

Chapter 1: Grudges, Greyhounds and Retirement Blues

"Either someone's playing a practical joke on us, Cynthia, or this book has a life of its own." Heather Stocks told her assistant, Cynthia Grudge. They both stared down at the offending article in Cynthia's grasp.

There was something puzzling about the way that *Good Book Keeping*, the first and thankfully only, title by Livingston Sidebottom-Staines, kept cropping up all over Boonhill Library. That the book had never been checked out of the Library made it all the more bemusing.

"Please put Livingston back in Local Interest, Cynthia, and perhaps you could be extra vigilant over there for the next few days. See if we can't get to the bottom of this."

Cynthia felt her pulse quicken. She had never dreamed that the duties of a lowly Library assistant would stretch to surveillance, but already, in her first twelve months on the job, she had been given responsibility of tracking down the smoker on the steps and now, staking out Local Interest.

To say that her father had been disappointed in her career choice would be like saying that Liberal Democrats were disappointed in Nick Clegg. Charlie Grudge regarded his daughter as an outright traitor for not following his footsteps into the local Constabulary. He claimed that with their surname, they were made for policing. Charlie was an excellent policeman, in that he never took sick leave, was never late and carried out his duties to the absolute letter of the law. If there was a National Jobsworth Award, he would surely be nominated by most of Boonhill, particularly the ones who drove. His seniors couldn't fault his dedication, although the endless off-duty tip-offs were a constant source of chagrin.

Heather Stocks had always run the village Library like clockwork with Libby Flavelle, her assistant, by her side. Libby had taken early retirement, when the local authorities offered her a deal she couldn't refuse after a mild heart attack at the age of fifty-six. Enter Cynthia Grudge. Of course, Heather knew Cynthia's father. Their most recent encounter occurred when Charlie intercepted an illegal park outside the Co-Op. Heather just needed to use the cash machine so that she could go straight to the hospital to visit Libby after work that evening (intending to purchase flowers and a card at the hospital).

It was 8.15 and she had to beat Brian to the Library. He'd be there anytime now and if he started setting up it would take her all day to get straight. There were times

when Brian was indispensable: when a strip light needed a new tube, when the bins needed emptying, or when Asbo 'Arris and his 'homies' paid a visit. But in the past few days, since Libby took ill, he'd really become altogether *too* helpful. As Heather pulled into one of the three empty disabled spaces, Charlie appeared, ready for action. Ordinarily, he would have allowed the perpetrator to attend to their business and apprehend them on their return. Thus securing the 'bust' and adding it to his impressive tally. However, Charlie did have some sympathy for librarians and their current demise (even if he didn't approve of his daughter's chosen career path). Local services were all feeling the strain and he saw this as a time for solidarity. He cautioned Heather about her choice of parking space and even pointed out a perfectly legal space that was about to be vacated by a Ford Transit not too far away. As the transit driver, Wayne Drawbridge, was manoeuvring out of the busy car park, Charlie noticed that he had a brake light out and had neglected to fasten his seat belt. On closer inspection, he could see that the tyres were almost smooth, and the tax disk was obscured. Since he didn't share any sympathies with transit van drivers, he left Heather, forgetting all about her minor misdemeanour, and proceeded to throw the book at Wayne.

Cynthia wouldn't have been Heather's choice as a replacement for Libby. As far as Heather was concerned, no one would ever replace Libby. Due to the current economic climate, Cynthia was chosen by the powers that be; she was young and inexperienced (she had her degree of course, but had yet to complete her MA in Librarianship). This, coupled with her father's position, secured her the post. Just like those senior officers at Boonhill Police Station, Heather couldn't fault Cynthia's dedication to her new duties. The girl (anyone under the age of 30 was a girl to Heather) was enthusiastic, organised and her age gave her an advantage with the new technology that was rapidly taking over. In addition to these qualities, Cynthia did seem to appeal to the more *robust* readers; anyone she didn't frighten half to death with her lairy greetings, was quite taken by her unrefined charms.

Heather had found that the best way to deal with Cynthia was to assign her 'special missions', which the assistant perceived to be crucial to the smooth running of the Library. Anything from data input, to turfing smokers out of the porch way - no task was considered too small for Cynthia. This left Heather to get on with the day to day running of the place.

Cynthia was convinced that this particular 'mission' would eventually restore her value as a citizen in her father's esteem. She paced around Local Interest tirelessly. On each lap, she proceeded towards the doors slowly, scouring the porch way as she

went; when she rounded the corner of Local Interest, she picked up her pace and hurriedly turned the opposite corner, hoping she hadn't missed anything untoward in the seconds her back had been turned.

Unfortunately for Mr. Bacon, one of Boonhill's retired readers, he happened to be in Cynthia's path on one of her hasty corners. If it weren't for Cynthia's ample bosom, he may have been hurt.

"Ooh, I'm sorry love," he said (although he'd been standing quite innocently perusing a rotating rack of war stories, when the formidable breasts struck him).

"No, *I'm* sorry," Cynthia corrected. "I really should look where I'm going." She took this as an opportunity for a little rest, and adjusted her position so that she could talk to Mr. Bacon and watch for activity over his shoulder.

"Would you like some help choosing?" She offered (Mr. Bacon frequently forgot his glasses and would get Cynthia or Heather to read titles to him).

"Oh, that's so kind. I don't know what I'd do without you, you know. They think they can get machines to run these places, but you can't beat a personal service." Despite not having his glasses, Cynthia was convinced that Mr. Bacon was staring at her chest. People were always staring at Cynthia's chest. They couldn't help it, especially when, like Mr. Bacon, their eye line was on a level with it.

"Right, let's see," the assistant began: "Cartwright's Heroes?" This first offering was met with a shake of the head. As were the next three. "How about 'Trench Rats'?"

"Maybe, could you read me the blurb?" He asked.

Cynthia turned over the book and cleared her throat, "the brutal, yet moving tale of a squadron of –"

"Excuse me dear," interrupted another elderly regular.

"Sorry, I'm just helping this gentleman, could you –"

"This can't wait really. Look!" the elderly woman was tugging at Cynthia's arm now and pointing in the direction of 'Body, Mind and Spirit'.

"Gordon Byron! How on Earth did you get in here?" Cynthia asked, rather excitedly, as she hot footed it across the Library, leaving Mr. Bacon agog at her uncharacteristic rudeness. As he couldn't actually *see* Cynthia's Greyhound, Grimshaw, he assumed that Cynthia had forsaken him for another, more important, customer.