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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Almost a Crime**

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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# Almost A Crime

Penny Vincenzi



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## The Main Characters

Octavia Fleming, *beautiful and talented partner in a charities advisory firm and a 'power marriage'*

Tom, *her charming, clothes-conscious, workaholic lobbyist husband*

Poppy, Gideon and Minty, *their children*

Felix Miller, *Octavia's dynamic, possessive father*

Marianne, *his mistress, mother of adolescents Zoë and Romilly*

Nico Cadogan, *rich, charismatic hotel-owner, once Felix's friend, now Tom's client*

Michael Carlton, *another of Tom's clients, an unscrupulous developer*

Louise Trelawney, *Octavia's childhood friend, a former model, wife to dependable ex-army husband Sandy and mother of Dickon*

Anna Madison, *Louise's mother and Octavia's confidante, and her husband Charles*

Gabriel Bingham, *a Blair-intake MP with a chip*

Pattie David, *a client of Octavia's, and her daughter Megan*

Melanie Faulks, *Octavia's feisty, unconventional partner*

Lauren Bartlett, *a predatory family friend of the Flemings, and her complacent husband Drew*

# Chapter 1

The first time Octavia Fleming was asked if she and her husband would appear in a feature in a glossy magazine about power marriages she had laughed aloud; of course she and Tom weren't powerful, she said, they were just two rather overworked professional people and what was a power marriage anyway? It was a marriage, the editor had said carefully, that was mutually supportive professionally as well as personally: 'and, we feel, one of the major sociological icons of the 'nineties'. Octavia had said that neither she nor Tom had any idea they were sociologically interesting.

'Well,' the editor had said, 'there you are, you in the charity business, your husband in public affairs; there must be so many occasions when your paths cross, when you can help one another with contacts, or by discussing things together, by being aware of the same sort of situations. One of our other interviewees,' she finished, 'defined it as a marriage whose sum was greater than its parts.'

'You mean the opposite of divide and rule?' said Octavia, and the editor said yes, she supposed she did and that would be a good quote too.

Octavia had said she'd think about and discuss it with Tom; rather to her surprise he agreed, providing he could approve the text. He said his consultancy could do with the publicity; Octavia had supposed that rather proved the editor's point.

The article about five such marriages as theirs appeared three months later and was entitled 'Combine and Rule'. The feature was illustrated with some rather nice photographs – Octavia with her intense dark beauty, Tom with his slightly gaunt elegance, both of them inevitably over-glamorised. That, together with what had then

been a new and rather attractive concept – the power marriage – had raised their profiles considerably.

Other articles followed: in glossy magazines or the women's pages in national and Sunday newspapers. Tom and Octavia became used to being recognised in the sort of places where the chattering classes gathered; people would pause with their forkfuls of rocket salad raised to their lips in smart restaurants and point them out to one another, would hurry across the room at receptions to claim a greater acquaintance with them than they actually had. And they would receive invitations to parties to launch products or meet people whom they had never heard of or hardly knew, their very presence, vaguely famous, helping to lend the right connotations of gloss and glamour to a gathering.

They didn't mind, rather the reverse (although the quote from one 'friend', that she would practically pay them to have them at a dinner party, had made Octavia squirm), and there was no doubt that both their professional lives benefited.

What it did for the marriage itself, Octavia was rather less sure . . .

# Chapter 2

June 1997

‘Octavia, I’ve got Tom on the line. He says can you possibly fit in drinks with him this evening? Six in the American Bar at the Savoy. He says it won’t take more than an hour because then he’s got to go on to a dinner. I said I didn’t think you could, but—’

Octavia sometimes thought that Sarah Jane Carstairs, her awesomely efficient secretary, would make a much better job of being Mrs Tom Fleming. She would never double book herself, over-extend her energies, spread herself too thin. If Sarah Jane thought she couldn’t be at the Savoy by six this evening, then she couldn’t.

‘I don’t think I can either. I’ve got the meeting with a possible sponsor for Cultivate coming in at four thirty, haven’t I?’

Sarah Jane smiled at her approvingly. ‘I’ll tell him. Now you’d better start winding up for lunch, Octavia. The cab’s just phoned, be here in five minutes.’

‘Yes, okay. Where am I going?’

‘Daphne’s.’

‘Fine. Have you got the notes?’

‘Yes. I’ll just get them . . .’

She reappeared with a thick, rather battered file. ‘Tom’s rung again. He says if he makes it six thirty could you manage it? He’d really like you there.’

‘Can I do that?’

‘I should think so. Yes. Yes, I’ll tell him. Now, I’ve put *everything* in here. Mrs Piper is always impressed by volume. The fact half the things in there are years old doesn’t really matter. Oh, by the way, Tom

also wants to know when Gideon's sports day is. I did tell him, but he's obviously forgotten.'

'July tenth.'

'Fine. I'll fax it, I think.'

And that conversation, thought Octavia, really did sum up her whole life. And how absurd a life it was, where she and Tom communicated through their secretaries, tried (and failed) to make appointments with one another, struggled to find the time to have a conversation together about quite ordinary things.

We must have a talk about the holiday, he would say, or we really should discuss Gideon's extra coaching, she would suggest, and they would both agree that yes they should, but there would be no time that day – he with a late dinner, she with a meeting out of town involving an overnight stay – nor the next – separate drinks parties, then a dinner, much too tired after that – maybe the weekend, except they were going to the country, taking the children but not the nanny, might be a bit tricky, but Sunday morning should be all right, yes, they'd try to talk then.

Time to spend together on their own had become a luxury, traded in for money, success. Most of the time, they had agreed, it was worth it, and even if one of them had thought it wasn't, there had been neither the time nor the opportunity to discuss that either.

Just the same, their marriage, in all its frantic singularity, seemed to work.

As Octavia walked out of her office, bracing herself for what was undoubtedly going to be a difficult lunchtime meeting, a loud shout of 'Shit!' came from the next office.

'What did you do this time?' she said, putting her head round the door.

'Wiped a whole report. Fuck, I hate these bloody things!'

Melanie Faulks, her business partner, was technophobic, and shrieked obscenities filled the air throughout the day, as she deleted her voice mail, wiped crucial information from reports and saved things under file names which no one could ever find.

'Mel, Lucy will have saved it.'

'I don't know that she has. And I need it for lunch. Oh, God—'

'Who are you having lunch with?'



‘Some bimbo from the *Express*. Dear God, Lucy, where are you, please, please come and help me . . .’

As Octavia pushed through the swing doors on to the landing, she heard Lucy, Melanie’s wonderfully serene secretary, saying, ‘Melanie, of course I’ve got it, and I’ve run it off already, here, look . . .’

Octavia and Melanie ran a charity consultancy, Capital C, its claim being that it put client charities ‘into capital letters’ by advising on the raising of both funds and profile.

It was not a large company – there were two partners, and a handful of executive and administrative staff – but it was one of the top ten in the country; the turnover had run at over two million for the past three years, and looked like hitting two point five before the millennium.

Octavia had joined Capital C five years earlier. She had a degree in law, but she had disliked private practice, finding it at once tedious and stressful, and moved with relief into the corporate legal world, and thence into corporate consultancy, where one of her clients had been a large Third World charity, and another a chain of pharmacists. Five years later the pharmacy had been running at number three to Boots; Octavia’s advice, shrewd and creative, was seen as a considerable factor.

She had met Melanie Faulks at a lunch; Melanie, then on the staff of a large charity herself, had phoned Octavia later that day; she was in the process of forming her own company and wondered if Octavia would like to discuss a possible involvement. It was love at first sight, Octavia often said, laughing; two meetings later she and Melanie were engaged, and three months after that married.

Octavia brought to her clients a book of contacts that was breathtaking in its range, and she networked tirelessly (‘Octavia does all her best work in the ladies’, one of her rivals had been heard to say rather bitterly). One of the stronger arms that Capital C had developed as a result of her input was that of broker, persuading individuals and institutions to sponsor clients with considerable amounts of money.

Octavia’s profile was high and she was smoothly skilful at her job, at handling the odd blend of cynicism and sentimentality that characterises the charity business. ‘And it is a business, however much people dislike the fact,’ she would say at every presentation, every client pitch.

The offices were in a mansion block at the South Kensington end of the Old Brompton Road; she and Melanie had chosen them with great care. Not a shiny, modern ritzy job (bad for the image), not too expensive an area (same reason, although the consultancy could easily have sustained a higher rent), sleekly streamlined in design inside (to avoid any possible connotations of ladies working at home, playing at business). Octavia and Melanie had small self-contained offices, the rest was open plan divided by furniture, smoked-glass screens, and – the only gesture towards femininity – a great many plants and flowers. There were white roman blinds at the windows, bleached faux-parquet on the floor, and the furniture was starkly functional, in black and white.

The charity field was tough and very competitive. Octavia, also competitive and fairly tough, loved it.

Margaret Piper was already at the table when Octavia arrived, sipping at a glass of tomato juice and flicking through a very battered diary.

‘We did say one, didn’t we?’ she asked.

‘We did,’ said Octavia, looking at her watch, managing to smile at her. ‘So we’re both early. Which is very good, as we have so much to talk about. I’ll have a mineral water,’ she said to the wine waiter, ‘and shall we order straight away, Margaret, so we can concentrate on business after that?’

‘Yes, very well.’

Octavia ordered a green salad and some steamed sole for herself, listened enviously as Margaret Piper asked for deepfried mozzarella and rack of lamb, and pulled out some papers.

‘Now then. I’ve prepared a report on progress so far this year—’

‘But there hasn’t been very much, has there, Mrs Fleming?’ said Margaret Piper. ‘Our profile has hardly been raised at all, and we are very disappointed in your failure to find us a sponsor.’

‘Well, I can understand that,’ said Octavia, ‘but these things do take time. You’re competing for a share in a very overcrowded market.’

‘Overcrowded perhaps, but certain charities continue to get a great deal of publicity. Every time I pick up the paper I seem to read about the Macmillan nurses. And Dr Barnardo’s. And Action Aid—’

‘Yes, of course you do, Mrs Piper, but you have picked three charities out of the really big league. All those have incomes of over

twenty-five million pounds. They're extremely well established, terribly popular, household words.'

'All the more reason, surely, for getting some publicity for Cultivate,' said Margaret Piper.

'It isn't quite that straightforward . . .'

'Obviously not. That is why we came to you. Now there's some other new charity, what is it called, oh yes, Network, which is getting a great deal of publicity. How do you explain that?'

'Oh, well now—' Careful, Octavia, not to start justifying yourself, it won't help, especially as Network was also one of Capital C's charities. 'Network is in exactly the field I told you about at the very beginning, that gains high visibility very quickly. It's a support organisation for bereaved parents and therefore attracts great sympathy. Everyone can imagine themselves in that situation, most people know someone in it. Cultivate is outside most people's immediate realm of experience. And there are so many big charities in its field, like Oxfam, Action Aid . . . you really are facing some very stiff competition. And you may remember I said, at our first meeting, public sympathy, and therefore interest, does go primarily to children, anything to do with children, particularly sick children and little children. Now Cultivate is a marvellous charity, encouraging communities in the Third World to help themselves, but it isn't something that gains instant memorability or appeal. It's a slow process, do believe me. But we will get there.'

'Well,' said Margaret Piper, buttering her second roll rather viciously, 'I suppose we have to believe we are in the hands of experts—' her tone and expression making it clear she believed nothing of the sort – 'but our finance director has said that we really cannot commit ourselves to another year of expenditure on your services without considerable results.'

'Fair enough. And you shall have them,' said Octavia, sending up a fervent prayer to the Almighty, who she hoped was hovering in the area of Draycott Avenue at the time. 'I really think I might have a sponsor for you at last, and we have an excellent chance of a big article in the *Guardian* next month. They're doing a supplement on overseas charities and—'

'I would have hoped for something more exclusive.'

'Yes, but this would still be very good.' Octavia raised her arm,

waved at the waiter. ‘Mrs Piper, are you sure you wouldn’t like a drink while we wait for our food?’

‘Well, perhaps just a small gin and tonic.’

That was good. Octavia remembered her mellowing very swiftly under the influence of alcohol at their last lunch. ‘Now, if I could just take you through these figures I think you’ll see that things are much improved on this time last year, and I have to tell you I’m still wondering about the name . . .’

Tom was already in the American Bar at the Savoy when Octavia rushed in, almost fifteen minutes late, but he was not looking alternately at his watch and the entrance as she would have done, he was at one of the prized corner tables – of *course* he was at a corner table – reading the *Financial Times*, apparently perfectly relaxed. Only a handful of people, Octavia included, would have known that Tom was never relaxed, any more than she was, but he was masterly at appearing so. It was a great part of his charm, making people feel comfortable and at ease in his company.

He was already in his dinner jacket – he had two, one kept at the office. He loved clothes and spent a lot of money on them. His suits were all hand tailored, and his shoes were handmade; his shirts he bought mostly from Thomas Pink and other such establishments in Jermyn Street, or from Brooks Brothers on trips to the States, his leisure clothes mostly from Ralph Lauren. He often said that in another life he would like to have been a fashion editor. Octavia was the reverse. She would spend hours trying and retrying things on and still often go back to change or return them. She was thinking of turning the whole thing over to a style consultant to do her shopping for her; apart from ridding her of a great deal of indecisive misery, it would save her time. Precious time . . .

Tom stood up, kissed her. ‘Hallo, darling, it’s very good of you to come, I know it was difficult.’

‘Oh, anything for you, Tom,’ said Octavia, returning the kiss. She sat down opposite him. ‘Anyway, it’s nice to stop for a bit.’

‘You look tired. Bad day?’

‘Terrible actually.’

‘Have a drink. Can I tempt you, just for once?’

‘No, I’ll just have a mineral water. With lots of ice.’

She hardly ever drank; she hated any loss of control, any blurring of her clear cool mind.

‘What was so bad about your day?’

‘Oh, the usual. Disgruntled client at lunchtime, useless sponsor over tea – now where is it you’re going after this, Tom? I’ve forgotten.’

‘City dinner.’

‘With?’

‘Oh, a couple of captains of industry. Look, I haven’t got time to discuss that now, Octavia. Luckily the client is late so I can brief you.’

‘I’m all ears. Who is it?’

‘It’s Michael Carlton. Property developer.’

‘Oh, that one. Opera. Last autumn.’

‘Yes, that one. Anyway, he wants to build on a greenfield site. Local people don’t like the idea, big protest group formed. We’ve done all the right things, courted the planners and councillors, gone to endless meetings with terrible Nimbys. And it might have just about gone through, but today there’s a horribly nasty piece in the local paper, and I fear it’ll make the nationals in no time.’

‘Well, I’m very sorry for you and your Mr Carlton, Tom,’ she said briskly, ‘but what can I do about it?’

‘I’ll tell – Oh, shit, here he is now. Michael! Hallo, do come and sit down. You remember my wife, Octavia, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. Very nice to see you again.’

Octavia’s hand was pumped over-vigorously. She remembered Michael Carlton now. He was very large, not just overweight, but extremely tall, about six foot five. He had a shock of white hair, rather alarmingly brilliant-green eyes, and was surprisingly well dressed, in a dark grey three-piece suit, an old-fashioned gold watch chain slung across his large belly. Sitting beside Tom, he should have looked gross and vulgar, but for some reason he didn’t.

His voice was booming, his accent neutral, his laugh loud; she remembered now enjoying his rather determined vulgarity. The opera had been one of Tom’s rare pieces of bad judgement; Carlton had confided to her in a very loud stage whisper as the lights went down, that when it came to operas, *Phantom* was more his style. She remembered his constantly dropping off to sleep and fighting it, and liking him for that.

‘Nice to see you too, Mr Carlton. How is your wife?’

Betty Carlton had been cheerfully plump, badly dressed, eager to please.

‘Oh, not so bad. She’s a bit low at the moment. Empty nest, all the kids gone. I’ll have a large vodka martini, please,’ he said to the waiter, ‘and a very big bowl of peanuts.’ He scooped the remaining nuts from the bowl on the table into his fist, ate them at one go.

‘Terrible things, these,’ he said to Octavia, ‘thousands of calories each. But you know what? I don’t care.’

Octavia, who would have given a great deal at that moment for even one peanut, forced herself to smile.

‘Don’t mention calories to Octavia,’ said Tom, ‘she’s obsessed with the things. Virtually anorexic, aren’t you, darling?’

‘How absurd,’ said Michael Carlton, ‘with a wonderful figure like yours.’

People always said that, Octavia thought, smiling more determinedly still, people who could never connect the obsession with calories with the wonderful figure, assuming it came of its own accord.

‘I asked Octavia along tonight,’ said Tom, ‘because what you’re proposing is very much in her field.’

‘Really?’ said Octavia, staring at him. ‘What *are* you proposing, Mr Carlton?’

‘Michael is proposing, as well as the usual planning gain—’

‘I’m sorry. Remind me about planning gain . . .’

‘It’s something a developer offers the local community along with the rest of his plans,’ said Tom, irritation skimming briefly across his face. ‘Might be a park, a swimming pool, something like that. Michael is offering a community centre. You know, social hall, sports club, all that sort of thing. And he wants to include some facilities for the handicapped.’

This was obviously an extremely sensitive site, thought Octavia.

‘Where is it?’

‘Oh, Somerset/Avon borders. Not so far from our cottage actually. Anyway, I told him about your work, particularly with Foothold—’

Foothold was one of the charities Capital C advised. It funded research into juvenile arthritis, equipment for the children, and perhaps most crucially, respite weekends for the parents.

‘Oh, yes?’

‘And we thought you might have a local group down there who would be interested . . .’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Octavia.

‘It could help us a lot. Get some of the locals on to our side, make the others see this development isn’t all bad. Which it isn’t.’

‘No, I – suppose not.’

Octavia suddenly felt rather upset. Foothold was particularly dear to her heart, she had worked very hard on it, seen it move from a really small-time charity into the five-million-a-year level with quite a high profile. She didn’t really want it used in this way.

‘Well, I could look into it, I suppose. People are always interested in improved facilities.’

‘Of course,’ Michael Carlton said. ‘That’s why I want to help.’

Yes, thought Octavia, and cut a swathe through yet another lovely forest or meadow, rape a bit more of the countryside. She felt very strongly about these things, hated it when Tom was on the side of the rapists. They fought about it endlessly. But she ought to give Carlton the benefit of the doubt.

‘How marvellous of you,’ she said. ‘To think of the disabled, I mean. Well, I can certainly ask.’

‘And I thought perhaps see what you could do to help in the way of local publicity?’ said Tom.

‘Well, possibly. Yes.’

‘Now, talking of publicity, Tom, what are you going to do about stopping this stuff getting into the nationals?’ said Michael Carlton. ‘We can’t afford it at this stage. I hope you’re on top of that one.’

‘We’re doing all we can,’ said Tom. ‘I did get a couple of calls today, one from the *Express*, one from the *Mirror*. I played it very low-key, made it sound like a non-story.’

‘You didn’t talk about the community project? I’d have thought that would—’

‘Michael, trust me. That could have been counterproductive. Journalists are very cynical. Far better tell them, as I did, it’s yet another Swampy story. They’re getting bored with those. So I think I’ve diverted them for now. But that’s why I thought it might be a good idea to talk to Octavia. Get her to come in with some positive support at the local end. Don’t you think, darling?’

'I'm not sure,' said Octavia, aware that she should be sounding more enthusiastic.

'Octavia—'

'You mustn't make your wife compromise herself if she doesn't want to, Tom,' said Michael Carlton suddenly.

'What I meant,' she said quickly, 'was that I really couldn't commit my clients – and therefore myself – to anything at all.'

'No, of course not. I appreciate that.' His martini had arrived, been drunk and reordered. The peanut bowl was empty again. 'Tell me, what other charities are you involved in, Octavia?'

'Oh, dozens,' she said lightly.

'She's a great star in that world,' said Tom. 'Aren't you, darling?'

'Well, you know,' she said, 'maybe a medium-size one.'

'My wife's a great charity worker,' said Michael Carlton. 'Always standing outside the local supermarket, shaking a tin, organising ladies' lunches, that sort of thing. Takes up a lot of her time though.'

'It would,' said Octavia, 'but without field workers like your wife, all charities would be quite lost.'

'Is that so? Tell me, do you get involved with those big bashes? Royalty coming along and all that sort of thing?'

'Sometimes . . .'

'I imagine people will do anything to get in on one of those things. Pressing the flesh and so on.'

'To an extent. It's still not easy.'

'Oh, go on. I bet you can think of a number and double it. Supposing it was someone like Di?'

'Well, yes. Obviously. But she's virtually impossible to get.'

'That is the holy grail though, isn't it, darling? The honeypot number,' said Tom. 'Get your charity associated with someone really charismatic, and the money just flows in. How was your meeting this evening, by the way? With your would-be sponsor? Any good?'

Octavia stared at him. He knew it hadn't been. Why should he ask her again? Then she realised.

'Octavia is looking for a sponsor for one of her charities,' said Tom to Michael Carlton.

'Really? Which one would that be?'

'Oh, it's confidential, I'm afraid,' said Octavia.



‘Why on earth should it be?’ said Tom. ‘Tell us about it, darling, we’d like to hear.’

‘It’s a Third World charity,’ she said quickly, confident Michael Carlton wouldn’t be interested in such a thing, ‘one of the God-helps-those-who-help-themselves sort, called Cultivate. We supply tools, grain, pumps, know-how, and then they farm and feed themselves.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Michael Carlton unexpectedly. ‘That’s exactly what they should be doing. My son works out in one of those places, you know – he’s a man of the cloth – and he says Ethiopia is only just beginning to recover from what he calls the Geldof effect.’

‘What on earth’s that?’ said Tom.

‘The whole country was flooded with free food, right?’ said Carlton. ‘After that concert of his.’

‘Yes. So?’

‘So anyone who was farming just starved to death themselves. Who would pay for food if they didn’t need to?’

‘Yes, it was a terrible piece of misplaced benefaction,’ said Octavia.

‘It was indeed. Counterproductive. And your Cultivate is doing exactly the opposite?’

‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

‘And what sort of a sponsor are you looking for?’

‘Someone who’ll put X thousand pounds into the fund in the coming year.’

‘And what do they get in return?’

‘A high profile. Their name and logo on all promotional material – programmes, advertising material and press releases. Maximum visibility at fundraising bashes and so on.’

‘And you can’t get it?’

‘Well,’ she said carefully, ‘it’s very very hard to get sponsorship. Products are easy, people can always come up with a car or a holiday to auction. But sponsorship means parting with money. *Real* money.’

‘Yes, I can see that. Well, you tell me how much you’re looking for and I’ll tell you how much I’m prepared to find. How’s that?’

She stared at him. ‘Well, I . . .’

‘Oh, come on,’ Carlton said impatiently, ‘this is a no-strings offer. Or don’t you trust me?’

‘Of course I do. It’s not that, I just—’

‘You just think I’m doing this for my own ends. Well, I am. But all

good publicity is good publicity. And I can hardly start pumping money into your other charity, can I? That really would be a bit transparent. Besides, I like the sound of this . . . Cultivate. Terrible name, that. They ought to change it. Well, there's the offer. Yes or no?'

Octavia stared at him, her mind totally engaged suddenly. Margaret Piper had made it very clear that if no sponsor was forthcoming, she would sack Capital C at the end of the year. That would mean not just the loss of income, but loss of face. It was always bad to lose an account. And there was no one else she could think of to approach for money. On the other hand, if she accepted Carlton's offer, it would put her in a very difficult position with the local branch of Foothold – always supposing there was one. She would be obliged virtually to drag it into his fight for local approval, and that would be very unethical. Better in the long run to lose Cultivate.

'I really feel I should refuse,' she said, genuinely reluctant. 'It might compromise all of us. If we were seen to be in each other's pockets. Don't you, Tom?'

'I don't think so, no,' Tom said, and she could tell he was annoyed. 'I certainly feel you should think about it carefully. It's a very generous offer, Michael.'

'Balls,' said Carlton cheerfully. 'Not generous at all. It could help me. And to that end, what's – shall we say fifty grand, Octavia? Or would a hundred be more like it?'

Octavia felt suddenly dizzy. 'I haven't really thought about exact figures,' she said.

'Well, that doesn't impress me too much,' said Carlton. 'I thought you were a businesswoman.'

She was stung; he had hit her where it hurt. Probably as he intended. 'Fifty is around what we're looking for actually. The bottom end, that is.'

'Good. I'll make it seventy-five. All right?'

'Well,' she said, feeling slightly panicked by the pressure, 'of course I must talk to my partner. Perhaps we could all meet.'

Tom looked at his watch, stood up. 'I must leave you, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Have to be at the Mansion House in ten minutes. My driver's waiting. Octavia, darling, I shouldn't be too late. Home about eleven thirty.'

'Fine,' she said. 'I'll probably still be up, I've got loads of

paperwork to do. Only thing is, I've got an early start, breakfast meeting.' She lifted her face to his, he bent and kissed her cheek. 'Bye, Tom. Have a good evening.'

She watched Tom as he left, then turned back to Carlton. He was leaning against his seat, looking at her, his own eyes amused.

'Ah, the joys of – what is it you and Tom share? Oh, yes, a "power marriage"?' I was reading about you only the other week, Betty showed me the article.'

'You shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers, Mr Carlton.'

'Michael, Octavia, please. I don't. Another drink?'

'No, thank you. I have to get home, to my children.'

'The twins? And a baby. Is that right?'

'Yes,' she said, surprised he should remember.

'I seem to recall you'd only just had the baby. I was impressed you stayed awake. Ours have all gone. I miss them, not as much as Betty does, of course, but I still do. You want to make the most of them while they're little.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I try to.'

'You're missing a lot, you know,' he said, looking at her thoughtfully, 'working all the time. Pity, really. It's over so quickly.'

Irritation and resentment suddenly filled Octavia. 'Mr Carlton – sorry, Michael – I don't really think it's anything to do with you,' she said, smiling at him with a great effort, 'how I run my family. Of course I miss them, but—'

'It *is* something to do with me,' he said, 'because I like you. And I can see you're not nearly as tough as you make out. You'll regret it when they're grown up. You'll wonder where the time went. Anyway – sorry. You must do things your own way of course. And I've got to go as well. Let me know about the sponsorship deal. I really mean it.'

'Thank you,' she said. She felt close to tears. 'And of course I will get back to you, but I don't really think . . .' As they both stood up, he towered over her and she felt oddly swamped by him, not just his size, but the strength of his personality. He would be a dangerous opponent, she thought.

He handed her her briefcase, smiled at her. It was a genuinely warm, fatherly smile. 'I've enjoyed our conversation,' he said. 'Honestly. Can I get you a cab?'

‘No, the doorman will do it. Thank you. Goodbye – Michael.’

He grinned again, his huge hand surrounding hers. ‘Goodbye, Octavia. And I think you should cut out the power breakfasts at least.’

She managed to smile again and left.

The twins were in their pyjamas watching the nursery TV when she got back, and greeted her rather desultorily. Minty was asleep, her bedclothes thrown off, nesting amongst a mound of toys in her cot, small bottom thrust into the air, dark curls stuck damply to the nape of her neck. Octavia looked at her, in all her small sweet rosy perfection, tried to imagine her one day noisy, restlessly argumentative like the twins, and failed, or rather quailed from it, heard Carlton’s voice again – ‘You want to make the most of them when they’re little.’

She pulled the quilt tenderly up over the small body, and as she turned and left the room, she found her eyes full of tears.

She knew why: and it wasn’t just because of what Michael Carlton had said.

Caroline, the nanny, was in the kitchen when Octavia went down, and greeted her rather coolly. ‘Ah, Mrs Fleming. What happened?’

‘What do you mean, what happened?’ said Octavia sharply. She felt unable to cope with any more conflict.

‘I thought you were getting home by seven at the latest, this evening. At least, that’s what you said.’

‘Oh, God!’ She had told Caroline she could have the evening off. ‘I’m so sorry, Caroline. You were going out, weren’t you? Well, it’s only—’

‘Eight. Too late, I’m afraid. We were going to the cinema.’

‘Caroline, I am sorry. My husband suddenly needed me to meet one of his clients and – oh, dear, what can I say? I forgot. How dreadful of me. Are you sure it’s too late?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. I’d arranged to meet my boyfriend at seven.’

‘You should have rung me. On my mobile.’

‘I did try.’

Yes, and of course she had switched it off, for the Savoy. She looked at Caroline rather helplessly. ‘Well, look, you must have – oh, dear, not this weekend off, we’ve got people over from the States. Maybe next—’

‘The next one would be nice, Mrs Fleming. As actually we did agree – perhaps you’ve forgotten.’ Her voice was polite, but her expression was very hard. ‘I’ve arranged to go away, and—’

‘No, of course I haven’t forgotten,’ said Octavia quickly.

Caroline was supposed to have three weekends a month off; lately it had dwindled to more like the other way round. She was quite good natured beneath her daunting manner, and she was very fond of all three children, Minty in particular, but renegeing on what was, after all, a written contract, clearly made her angry. She did not smile now at Octavia, merely turned towards the door.

Octavia, reading her body language, sensing danger (for she had seen four nannies off already in her eight years of motherhood), said, ‘No, of course you must have that weekend. Why don’t you take the Monday as well, make it a really long one? Friday would be more difficult, we’ve got some do, I think, but—’

‘Oh, that would be marvellous, Mrs Fleming. Thank you. If you can manage it . . .’

‘Yes, of course I can. We certainly owe it to you. And Caroline, I’m sorry about this evening. Again.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Fleming. Right, well, I think I’ll go up to my room now, I’m very tired. Oh, by the way, your father phoned. No message, but he’ll ring again.’

He certainly will, thought Octavia; she might leave the answering machine to deal with him. ‘Fine,’ she said, ‘thank you.’

Caroline turned and ran up the stairs. Octavia watched her, thinking distractedly what good legs she had, how pretty she was altogether, tall, fair haired, athletic looking, wondering why she had chosen to be a nanny of all things. Her father was a prosperous solicitor and she’d gone to a good school; she had A-levels, she could have done anything, anything at all, and yet she’d opted to take care of other people’s children. Very odd: even if the rewards (£200 a week clear, own flat, sole use of car) were so good. No status, no freedom . . . Well, better not waste time meditating on that one, thought Octavia, pouring boiling water on to her peppermint teabag – she could save on a lot of calories if she cut out supper – and went back to the playroom, concentrating her thoughts and the necessary willpower on her children. They deserved some of her, quite a lot of her; they really didn’t get enough.

The twins had wearied of their video and were engaged in their favourite occupation of arguing. People who disapproved of Octavia – or who, more precisely, were envious of her, resented her success, her charmed life, her gilded lifestyle – often said it was irritatingly predictable that she would have had twins, would have instantly acquired a family, rather than just a child, would have got pregnancy and breastfeeding and postnatal exhaustion and the inevitable career break over and done with all at once. No wondering when or indeed whether to embark on the next pregnancy for Octavia; there it was, her family (and even a boy and girl, for heaven's sake), readymade, with the least possible inconvenience not only to herself but her colleagues and her clients as well.

Octavia herself, delighted by the charm, the distinction of twins, was at first unaware of the professional benefits they brought her, and was surprised and hurt the first time she heard these expressed by an outside source; later on, she was amused – and faintly shocked – to find herself recognising its wisdom.

The first occupant of a professional woman's womb is a novelty, interesting both to herself and to others – not least in the challenge it represents to her lifestyle and working systems; the second is an also ran, recognised for what it is, a necessary adjunct to the first, at once easier and more difficult to accommodate, the absence from the desk so much less acceptable, the non-availability to clients and colleagues so much more tedious. All Octavia's professional friends had taken less time off with the second baby (while needing it more), most of them back within two months: all pale, thin, manically over-conscientious. In contrast, Octavia's progress through the maze of working motherhood was, if not smooth, at least steady, and she was most gratefully aware of the fact. Until, of course, the arrival of Minty . . .

But she thought now, climbing the stairs on legs that were suddenly heavily and weakly weary, the twins, however convenient, were immensely exhausting. She could hear them arguing about what they were going to watch or do next; they argued all the time, it was to them like breathing, a constant background to everything they did. She had hoped that when they had been separated, sent to different

schools – or rather when Poppy had been sent to Bute House, as part of her inevitable progression to St Paul’s Girls’ School, leaving Gideon at Hill House, on his own inevitable one to Winchester – that they would meet at the end of each day more peacefully. But they did not. It wasn’t that they didn’t like each other, rather the reverse, but simply that they possessed a tumultuous energy, which fuelled in its turn an intense need to pursue any disagreement, any difference of opinion, to its logical end. Peaceable settlement of any matter was out of the question.

Even asleep they were restless, tossing and turning, talking, even giggling. They had wild, unruly dark hair, brilliantly deep-blue eyes, ceaselessly watchful expressions. They were almost nine now, and very alike; perhaps more so in their middle childhood, resolutely asexual, than they ever would be again. They were incredibly exhausting: that was another thing people said about twins, that they were easier, once the first year was over, than ordinary siblings, but nobody could have said that of Gideon and Poppy.

Octavia took a deep breath now, braced herself, went into the playroom. ‘Hallo again. Had a good day?’

‘Gross,’ said Gideon.

‘Brilliant,’ said Poppy.

‘Okay, one at a time! Why gross, Gideon?’

‘Got gated.’

‘What for?’

‘Talking. In Latin.’

‘What a surprise.’

‘Yeah, and I didn’t get into the soccer team. That pig Johnson did instead, he’s so—’

‘Much better than you?’ said Poppy sweetly.

‘Shut up, Poppy! Of course he’s not. He’s been practising on the sly, that’s why, and sucking up to—’

‘You can’t practise on the sly,’ said Poppy, who was a stickler for syntax. ‘You can only do things on the sly that aren’t allowed. Practising soccer is obviously allowed, there’s nothing wrong with it.’

‘There might be,’ said Gideon darkly.

‘How could there be?’

‘Look,’ said Octavia, ‘Johnson wouldn’t have been chosen for the

team unless he was good enough. Bad luck, Gideon, but there's always next time.'

'It's all right for you,' said Gideon. 'You don't care about games, you wouldn't want to be in a team.'

This was so unarguable that Octavia was silent for a moment; then she rallied.

'No, but I know about getting in other things. Like companies I want to work for and can't, it's like that really. I know about being disappointed.'

'Work!' said Gideon. 'That's all you think about. How could work be as important as playing for your school?'

'I think it's about the same actually,' said Octavia firmly. 'Now then, Poppy. What was so good about your day?'

'Lots! I came top in French *and* got asked to Camilla Bartlett's party.'

'Did you, darling? How lovely.'

'More than lovely,' said Poppy. 'Her dad's renting a plane and flying twelve of us to France. I've got a letter here.'

'Good heavens,' said Octavia, her eyes scanning the letter ('... love you to join us ... 19 June ... Le Touquet ... day by the French seaside ... bring swimmers and something a bit more formal to wear for lunch ... ask your mother to phone me ... Lauren Bartlett ...'), 'whatever happened to musical bumps?'

'It might be bumpy,' said Gideon, 'on the plane. They often are, those little ones. Then you'd be sick. Then you might not be so pleased.'

'Oh, shut up, Gideon. Why do you have to spoil everything?'

'That's not spoiling it. That's just being truthful.'

'Of course it's spoiling it, it's saying it won't be nice, when it will.'

'You don't know that.'

'Yes, I do.'

'Twins, please!' said Octavia wearily. 'Listen, shall we play something before you go to bed?'

'Like what? Murder Mystery?'

'No, there isn't time for that. You know those games take hours.'

'So what, then?' Poppy's voice was heavy with sarcasm. 'Something like Scrabble? Pelmanism?'

'Something like that, yes.'



‘Bor-ing,’ they said in unison. ‘No thanks.’

At least she had stopped them arguing.

They watched the first twenty minutes of *A Hundred and One Dalmations*, and then went to bed. The last thing Octavia heard as she went back down the stairs was them arguing (from their different rooms) about whether the landing light should be on or off.

Octavia went into her bedroom and changed into some leggings and a sweatshirt and then walked very slowly along the corridor to her study. She always spent her rare solitary evenings there, working, writing letters, making phone calls. It was where she felt happiest, most at home, most safe.

The day’s post was on her desk, placed there by Mrs Donaldson. She put Poppy’s invitation on the top of the pile, and sat looking at it, oddly unsettled by the events of her day; by the difficult lunch with Margaret Piper, by the contretemps with Caroline, by the near confrontation with Michael Carlton.

He was right, in a way, about the children. They did grow up so quickly, and you did miss so much. She hadn’t been there when the twins had taken their first steps, or when Poppy had said her first joined-up sentence (although it was engraved on her heart and her conscience: ‘Mummy gone work’), but could she really have spent all that time in all those years with them, long, long tedious days with nothing to think about but the house and the supper and whether they were going to get chickenpox this time round?

It was very shocking, but she feared she could not; the restless, questing, ambitious Octavia would have become bored, depressed, and therefore, and inevitably, a bad mother. Far better that she was fun, adoring, interesting for them. Only – that was what all working mothers argued. And it wasn’t quite true. She knew it. She quite often wasn’t interesting or fun; she was too tired, if she was there at all. The whole concept of quality time was a dreadful con. The quality was frequently very poor. And children wanted you when they wanted you; they didn’t save things up to tell you, to talk to you about, cry over.

She sighed. She had always promised herself that one day, when the business could stand it, she would work less, a four- or three-day week, spend more time at home with the children. Only clients were

rather like children, they also wanted you on demand. Most of their lives belonged to clients, Tom's as well as hers; no moment was sacred, no corner safe from them. She sometimes thought, in her wilder, more distressed moments, that if she woke up and found one of them lying between her and Tom in bed, and an earnest discussion going on about budgets or tactics, she would not be in the least surprised.

And sometimes, when she was really tired, really low, she had thought that whatever happened to their marriage, neither of them could possibly afford to leave it, so inextricably entwined was it in their professional as well as their personal lives.