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The Yorkshire Pudding Club

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The following February

Her arms and legs spasmed outwards, she let loose a very loud scream and then Elizabeth awoke to find herself *not* on a nose-diving plane but on the seven thirty-six to Leeds and the focus of half a crammed carriageful of 'glad that wasn't me' faces. However, not even their cold-water stares, the probability that she had been snoring and two mega-strength coffees slopping around her digestive system could keep Elizabeth's eyes from shuttering down again – she was exhausted. She was last off the train and, in fact, had the fat, sweaty bloke sitting next to her not caught her with the hard edge of his briefcase as he heaved his carcass out of the seat, she might well have slept through to Barnsley again on the return trip. She had better buck up for later; she was hardly going to be the life and soul of Helen's birthday party face down and asleep in her minestrone.

As usual, the train station was full of suits zipping in straight lines to their destinations clutching a laptop case in one hand and a grabbed breakfast bag in the other. As usual, there were a few early shoppers making

a leisurely way up to the main city stores and managing to get in the way of the rushing executives, who did not take too kindly to having lumpy human obstacles on their own personal work paths. And as usual, there was a large contingent of big-bellied workmen staring at women's breasts from the scaffolding as their more industrious colleagues worked on extending the station, yet again. The train used to dump Elizabeth right in front of the ticket barriers, but these days it deposited them all so far away on one of the new platforms that she almost needed to catch another train from there to the exit. That morning, it felt a particularly long way.

At least the ten-minute walk in the crisp February air served to startle her brainwaves into some activity, and by the time she had reached the great, smutty-bricked offices with the giant blue *Handi-Save* sign above the entrance she felt considerably more human and less like a dormouse again. It was an old, weary-looking building in the middle of a sea of younger, more dynamic structures, with its exterior reflecting the majority of the people on the inside – dull, tired and uninspiring. She pushed open the giant stiff revolving door that had given everyone who had worked there for any length of time a deformed bicep. It was easy to spot a long-timer at Handi-Save for they all had one arm bigger than the other, like a male Fiddler crab. Yep, she felt decidedly better for the walk.

'Flaming Norah, you look rough,' said Derek the security man. He, being ambidextrous, had two massive arms. 'Good night, was it?'

'I was in bed for nine,' Elizabeth held up her best shushing finger as his mouth sprang open, 'and before you say it, yes, I was alone. I don't know what's up with me at the moment. I think I've been bitten by a tsetse-tsetse fly.'

'Tsetse-tsetse? Going round in pairs now, are they?' grinned Derek. 'Maybe you're coming down with something. Mind you, in a place like this someone's only got to say "cold" and everyone gets it through the air conditioning.'

'I feel all right in myself, just tired,' she said, hunting in her bag for one of her menthols. She proffered the packet to him. 'Want one?'

'Do I chuff!' he said, warding them away like a vampire who had just been offered a garlic bulb. 'If I want mints I'll suck a Polo, if I want a fag I'll have an Embassy, thanks for asking.'

'Please yourself then! Right, now, I better do something with my face then if I look that bad.'

'I've a carrier bag behind Reception. I could poke two eyeholes in it for you.'

'Thanks a lot, Ras.'

He nudged her playfully. 'Ah, you still look bonny!'

She turned away, mock-insulted. 'Nope, sorry, the damage has been done, you can get stuffed,' and though she could hear him laughing behind her, the smile slid off her face as if it had been greased with three pounds of melted butter. Not that she had taken offence, for it took a lot to wind Elizabeth up – at least it had done until recently, when this infernal tiredness threatened to turn even her cool disposition to something

as brittle as the toffee she used to get as a kid that snapped off into artery-severing shards.

Derek, or Rasputin as everyone called him, would have been mortified even to suspect that he had upset her because they went back such a long way. He had only been at Handi-Save a week himself when she had turned up at the Reception desk aged sixteen, all wide grey eyes, smashing blouse buttoned up to the neck and her dark gypsy curls tamed into a ponytail. She had been half-fearful, half-excited by her important-sounding destination – 'the typing pool' – to where Ras volunteered to escort her. She'd had a picture in her mind of lots of typists working around a pool full of warm, blue water and was critically disappointed when it turned out to be just an airless office full of women with perms and frumpy frocks banging away on word processors. Ras was string-thin back then, with a number one haircut and a moustache like Ron from the pop group 'Sparks'. He ended up getting them both hopelessly lost which caused a standing joke that was still running.

Twenty-two years later, they were both still there, crossing paths in Reception each morning, though Elizabeth had long since left the pool and was now the Managing Director's secretary. Ras, on the other hand, had concentrated his energies over the years into evolving physically into a heavyweight wrestler who would fail a Roy Wood's Wizzard audition for being too hairy. He'd had four kids, three wives, two motorcycle crashes and a steel plate in his head. The only things that seemed to have stayed constant about him

were those friendly facial features and the warmth in his morning greetings. He alone these days put a smile on Elizabeth's lips at work, or as she preferred to call it, 'the Hammer House of Handi-Save'.

The worrying part in all this was that if Ras thought she looked rough, then Julia definitely would – and the only reason Elizabeth had pushed herself out of bed that morning was because Julia and Laurence had made it perfectly clear that being absent on a Monday was tantamount to admitting to a hangover. So ironically, there she was dutifully turning up but looking as if she had been on a weekend ciderfest. A picture of the pair of them flitted across her mind, which made her growl inwardly. She was wound into the ground before she had even set eyes on the Gruesome Twosome and it was *so* not like her to feel this way. Hardly anything ever got to Elizabeth and even if it did, she never showed it.

She grabbed a coffee from the machine and slid into the tiny and horribly smoky room that the militantly anti-tobacco Laurence had 'allowed' the smokers to have and, as he said 'pollute as their own'. The rebellious air in there usually calmed her down before she had even lit up, but that morning it felt thick and unpleasant, and welded itself like glue to the back of her throat. She sat on a table in the canteen instead, gulping back the lukewarm gritty coffee whilst pitter-patting with her fingertips at the fluidy swellings under her eyeballs. She didn't dare risk another look in the mirror in case it threw back a worse reflection than the passable one she imagined was there before making her way to the lift.

She pressed the button (only four times that morning) before it started to shudder and rattle upwards at a pace that a snail with a weight problem could beat – even the machinery didn't want to work here! She hadn't always felt like that, for there had been a time when she used to belt up the staircase in the mornings, glad to get to her desk. Obviously that was before the days of that well-known double act Laurence Stewart-Smith, a name impossible to say without hissing, and his wonderful side-kick, Julia Powell – Powell as in the contraction of 'power crazed troll'.

Laurence Stewart-Smith: also known as 'Eyebrow Man' on account of the long furry caterpillar which ran the width of his forehead before scuttling into his hairline to hide the *666*. Laurence Stewart-Smith: in the opinion of the City, *The Man* – business genius, whizz-kid, darling of industry, multi-millionaire man-of-the-people, demi-god of the hoi polloi – but in the opinion of anyone who really knew the man behind the title: total plonker.

Julia did not lift her head as Elizabeth walked past her desk, which had long since failed to surprise her. Julia could not communicate with females on a lesser grade unless it was by email, even when sitting two metres away as Elizabeth did. There were bagfuls of evidence to substantiate the theory that Julia was threatened by other women, who were creatures to be ignored, or destroyed. Men, however, were a different kettle of fish. Then she would start flirting and sticking out her chest and batting her eyelashes in the general direction of the flirtee – the number

of bats being directly proportionate to the quality of his suit.

Sometimes, to be controversial, Elizabeth would open a mail and shout across the reply to Julia as it really seemed to annoy her, but this past week or so she was just too tired to play the dissident. Was this the onset of old age, she wondered. Was she about to start dribbling and nodding off after a morning Rich Tea biscuit and exchanging her cappuccinos for a nice cup of cocoa? She was only eighteen months off being forty, after all.

Laurence's first visitors arrived early and hung about the entrance foyer in nervous anticipation. They were the ladies from the Blackberry Moor council-house estate and he kept them waiting an extra quarter of an hour for no other reason, it seemed, than because he could. A gum-chewing photographer from the *Yorkshire Post* announced himself at Reception and Elizabeth collected them all and escorted them up. Jolly poses ensued, in Laurence's open-plan meeting area, with the great man himself, who did not manage to fully lose that uncomfortable look on his face which seemed to say, *Ooh, I've touched a council-house person! Which way is the de-louser?* Then the photographer departed with his PR snaps and the three women perched awkwardly on the ends of the big squashy seats, blushing and stuttering like 1970s teenagers who had just been granted an audience with Donny Osmond. Elizabeth could never understand the effect Laurence had on such visitors. Half the time she

expected to have to go and find a mop to clean up excited puppy-like puddles at their feet, but on that occasion, so far so good.

She scribbled some notes down as Julia and Laurence both held their heads at the same angle of sympathetic tilt as they listened to babble about how grateful the Blackberry Moor estate was for the support of Handi-Save. Julia flicked through the folders the ladies had brought full of Before and After pictures of dreary communal dog-toilet areas, which had been converted impressively into playgrounds and thoughtful squares of garden thanks to donations and fundraising. Laurence sat, fingers templed in front of him, head nodding in all the right spots, his one long eyebrow managing to both crease in all the appropriate places and hood a pair of eyes that showed a mixture of boredom and disgust.

'So hif you could . . . er . . . just continue to let hus have that turkey or something at Christmas for hour raffle,' said the lady with the crocheted hat, trying desperately to stuff a few posh aitches in.

'The money mainly goes for the kids' benefit,' butted in another as if it were in some dispute.

'We don't want much, just a few bits a couple of times a year, to raffle hoff like.'

'We're just starting to get some community spirit going, you see.'

The great Laurence Stewart-Smith nodded regally, and as if his head was attached to his assistant's by an invisible puppet-string, it set Julia's off as well. Neither would have looked out of place on the back parcel shelf of Elizabeth's old Vauxhall.

'Of course,' he said. 'I'm sure we could fix you up with a little more than that.' He scribbled something with an important flourish on a piece of paper and handed it to Julia. The ladies' eyes followed the handover of the note with great anticipation. They could not have been more thrilled if he had just written down the secret of eternal life.

'That would be just marvellous,' said the one who had the pencilled-on eyebrows, and her face lit up so much they were in danger of melting.

'Good, good.'

Laurence smiled, raised his watch hand theatrically, flicked his eyes towards it, and then stood to signify their audience time was at an end.

'Well, I'm sorry it's been such a short meeting but I do have another appointment, albeit not as entertaining, which I regret I'm a little late for,' and he flashed his charming smile again and added, 'My assistant Julia will show you out.'

The ladies twittered their way out of the door and as Laurence and Julia made to follow them, the piece of paper twirled to the floor from Julia's file. Elizabeth picked it up. She just managed to sneak a look before Troll snatched it back rather hastily.

Let's just give these old scrubbers some money and get out of here quick, it said.

Elizabeth was disgusted but not surprised. She watched the smiling little trio from Blackberry Moor meander down the office to the temperamental lifts, blissfully ignorant of what their hero Laurence Stewart-Smith was really like. So long as he flung them a few

tombola pressies every so often, they would continue to idolize him as a local saint, although Elizabeth knew that one did not get to be in his position by being a nice bloke. Somewhere in mid-management, they cut out the heart and replaced it with an axe. And once a man held power, she had found, he was almost certain to misuse it.