *(She speaks to CEDRIC.)* And thanks for the kind loan of your office safe, Cedric.

CEDRIC: No problem. There was nothing in it anyway.

ISHBEL: Now that I've seen them, I can understand why your agent is worried about theft. If they were mine, I think I'd be too afraid to ever wear them. They'd be safely locked away in a bank vault.

CODIE: What's the point of owning diamonds if you never wear them? Put them in a bank vault and they'll still be there after I'm dead. I'm known for them. They're part of who I am. They make me feel like a million dollars. Only diamonds can light up your face and put a fire in your eyes... or at least they used to, when I was young and pretty, *was* being the operative word.

CEDRIC: Not at all. You're still very pretty.

CODIE: Why, thank you Cedric. I suppose I'm not too bad for a woman approaching her forty-ninth birthday.

CEDRIC: Never! Do you hear that, Ishbel? Codie is almost the same age as you. She looks so much younger, doesn't she?

ISHBEL is struggling to control herself.

CODIE: Ced, you are a shameless flirt, but I guess Mother Nature does favour the chosen few. She's been very kind to me, and I'd say to you too. You're a fine figure of a man, and I'll bet you have rock hard biceps under that jacket. (*She squeezes his arm.*) Oh yes! Do you work out often?

CEDRIC: Work out?

CODIE: Exercise at the gym, jogging, boxing, training with weights?

CEDRIC: No, no, none of that. Wasted energy, that's what I call that nonsense. I get all the exercise I need around the house and grounds. I do all my own maintenance.

ISHBEL is embarrassed.

ISHBEL: Not all of it, Cedric.

CEDRIC: The lion's share.

ISHBEL: It's his favourite hobby.

CEDRIC: Hobby my eye, it's a necessity. With a place this size, maintenance and repairs are non-stop and prohibitively expensive, so over the years, except for the most specialised skills, I've taught myself all the trades from the ground up.

CODIE: Oh my! You clever man! Let me tell you, I've had seven husbands and not one of them knew one end of a screwdriver from the other, but a man who's good with his hands, and a titled man at that, now I find that a serious turn-on, in fact I'm going weak at the knees right now. Say that motto again, that family motto.

CEDRIC: Primus ultimusque in acie.

CODIE: Oh God, I'm melting. Doesn't that Latin stuff do something to you? I'll tell ya something, Ish, you got one in a million here. Don't you let this man outta your sight for one minute because there must be a hundred horny bitches just waiting to pounce on him, and this one's first in the queue.

CEDRIC is enjoying all this flattery a little too much for ISHBEL'S liking. She tries to change the subject.

ISHBEL: Do you ride, Codie?

CODIE: Not as much as I'd like to.

ISHBEL: I thought we might visit the stables in the morning, and take a jog round the park.

CODIE: Oh horses! You're talking about horses? *(She nudges CEDRIC and giggles.)*

ISHBEL: Of course. What else would I be talking about?

CODIE: Ishbel honey, please forgive me my earthy sense of humour. I know it lacks the subtlety of the humour over here, but I promise I shall settle down now and behave myself. Now, what do you got laid on for me this evening?

ISHBEL: Pardon me?

CODIE: Entertainment wise?

ISHBEL: Oh... well I'm sure Cedric could give you a good game of chess, or if you don't play, I have Monopoly and a Scrabble game somewhere.

CODIE: Ha ha, there you go again with your English sense of humour. You're planning on surprising me, aren't you? I must say that I adore surprises, but don't leave it too long as I may nod off and disgrace myself what with the jet lag an' all.

ISHBEL looks totally at a loss, so CEDRIC steps in.

CEDRIC: What sort of entertainment did you have in mind, Codie?

CODIE: There he goes, tempting me to be naughty again. Ok, serious. I'd love something typically English, just like that super blow-out meal we just enjoyed. So, stop me when I hit on it. How's about the traditional court jester in cap and bells, or a courtly ball with medieval musicians in the gallery, maybe a troupe of Morris dancers and a fiddler, or perhaps Highland dancers with a drum and bagpipe band, something simple like that. No? Come on, what you got up your sleeves?

CEDRIC and ISHBEL are at a loss. ORLA enters with a lip-gloss which she gives to CODIE. CODIE slathers it round her lips before giving it back to ORLA.

ISHBEL: Petit fours. I forgot them. How remiss of me! I'll just ring through to the kitchen for them.

ORLA: I'll fetch them for you, milady. *(She makes a move to exit.)*

ISHBEL: No, no. You stay here, Orla. *(She aims her speech at CEDRIC.)* I'll ring for them.

Unsure where to stand, ORLA stands Upstage Right.

CEDRIC: Meanwhile, would a brandy be in order?

CODIE: I'd say it would. Thanks.

CEDRIC takes CODIE'S glass and goes to take ISHBEL'S glass.

ISHBEL: And I'll ring through to the kitchen, Cedric... shall I?

CEDRIC: What?

ISHBEL emphasises.

ISHBEL: Shall I ring through to the kitchen ?

CEDRIC realises that ISHBEL is planning on summoning 'the ghost'

CEDRIC: Oh yes... of course... you must ring through to the kitchen.

Full of trepidation, CEDRIC goes to fill the brandy glasses and ISHBEL pulls the bell sash situated Upstage Left. Only seconds elapse before THE GREY GHOST, unseen by CEDRIC, enters Right and sweeps behind CEDRIC on its way to exit Upstage Left.

CEDRIC: Where's that awful draught come from? Has someone left a door open?

CODIE and ORLA are amazed. CODIE stands.

CODIE: Did you see that? You must have seen it.

ORLA: I did

CEDRIC sniffs.

CEDRIC: Something's on fire.

ISHBEL: Toast. Burning toast.

CEDRIC: Oh hell, the old bag's set fire to the kitchen.

He hastens to exit Downstage Right as STANLEY, in black habit and cowl, drifts in Downstage Right and collides with him. STANLEY trips over his robe and ends up on the floor.

CODIE: What's this?

CEDRIC: It's the er... surprise entertainment, a short excerpt from a play, as arranged by our actor son, Stanley. You're a ghost, aren't you, Stanley... from a Shakespeare play? Which ghost are you playing?

STANLEY: Er... B...B...Banquo's ghost.

CODIE: Macbeth! I'm loving it! More! More!

STANLEY looks helplessly at CEDRIC, but ORLA steps up and assumes the role of Macbeth. She points at STANLEY, looks horrified, and begins to quote from the play.

ORLA: Which of you have done this? Thou canst not say I did it: never shake thy gory locks at me.

ORLA says the next line as a different character and in a different position before resuming Macbeth's role again.

ORLA: Gentlemen rise; his highness is not well.

CODIE'S chance to shine has arrived. She launches in as Lady Macbeth, CODIE style.

CODIE: Sit, worthy friends: *(She motions for CEDRIC and ISHBEL to sit. They sit.)* my lord is often thus, and hath been from his youth; pray you, keep seat; the fit is momentary; upon a thought he will again be well; if much you note him, you shall offend him and extend his passion; feed and regard him not. *(She urges CEDRIC and ISHBEL to drink. They do.)* Are you a man?

ORLA: Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that which might appal the devil.

STANLEY begins to applaud CODIE, and the others join in, but CODIE won't be stopped just as she's got going.

CODIE: O proper stuff! This is the very painting of your fear: this is the air-drawn dagger which, you said, led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts, imposters to true fear, would well become a woman's story at a winter's fire, authorized by her grandam. Shame itself! Why do you make such faces? When all's done, you look but on a stool. *(She points dramatically at STANLEY and holds the pose.)*

ORLA leads the applause, and CODIE takes a few bows, finally including ORLA and STANLEY in the applause.

ORLA: Wow, Miss Polaine! Master Stanley and I had prepared a few key excerpts from Macbeth, but now we wouldn't dare. How could we follow a performance like yours?

CODIE asks ISHBEL.