Head Wound

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CHAPTER ONE

'I think she's still alive!'

A girl. Yes, still alive – but not for much longer.

She was nailed, hands and feet, in a parody of the crucifixion. She was gasping for breath – hadn't enough to scream, though the pain in her hands must have been excruciating as the weight of her body pulled against the nails, leaving trenches in the flesh.

A bleak February day. An east wind apparently straight from Russia hurtling across the grey fields of Kent to sling horizontal rain at the windows. What does everyone want? A quiet evening at home. What do I get? An emergency meeting with the school governors.

In fact, since I was head teacher of two schools, Wrayford and Wray Episcopi, I had two sets of governors to contend with. They had agreed to have a joint session since the

problem was one that would affect both schools equally – proposed changes to school funding throughout the country. For once we were all pulling in the same direction. We were desperate to avoid staff redundancies and any reductions to the curriculum. So – after much depressed discussion – we had agreed what I had actually told them at the start: while we appreciated the huge efforts everyone put into Christmas and summer fairs, and spin-off raffles and refreshment sales from the play, we needed to raise a lot more money than they produced to support all the activities that broadened the children's horizons. It wouldn't stop at funding things like sports equipment and school trips, no matter how educational. It would mean buying books for the library and for the classroom. Even then we'd have to recruit volunteers for appropriate tasks – in other words, anything that didn't need properly trained teachers.

'I'm sure we can rely on the parent–teacher groups at both schools to step up to the plate,' the chair of Wrayford governors declared, leaning heavily forward and eyeballing each governor in turn, as if challenging them to object to the cliché. Not just because of his physical presence – his thick neck and heavy shoulders – Brian Dawes was a man hard to stand up to, though he could be charm itself. He flashed me a disconcertingly conspiratorial smile even as he spoke.

Hazel Roberts shook her head. In her seventies, she was a little older than Brian and was actually chair of the Wray Episcopi governors. She had graciously – or sensibly – allowed Brian to take the lead in the meeting. Others might say she had been elbowed out, though with a great deal of persuasive courtesy. 'Our Parents' Association – which pointed out that the teachers don't get much involved—'

'Not through lack of interest,' Colin Ames said quickly. He'd drawn the short straw, as the secretary of the Wray Episcopi governors, the job of taking the minutes. 'Lack of time. It's even worse than when I was in the profession. I can't believe the amount of paperwork teachers today have to deal with.' He looked at his own reporter's notebook, as if expecting it to sigh in sympathy. He'd certainly covered a huge number of pages, taking conscientious note of everything – though I would have thought nice succinct resolution minutes would have been enough.

Brian was ready to leap in, but Hazel was there before him. 'Exactly,' she said firmly. 'More importantly, there's been something of a schism within the Parents' Association, largely because of the disruptive presence of one parent whose politics and manner of expressing them were offensive in the extreme.'

I could see Colin's pen move.

. . . in the extreme . . .

'Sadly, as things stand, it's impossible for us to force the man to resign. It would be worse if he was a parent governor, of course, because . . .'

Which was true but not to the point. At last Hazel pulled herself up short, continuing more relevantly, 'We also lack the village infrastructure so helpful to Wrayford. You have your playing field and the Jolly Cricketers' garden. We have neither field nor pub. Lady Preston used to allow us to use her grounds for our fete but while she's not in residence at the Great House, nor likely to be for some time' – she coughed with delicate irony – 'we can hardly expect the same privilege this year.'

'The greed of the woman!' someone put in. 'Owns all

that lot and still wants to make money by exploiting others!'

'That's a bit strong. She did a lot of good in the village.'

'Once upon a time! And now she's a convicted criminal doing her time, quite a lot of it, in jail. Don't waste your sympathy on her and her like.'

'It's because our resources aren't quite equal,' I put in, hoping to draw things to a close so we could all go home, 'that I suggested that the schools and the parents acted together for the common good. United we may stand; divided we will almost certainly fall. If we can't run the schools "properly" – in the eyes of Ofsted, that is – I'll bet my pension that someone will decide to put them in special measures and then quite coincidentally close them. The villages will be a great deal poorer in every sense if they lose their schools and the children have to go to bigger ones in towns that may be some distance from their homes. What I'd like to suggest, Chair, is that we reconvene next week, each of us with a list of ideas for heavy-duty fundraising that the schools with their PTA or PA will do together. If we don't raise funds we might even lose teachers. It's as serious as that. Now, it's unlikely we can all be present, of course – but if we email each other our ideas, even non-attenders will be making a significant contribution. I'd also like a subcommittee to be set up to evaluate the ideas that seem to have the greatest potential . . .'

'And to organise a search party at Wray Episcopi for Lady P's mythical missing masterpieces,' someone added, to general laughter. By now everyone knew about her ladyship's strange insistence that one of her forebears had donated paintings to the school and that she now wanted them back. There were two problems: firstly no one could

find them anywhere, and secondly the county council archive's search for any documentation stating that they had been loaned, not simply given like the school itself, had so far been fruitless. More to the point, no one could find any references at all to the paintings. But her ladyship's lawyers, when not trying to get her a reduced jail sentence, were threatening legal action if they were not returned.

I wasn't surprised when Brian dawdled at the end of the meeting, falling into step with me when I walked back to the office I shared with Tom, my deputy.

'Will you be eating at the Cricketers this evening?' he asked. 'Would you mind if I joined you?' This comparative humility was new. The behaviour of the said Lady P – Cassandra Preston to her intimates, one of whom was Brian – had rocked the village. Brian seemed to have been hurt more deeply than most by her fall from grace: his shoulders slumped from their previous quasi-military straightness, his face had sagged into deeper lines. A man who valued trust had had his betrayed. He added, 'I could use a really stiff drink.'

'Me too.' There was something in his voice that stopped me reminding him that I was driving. Perhaps I could simply leave the car locked in the school car park and indulge after all.

We set off, leaning into the wind, which might have been exhilarating. But in fact it was simply unpleasant, though at least the rain had stopped. Refuse from the collection earlier in the day was blowing round the playground: lit by the security lights we both gathered handfuls and shoved them into the bins.

'It's worse in cities where they use black refuse sacks,' I

observed. 'You should see the mess when people leave the bags on the pavement the night before a collection.'

'At least we have wheelie bins – almost impossible to blow them over,' he said confidently.

Usually, brisk though I am, I have to work hard to keep up with him. Now I was already a metre or so ahead. Was he dawdling because he was planning to ask me something? I risked a sideways glance, but out of the lights' range, the village's lack of street lights made it impossible to detect any subtle changes. In a sudden lull, the wind dropping almost to stillness, his breathing sounded laboured. Was there a problem? But there was a limit to the personal questions I could put to a man who was not only the chair of governors but also my landlord, and I certainly couldn't demand that he turn back so I could inspect him under our security lights. Then the wind, as if it had paused for a greater effort, let rip again. Waving the stiff drink goodbye, I turned towards the car after all. Brian sank on to the passenger seat with a deep sigh, forgetting his seat belt till I prompted him.

Perhaps I shouldn't try any conversation till we'd reached the pub.

He was already well down his first glass of wine and we were ready to order when he muttered, almost as if he was hoping I wouldn't hear, 'When you're walking against the wind like that and it's cold, do you ever feel as if – well, as if you've got something tight – like a belt – round your ribs? So you can't breathe?'

I put my hand over his glass. 'Leave that. I'm taking you to A & E right now.'

He shook his head dismissively. 'No, no. It's not an

emergency. I've had the feeling before. Several times. I was just wondering . . .' His hand went to his ribs.

Conversation in the car was a bit stilted, because I was pretty sure no one had ever ordered him about so much and because I was having to concentrate very hard on my driving. 'Are they making progress on your new house?' he asked, with an obvious effort.

'Yes. At last. The builders and architect have managed to persuade the powers-that-be that it's not interesting enough to be listed – which took far longer than any of us anticipated. So long as the police don't keep wanting one more look at the garden – just in case it's still a crime scene.'

'But they haven't found any more . . . remains?'

'No. Nor anything else of forensic interest. Nothing in the house, either. Yet,' I added dryly.

'And is that neighbour of yours any friendlier? The one who looks like a fashion plate? Hair cut like a Frenchwoman's?'

He was spot on. She always looked as if she'd stepped from the pages of a chic magazine for the older woman – *Saga*, *Vogue*, maybe. 'Joy Penkridge? Much friendlier. She really improves on acquaintance. She's stopped peering over her garden fence all the time to complain about the building mess. In fact, she invited me to Christmas drinkies and I've been to coffee a couple of times. We have a shared interest in her granddaughter, who started school in September. Charlotte Bingham. Nice bright kid.'

'I still think the location is too isolated for a woman on her own. It would have been better to find a property in the

village' – he smiled almost apologetically – 'had there been any on the market, of course.'

Had people like him not snapped up every single one before the public even knew they were for sale in order to turn them into highly profitable holiday cottages or second homes. I couldn't bitch at him because he'd been prompt to offer me one of his properties – more accurately, another of his properties, a mishap having occurred to my last one. In fact, the whole row had had to be demolished and work was about to start on new ones. The present one was a four-bedroom family house in Little Orchard Close. This was a pleasant little enclave of forty or so dwellings, mostly houses though there were some bungalows, in a variety of sizes and shapes built in the 1980s a couple of hundred metres from the main part of the village. Apparently the hotel originally occupying the site had been gutted in a fire that everyone – except Brian – assured me was an insurance job. That was village life for you.

'Might I ask how that police officer friend of yours is? Will? Is there any change in his condition?'

Personally, I didn't think there would be, ever – until a merciful death claimed him. I said quietly, 'Thanks for asking. He's still deeply unconscious.' Persistent vegetative state. What a terrible way for a life to end. Or had it ended before I even tried to resuscitate him?

'All these months after the attack on him. Yet they say you still go and talk to him all the time.'

Did I detect a strange sort of jealousy? If he hadn't been so worried about his own health I would have challenged him. As it was I said quietly, with only the slightest emphasis on the noun, 'All his friends do. And

we all read to him and play his favourite music. Jo – you know her: she's the part-time maths teacher – she and her husband are regulars. There are other people I only ever meet there. Some talk to him; some talk across him. Now things are so tough at work I can't go as often as I'd like, of course. Plus training the new women's cricket team takes time,' I added, not admitting that one of the reasons I didn't go so often was because I couldn't deal with all the unresolved emotion.

It was time to change the subject.

To my amazement, A & E was relatively empty – it was, as the receptionist observed, before the pub-closing rush. Waiting time now was about an hour; later it would grow, exponentially.

It was my time to accept Brian's instructions. I was to go home and leave him in these safe hands. He'd probably be subjected to a battery of tests, all of which would take time. 'Please, before conditions get any worse. I'm sure you have a mountain of work to get through.'

'I won't argue,' I said, adding with a smile it took him a moment to reciprocate, 'because it'll only add to your stress levels.'

And it would only add to mine if I called in on Will. Resolutely, I turned my back on the pair of them.

Weather like this always rattled the kids – kids everywhere I've taught – and I have to admit I found it hard to settle into the work I was supposed to finish before school next day. It might have been concern for Brian, or perhaps it was the drive home: there were twigs and full-size branches everywhere; I'd had to move two wheelie bins out of the

main road (yes, Brian!) where they lay helplessly on their sides, like beached porpoises. In Little Orchard Close there was a smattering of smashed tiles, though my own – Brian's own – roof was intact, as far as I could see. So it was time to draw the curtains, turn up the heating, make a sandwich and get on with it. I might even treat myself to a glass of wine once I'd finished.

I'd hardly opened my laptop when my mobile rang. Drat.

'Jane? Joy here.'

Joy Penkridge? Oh dear, I really didn't have time for a nice girlie gossip. I looked at the pile on the desk. All that work to get through! All the same I tried to sound polite, enthusiastic, even. 'Hi, Joy. Everything OK?'

'Yes. No. Not really. Ken's away with his wretched model boats, and I didn't know who to ask.'

Feeling in my thumbs I was going to get involved, I tried to stop the question, but it came out anyway. 'What's the problem, Joy?'

'Tiles. I can see them on the drive. Quite a lot. Do you think you could ask your builders to fix them when they come tomorrow?'

Were roof repairs as simple as that? 'Of course. And if they can't they'll know someone who can. Don't worry.' I could relax after all.

'I'll do my best. When do you think you'll move in? It'll be such a relief to have a neighbour like you.' Which was not what she'd said at first, but I'd be the first to admit I couldn't blame her for her original hostility.

'Easter, all being well. What was that noise, Joy?'

'The fence, I think. What should I do?'

'Go and have a quick look.' Oh dear. I was implying

something, wasn't I? But no way could I go and sort it out for her myself. Not at this time of night.

She was back. 'Yes. It's all over the front garden. What should I do?' she repeated, this time quite desperately.

'The big larch-lap one the other side from me? That's far too heavy for us to lift, Joy. The builders will be able to shift it in the morning. Now do as I've done. Draw the curtains and turn up the volume on the TV. See you soon.'

'Do you think I should phone Ken?'

Yes! 'I think he'd want to know, don't you? Maybe he can cut short his trip and help organise the repairs.'

'What a good idea. Men are so good at that sort of thing, aren't they?'

'Absolutely,' I agreed through gritted teeth.

I was just getting ready for bed when the phone rang again. Calls late at night always make me panic. Had my ex-husband escaped? Had Brian been taken really ill? Had Will—I couldn't complete the sentence even in my thoughts.

But I simply wouldn't let my voice quiver.

It was Joy again. 'Jane, I'm so sorry. But I'm really worried about the tree next to the house. I'm so afraid. I think it's going to come down.' Her voice was rising in a crescendo of panic – and why not? 'On top of the house!'

What could I do? Go and prop the damn thing up? But she was right to worry. I would, in her situation. 'Listen, Joy: pack a bag quickly and come over here for the night. Just in case. I'll air the spare bed. No, don't argue.'

To my amazement she didn't.

I was even more surprised when she brought in her own towel, pillow and duvet. 'I don't want to put you to any

trouble . . .' In fact, she didn't. We had a companionable glass of single malt and headed to bed. The wind seemed to ease. I slept like a log.

To my relief, Joy declined my invitation to stay for breakfast. I might have been working on the computer since before six, but that didn't mean I could afford half an hour to be sociable over toast. We left the house together, tutting at the debris all over the road, and thanking goodness that neither car had been damaged. Waving cheerfully, we set off in opposite directions.

I'd barely switched off the Wrayford School alarm when my phone rang.

Joy again.

'You'd better come over,' she said. 'Straight over.'