MATCH DAZE

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Content Warning:

Contains mild swearing, critical illness representation (MND).

CHAPTER 1

Tom Honey levered off his giant head and sank to the bench. Another tirade was incoming. It was inevitable. Yet he was doing his best. They all were. It simply wasn't enough—as usual.

Football studs tapped nervously on the stained concrete floor. Out of the chill October wind, Tom's furry boots were toasting his ankles.

Jack Doyle lasered a gaze on the eleven players. The manager looked every minute of his sixty years—as he often did during the half-time rollockings.

'My wife cooks the worst roast dinner in the country. The carrots have the taste and consistency of putty. The peas are like pulped newspaper, and the roast potatoes I'm thinking of offering to the Army as cheap munitions.' Jack surveyed his hapless charges. 'But right now, I'd rather have them out there in the second half than you bunch of vegetables.'

Hmm, vegetables this time, Tom mused. Last time, it was sheep. The previous week, a mention of lemmings and banana skins.

A midfielder met Tom's eye and grimaced. Tom offered a typically sober shrug. It wasn't *his* job to kick the bloody ball.

Jack jammed his hands on his hips. 'It's not over at four-nil. Bromley proved that when they came back to beat us five-four. The crucial thing is goals. Paul—you might try aiming *between* the posts in this half. Rest of you—they aren't Man

bleeding United. Their left winger is an undertaker, and their number 4 breeds turkeys. Just go for their weaknesses. Their goalie is yer James Dean—can't handle corners. And we know who ate all the pies—number 6. You're *better* than this. How about some of that Cup spirit, huh?' He clapped his hands. 'Now let's have some heart.' He shooed them away. 'Go on.'

Tom wanted to point out that they *weren't* better than this. They certainly weren't a match for today's opposition, Myston Rovers. They hadn't been for three years. Local rivalries are always tough. Worse when the odds, and history, are against you.

He sighed hard, then rose, lifting his head from the bench.

'Not you, Tom,' Jack said.

Tom swallowed. *A familiar dressing down, surely?*

Jack shook his head. 'It's not good enough. No wonder we're bloody four-nil down. You know the effect you can have on these guys. You get going, the crowd gets going, inspires the whole team. You're not even at the bloody game today. We need you, second half. Make an effort, alright?'

There was no point in Tom arguing. He *was* making an effort. Yet, without his... mojo... things seldom went well for Cattingley Town FC.

'Will do, Jack,' he mumbled.

'Good. Or you're out.' The manager shot a withering look, banged through the warped dressing room door, and was gone.

The last word echoed through the room.

Out? You can't do that. Well, you can, but why today? What's special about today? We've been rubbish—patchy, if you want a kind term—for weeks.

If "The Cats" had been an actual cat, it would have been taken to the vet and quietly put out of its pain. The Southern Combination Football League would be a distant memory,

and Tom Honey would need to find another way to occupy his Saturday afternoons (plus occasional midweek games and Thursday training sessions).

How about a little faith, Jack? We're not on our ninth life yet.

Maybe the eighth, though.

Jack was right about one thing. Tom could—on a good day—make a difference. However, the good days invariably coincided with the periods when he was in love. Or at least, in a relationship.

The Cats' season had started promisingly. Five wins in the first seven games. Then Kaila dumped him for being "too much of a drifter". Apparently, being "really scrummy" (her words, some months earlier) wasn't sufficient to hold her interest.

The team hadn't won a League game since the breakup. However, inexplicably and without precedent, they had squeezed through all four FA Cup qualifying rounds. In their 28 year history, Cattingley Town FC had never got this far. Next month, they'd be in the First Round proper!

And lose, almost certainly.

Still, the First Round! Come on, Jack—we have our moments.

But they needed more than moments. Ideally, weeks. And, based on the pattern of past results, that would only happen if Tom could catalyse the players to make a decent fist of things for ninety minutes or so every week. So, the quicker he got out of his funk—and into love—the sooner the club's relegation woes would abate. Easier said than done. Love doesn't conveniently come along when you need it. It takes its own sweet time. And Cattingley Town didn't have forever.

With a sigh of resignation, Tom pulled the huge fur-

covered headpiece over his own noggin, squeezed through the doorway and padded out to the touchline.

'Come on, The Cats!' yelled some poor hopeful soul.

'Stick it to them, Cattingley!'

'Cats beat mice any day!' bawled another—clearly unfamiliar with the recent stats, which read:

Cattingley Town FC ("The Cats") vs. Myston Rovers ("The Mice")
Played 6 Won 0 Drawn 0 Lost 6

Contrasting encouragements rained down from the opposition supporters—numbering around 200—who were waving and bawling in the Alan Simpson West Stand (sponsored by Villiers Hardware).

Three volunteer stewards—one on his phone, one watching the match, one chatting with a mate near the warped wooden advertising hoarding—were charged with keeping the two vociferous armies of fans from lobbing anything more than V-signs and "tosser" gestures at each other.

Tom restricted his antics to the touchline beside the well-populated East Stand (sponsored by Timmins Seeds). Unable to offer vocal encouragement from inside the bulbous head of Snowy The Cat, his cheerleading was limited to a variety of waves and gestures, a few full-body poses, a gentle jog, or a couple of star jumps if he was feeling energetic. On a good day, a brief chant of "Sno-wy, Sno-wy" might ripple through a few dozen of the most ardent Cats fans. Today, however, the costume felt heavier than usual.

In the 61st minute, Myston scored. It was their annoyingly accomplished and showy striker, Jamie Haskell.

'Fuck,' Tom breathed.

The Myston supporters went wild. Cries of "You're going down" broke out. Their mascot, Cheeser The Mouse, did two star jumps and then moonwalked.

Yes, they even had a cooler mascot. Still, Tom took heart that the costume's inhabitant, Jerry O'Connell, was a traffic warden and, therefore, soundly despised by the local population for the remaining six days, twenty-two and a half hours of the week.

Nobody despised Tom Honey. They couldn't. He never did anything of note that could be despised.

So there, Cheeser. Up yours.

In the 73rd minute, The Cats hit the post.

In the 74th minute, The Mice scored again.

'Fuck,' Tom said, probably in unison with the other Cattingley devotees.

Please don't do anything rash, lads.

No point in getting injured when the game is already lost. Save your strength for next week.

In the 85th minute, centre-back Kev Jones made a sliding tackle to take out Haskell, who was through on goal again. Both went down hard.

'Bloody idiot,' Tom spat.

It would have been churlish to wish harm on someone who was tall, dark, handsome, athletic and played for The Cats arch-rivals, so Tom only hoped that Jamie Haskell wasn't *actually* dead.

However, after fifteen seconds, when the movement of both players remained sluggish, Dave, Cattingley's long-serving physio, was off the bench like a startled (though ageing) hare, and making a beeline for the incident.

Halfway there, Dave's left leg escaped from under him, shot out at a sickening angle, and the man crumpled to the turf with a yowl which probably carried to the car park (unsurfaced, watch out for the big pothole on the far side).

Myston's physio ignored his downed colleague and pelted to where Jamie Haskell was writhing around like a South American player who'd been run over by a steamroller covered in strychnine.

Tom wandered back to the dugout area as the crowd remained hushed. Jack and the four substitutes were discussing aspects of the debacle. On the pitch, three Cats players gathered around Dave and gingerly escorted him to the sideline. Two of the subs helped the physio limp away to the changing rooms, his face rent in agony.

Kev Jones and Jamie Haskell were uninjured, but Haskell still engaged in a tirade which would have had the TV bleep-machine operator in spasms... if such a match were ever televised, which, of course, it wouldn't be.

The final five minutes of the game, plus three for injury time, were played in an atmosphere you could cut with a broadsword.

At the whistle, a smatter of applause rippled through the Cats' supporters. Tom blew out familiar post-game sigh.

'Snowy?' called a small voice.

A young girl was wide-eyed with expectation. Tom scampered over to the lopsided pitchside hoarding, and offered a paw for her to low-five. A burly bloke—doubtless her dad—pulled out his phone.

Tom knew the drill, rare though it was. He perched on the edge of the rickety board, put his arm around the girl's shoulder, and, with the other hand, offered the best thumbs-

up that the furry mitt could form. He even found himself grinning inanely—which was idiotic, because his face was completely obscured.

'Thanks, mate,' said the guy.

Tom hoped the girl wasn't labouring under the notion that Snowy was a real—not to mention giant and careworn—feline. She squeezed Snowy's waist, then took her father's hand and led him towards the gate.

Maybe this stupid lark does have its moments.

The ref was leading the players off. Words were being exchanged. As Tom ambled around, grabbing disconsolate high-fives from teammates, something thudded into him.

'Hey, watch where you're going!'

Through his eye holes, he saw the scowl of a brunette. 'Sorry,' he said.

She tutted, then jogged over to Haskell and landed a fat kiss on his mouth. 'Well done. You okay?'

'Yeah. Fucking Jones.' The striker brushed mud from his forehead.

'Okay.' She pecked him again. 'See you outside.'

'Where the fuck you going, Loz?'

'I want to check on Dave.'

'The physio? He's a Cat. Leave him alone. Stupid old bastard.'

'Look, Jamie—' she protested.

'Leave him alone.' Haskell swivelled. 'And what you looking at, loser?'

Tom was eyeing the girl's hair. And face. And physique.

Probably best not to say that, though.

'Leave him alone, Jamie,' she said firmly. 'Who knows where he's looking, in that stupid get-up.'

Tom avoided meeting her eye, and especially her boyfriend's. *Or brother's? Perhaps? Hopefully?*

He mumbled something incoherent and clumped away.

'Oi, what you looking at, pussy?'

It wasn't the first time Tom had heard that manufactured ambiguity. He'd never risen to it, and wasn't about to now. Haskell was six-one and could probably punch through the bulbous cat head right into Tom's frontal cortex. Then they'd have the same IQ.

Tom kept walking.

Surely she'll say something like, "He's not worth it, babe"? Please?

'Yeah. Chicken as well as a pussy,' Haskell spat.

'Oi, mate!'

Tom identified that voice as Martin White, The Cats' lofty goalkeeper.

'What?' Jamie snapped.

'You won, okay? Leave it at that.'

'Three past you this time, Whitey.'

'Whatever,' Martin scoffed.

'You're all as shit as ever,' said another Myston player.

'At least we're still in the Cup,' piped up another passing Cat.

Tom rolled his eyes.

'And so are we, prick,' Jamie pointed out.

'Oh. Bollocks.'

Tom hastened his stride.

'Hope we get drawn against you, so we can wipe the smile off your face,' Jamie added.

'What did you say?' Martin demanded.

'We'll boot your pussy arses out of the Cup as well as the league.'

Tom hastened even more.

There were sounds of a tussle. Shouts. The ref charged

past Tom. The girl exited, more quickly, in the other direction.

He gave her a wide berth as she jogged towards the dressing rooms. He didn't want to bump her again. Not to risk the withering look, not to slow her progress, not because Haskell might knock Tom's giant head into low Earth orbit.

But because he'd become instantly smitten by her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing romcoms is my happy place. After working in other genres for many years, I couldn't resist the pull towards comedy and romance. I have a soft spot for stories with strong women, nice guys, and a touch of the bittersweet. I like the connection between my protagonists to be more than physical – a bond that helps solve their problems. Often I shine a light on mental health issues, especially neurodiversity, which is close to my heart. Fundamentally, I try to write the books I like to read – those with wit, heart and intelligence.

Away from the writing desk, I enjoy great scenery, a relaxing train ride, delicious coffee and cake, and catching up with friends and fellow authors.

Chrissie Harrison is a pen name.

Find me on Instagram or Threads @AuthorChrissieHarrison or in other places via Linktree

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