



Head Count

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CHAPTER ONE

I'd seen kids like that a thousand times on TV. Thin – emaciated really. Heads crawling with lice. Dirty. Not just grubby because they'd been playing outdoors. Filthy. Some of them ill. Some dressed in the remains of a parent's idea of best clothes. Some with little bundles. Some with nothing. Some even with something tattooed on their wrists. But here? In the Garden of England?

So there I was, head over heels, if you'll forgive my occupational pun, in a very thorny hedge, with plenty of time to reflect on my summer holiday so far.

Everyone knows that schoolteachers are an overpaid, idle lot, enjoying all sorts of fringe benefits, including enormously long holidays during which they do nothing but doss around. Meanwhile, parents have to scurry round in search of expensive and elusive childcare unless they are

lucky enough to take a holiday that is hugely overpriced simply because it's not in term time.

On the other side of the school fence, you might hear different facts. One of which, sadly, is that when the longed-for breaks finally arrive, the first thing the average teacher does is succumb to an evil virus that takes at least a week to shake off – by which time you should probably be starting your preparation for the next academic year.

The bug is no respecter of persons either. It doesn't knock on the head teacher's door and slink away when it's told she's too busy.

Not in my case, anyway.

I lost my voice on the last day of term. Perhaps people thought it was because I was so choked up at the transfer of some of my lovely pupils to the wicked world of secondary education. It might well have been. They were moving from a tiny school with only a hundred or so pupils to the giant world of a full-sized secondary – whether it was co-ed or single sex, a grammar or an academy, they would cease to be big fish in a tiny pond and become the smallest of minnows. If I had wept, I'd have tried to swallow my tears, for the sake of the kids and, let's face it, my dignity. But swallowing anything was a pretty painful option, and remained so long after the last child had waved goodbye.

All through the rest of the day. And the day after. Which was interesting, because I'd been roped in to act as Wrayford Cricket Club's substitute umpire, the regular one having succumbed to an attack of gout, which trumped my laryngitis.

Wrayford were playing St Luke's Bay, down in the south of the county. The ground was in a lovely setting with the

sea one way and wooded hills another. The village itself was small, but its harbour bulged with vessels of all shapes and sizes. There were a few working boats, but most were chic yachts that looked as if they didn't really want to get their keels wet, any more than their owners would want their hair windswept.

The Bay team had produced county players in the past, and were already contributing girls to the Kent under-19 women's team. So the match promised to be a good contest, and we had all signed up for a fish supper at a proper old-fashioned chippie, which had so far resisted attempts to gentrify it. There was also a good pub next door, according to Ed van Boolean, the captain.

Tall, broad-shouldered and blonde, with the bluest eyes in the world, Ed ought to have been a Viking. He'd actually come from the Netherlands. He'd arrived in the UK in his teens with his sister, both intending to study fruit growing. She'd married and given up on the idea – I had a feeling they were no longer in touch – and he'd turned instead to landscape gardening and cricket, in whichever order. The Netherlands were a growing presence on the international cricket scene; Ed was the driving force of Wrayford CC. We'd had a lot to do with each other ever since I'd persuaded the governors to let the cricket club use the school playing field. I insisted it would benefit everyone: club, village and school. The club wouldn't have to close down, the village would have the social fun of a few fund-raising events, and the kids would get year-round coaching instead of the short burst that the wonderful Chance to Shine cricket charity provided. Yes, the club members involved would get the relevant background checks. Win, win, win, as far as I

could see. The children didn't just have role models, but next year would get the chance to play in the under-twelve team Ed and the club were now planning. I had my eye on a girl I was sure would become a founder member.

And rumour had it that Ed had his eye on me, which was good for my ego, at least.

He'd hired three minibuses for the players and supporters to take us down to St Luke's Bay. We'd be dropped off one by one outside our own front doors in case any of us were too relaxed, as it were, to manage the stroll from a central point.

As it happened, we never made it to the chippie or to the pub because the captain of the Bay team, Marcus Baker, had organised a barbecue for us all, all the more generous in light of their eight-wicket defeat. Marcus's house was halfway up the steep hill to the north-east of the harbour; apart from a patio bigger than the whole of my garden, a lawn the size of a tennis court dropped towards a low wall overlooking the bay. Tonight the sunset was spectacular. The food smelt as good as only the open air can make it, and the drink was free-flowing. But by now I could hardly do more than sip iced water. My head throbbed in time with the loud music; my eyes found even the fairy lights dazzling; I could no longer attempt to join in any conversation. Then one of the Bay's players, extremely drunk already, started jabbing me in the chest, complaining about a leg-before-wicket decision I'd made. He'd argued at the time, with a lot of obscene words to emphasise his point. And another short, equally unacceptable gesture had ended his tirade as his fellow batsman, mouthing his apologies to me, propelled him off the square towards the boundary.

I shook my head: ‘Come on, Dennis, what’s played on the pitch stays on the pitch,’ I whispered.

‘I could have bloody killed you!’

The Bay umpire and another Bay player appeared, telling him it was time he left. He did, but not quietly. A couple of people came to offer their apologies. All I could do was smile pacifically, all the time longing for nothing more than paracetamol and my bed, with no one but Nosey the Bear for company, thank you very much.

But I had to wait for the minibus home: if I tried to call a cab someone would insist on driving me, which would break up an otherwise friendly party. So I looked for somewhere nice and quiet. Soon I found myself down by the back wall. Chunks of a poem I thought I’d forgotten years ago came unbidden to my mind as I leant heavily on the stonework and looked out towards the harbour:

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

. . . sweet is the night-air!

It was certainly sweet for a couple entwined in the shadows to my right. I would have averted my gaze from any lovers’ private moment but was even swifter with this pair: not for anything would anyone learn from me that the giant of an opening bowler was snogging the wicketkeeper, whom I had rebuked only five hours ago for the foulest mouthed macho sledging I’d ever heard.

I turned my attention to the sea,

. . . the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanchèd land . . .

The sea, or rather the inlet, was full of life in the descending dusk. All the boats were lit up, either from the cabin spaces or with what I dimly remembered were called riding lights. So I was surprised when one vessel slipped in in complete darkness, mooring out of my line of sight. As I peered round I was joined by our host, who asked abruptly why I was out on my own, and what was I staring at.

He stood rather closer than I expected to follow the line of my finger as I pointed. ‘Just someone driving without lights,’ I rasped.

He ignored my comment – might not even have heard it. Hardly moving away, he waved the bottles he held in his right hand. His own glass was in his left: it was very elegant, more at home on a candlelit dinner party than in the chaos of a big al fresco bash. Bravely he put it on the wall. It wobbled once but stayed put. ‘Another drink?’ I shook my head. ‘No thanks.’

He topped up his glass with red wine. ‘You’ve lost your voice completely? Really? We should have argued more with your decisions, shouldn’t we! Though, to be honest, I thought you were very fair. Even when you awarded five penalty runs against us when the ball hit the helmet our wicketkeeper should have stowed somewhere safe. Very good all round.’ He didn’t even add ‘For a woman’. He raised his glass in a silent toast. I responded with mine, mouthing painful thanks.

I couldn't work out why he bothered to stay with me, but he did, sipping his wine. Each time he wiped the glass rim with a tissue before drinking again. He might have been sharing a communion chalice except that there was no one there except me. The silence deepened. I was supposed to do something, wasn't I? Interact. Utter polite nothings. He was a pleasant enough young man, after all, but fairly nondescript in appearance – there was nothing to mark him out as a keen sportsman who'd once hoped to play at county level. I had an idea he was something in the family firm of lawyers, which would explain the size of his house and garden. Sadly his wife looked as if she'd been dipped in a bucketful of resentful unhappiness, and every time I'd heard her speak it was to complain about something – from the sugar-high children who refused to go to bed, to the smelly dog stealing burgers out of guests' buns and the fact that one of the minibus drivers had gone AWOL. Marcus, on the other hand, seemed serene enough, even if he must have been spitting tacks at being run out by his partner Toby something-or-other when he'd been on the verge of his first fifty of the season.

'I'm sorry about your half-century,' I growled.

He put his ear close to my mouth. I repeated what I'd said.

'Shit happens. But I'll put the little buggger in to field at very short square leg next match. See how he likes that.'

Yes. The most dangerous place on the field. I hoped Toby would wear adequate protection but couldn't say it. All I could manage was a wry smile of agreement. The burning pain in my throat was spreading through my sinuses and lungs.

The silence returned.

Another boat was moving about unlit – this one was leaving the harbour.

‘*Where ignorant armies clash by night,*’ I gasped meaninglessly – and fainted into, someone told me later, his arms.

By Monday morning I’d tried everything the Sainsbury’s pharmacist had to offer, though she warned me she was sure that I only had a virus, which no antibiotics would touch. Otherwise I would have been pleading, presumably via text messages, for an appointment with the local GP. As it was, I resigned myself to salt-water gargles, silent communion with Nosey, the teddy bear that had come into my life a few months ago, and an indolence quite foreign to me.

I should have enjoyed myself in my latest temporary home, normally a holiday cottage, which was equipped to the highest standards. I could bask in either the tiny walled garden or the chic living area, working my way through a year’s worth of unread books. Sadly and bizarrely, reading made my throat worse – even the silent reading I always encouraged when playtimes were too wet for the pupils to go outside. I felt too weak to start packing up for the move to my new home in the village, knowing that in any case it was in such a poor state that until essential work like repairs to the roof and drains, the installation of a new kitchen and a new bathroom and total redecoration had made it habitable, there was little point anyway. And now rumour had it that some do-gooder was applying to get it listed. Just what I needed when I’d run to earth

the only house in the area I could afford – thanks to my long-awaited divorce settlement and to a major change in my employment conditions thought to merit a respectable pay rise.

Fortunately my new landlord, Brian Dawes, the chair of the school governors, promised to let me stay as long as necessary. Furthermore, he was charging me at the low-season rate, which he could easily have tripled in the summer. Possibly he sensed that being generous to me would enhance his reputation in the village. But he didn't demur when I suggested that at the very least I should pay the weekly cleaner's bills.

Even though I was living on the outskirts of the village, news of my illness soon spread: a couple of wild-flower posies appeared on my doorstep, soon followed by soups of various sorts, some more successful than others. The things that brought the biggest smile to my face were the get-well cards crafted, perhaps lovingly and certainly proudly, by some of my pupils. There was also a mauve teddy bear, which Nosey eyed with disdain, and, from the cricket club, a canvas carrier bag containing a litre of whisky, a jar of local honey and a net of organic unwaxed lemons. A bunch of late sweet peas from Ed himself arrived late one evening too.

After a week of inertia and too much television, I found myself feeling better – though still silent. My new psychotherapist thought it might be something to do with being too angry at or even too upset by recent events to be able to speak. My own theory was a bit homespun, of course, but one shared by the GP to whom I'd had at last to report: that my throat, battered by all the end-of-term

activity, had succumbed more heavily than most to what was a decidedly nasty bug doing the rounds in the south of England. So rest, gentle exercise – and no antibiotics. There was no reason to lurk self-pityingly indoors, he said, now my fever had subsided. Canterbury cricket week was coming up any day now. I smiled my approval: Dr Mike Evans and his practice had been generous in sponsoring the school Kwik Cricket team. Meanwhile, he asked, why didn't I take advantage of my silent state? Why not buy a bike and explore the countryside?

Mouth agape, I pointed to my chest. Me, cycle?

He nodded, playing his trump card: 'Two legs good; two wheels better.'

I couldn't argue, could I? Firstly, I was still in Trappist mode. Secondly, I had to applaud his literary allusion.

One place within cycling distance would be my new school. No, I wasn't leaving the one in Wrayford, but gaining another, in Wray Episcopi. It was tinier than mine with fewer than eighty pupils on roll, and, as its head teacher had retired, was threatened with closure – unless some kind fellow head could be bribed to take it on in addition to their duties at their own school. Kind – or ambitious. Unwilling to identify my motives, I quickly established that this would involve appointing deputy heads and freeing the head from teaching duties. Sadly teaching was what I enjoyed most about the job – but getting on the property ladder was important, so I was prepared to trade it. And, perhaps simply on geographical grounds, I got the post.

There had been a lot of negotiations: we might have been discussing the merger of two multinationals. I'd wanted the unions involved from day one: the rights of the

teachers, my colleagues, on whom I would have to depend totally, were as important as saving local authority money, despite the swingeing cuts. The only male teacher at Wray Episcopi opted for voluntary redundancy, on the grounds that teaching wasn't what it used to be and he wanted to live long enough to enjoy his retirement. No one could argue with that, but I drew the line at recruiting a young, untried replacement. Being trained was one thing; knowing the job inside out was another. The latest statistics showed that new recruits to the profession generally stuck it out for only three years. So I wanted someone battle-hardened, even though that would make a bigger dent in my staffing budget. I was also quite keen to recruit a man, to give the boys a role model since all the other staff at Wray Episcopi were women. On the other hand, I would really have liked my deputy there to be a woman, to balance Tom, my deputy at Wrayford. But I wouldn't get any deputy till Christmas at the earliest, given notice periods, unless I could snap up one who'd been made redundant and wouldn't mind a bit of rural downsizing.

At last the job descriptions were drawn up, and advertisements placed. All I had to do now was watch and wait – and pray I could make myself heard, in every sense, at the interviews.

After the overwrought garrulity of the school, in one way I enjoyed the enforced quiet. In another I loathed it. I discovered I was more sociable than I'd realised: I wouldn't have had much of a career as a contemplative nun. I missed my elbows-on-bar gossips with Diane, the landlady of the Jolly Cricketers, who had sent me some magical ice cream, assuring me when I texted my thanks that she was simply

using me as a guinea pig to test her new machine. She might even have been serious.

With only the birds and loud agricultural machinery for company, then, I followed Mike Evans' advice. I bought a bike. I bought a helmet. I bought a hi-vis waistcoat. I bought gloves. What I found I couldn't do was go the whole Lycra-wearing hog. I saw the point, I really did, but I wasn't into that sort of statement. Overstatement, in my case. Any athletic skills I had had always involved keeping my feet on the ground, or at least running and jumping around on it. So, with everyday trainers on my feet and clad in old jeans and tops, I got on the saddle, waving a dubious Nosey goodbye. At first I confined myself to nice, secluded, dedicated cycle paths, even if that meant hoisting the bike on to the car – yes, I'd bought a bike rack too – and driving there. Gradually I progressed to country lanes, but I soon learnt that these might not be as idyllic as you'd think – learnt the hard way, too.

Suddenly I was flying. Suddenly I was on top of a hedgerow, which seemed to consist entirely of brambles, wild roses, and nettles. Ah, there was some barbed wire in there too. Probably rusty.

'Help!' But no sound came out, of course. And, for the time being, I couldn't reach my phone, tucked in my bumbag.

Before I knew it, I was being rescued. Painfully. Pulled through a hedge backwards, as the cliché goes, but this was literally happening.

'We've dialled 999,' a man's voice said. Oldish. Kentish.

'I'm fine,' I protested, though it's possible that over the grunting of their own exertions they couldn't hear my

guttural whisper. By now I was making my own efforts to free myself, but could find nothing to give any leverage.

It was hard not to squeak with pain when my rescuers resumed theirs.

‘Come on, Doreen: don’t just stand there!’ he gasped.

‘You’re just making it worse,’ the woman said. She too was oldish and Kentish. ‘And you know your heart’s not what it was, Harry.’

What if trying to help me killed him? ‘I’m safe enough here,’ I gasped. ‘Do you live nearby?’

‘Just across the lane – well, a few yards.’

‘Maybe you’ve got such a thing as a stepladder, Harry?’

He had. His footsteps retreated.

‘I’d best help him carry it, silly old bugger,’ the woman said doubtfully. ‘If it’s OK to leave you?’

Certainly I wasn’t going anywhere. I promised her I’d be all right.

And soon I was. Maybe I really had been hoping for the wail of an ambulance siren. Certainly I hadn’t expected the throaty pulse of a motorbike. Not just any leather-clad rider, either: the miracle of a mobile paramedic, who introduced himself as Ian.

I suppose he had a list of guidelines to follow, because he fired a series of questions at me. No doubt my rescuers’ helpful suggestions drowned some of my replies: it took time to persuade him that my lack of voice wasn’t as a result of today’s activities.

Eventually, though I didn’t wish to challenge his professionalism, I risked a suggestion: ‘Ian, you’re practically wearing a suit of armour. You could even put your helmet on again. Couldn’t you just push your way

through and hold me up while I wriggle free? Look, all my toes and fingers work, and I promise you I've not lost any feeling anywhere. Anywhere at all,' I whispered emphatically.

'I ought to get backup, Jane.' For some reason he dropped his voice too. 'Ambulances carry equipment I can't. Then we could slide a back-board under you and fix a neck brace.'

'I'm sure you ought. But I'm sure a quick tug and Harry's stepladder under me will free me.' Please let it be quick: otherwise it would be like having a slow tooth extraction or a leisurely leg wax.

He did his best. In a matter of seconds I was standing in my tattered jeans and shredded top on the dried-out grass verge. One foot hurt more than the other: I'd managed to lose a trainer at some point. My helmet was still in place, however, and things could clearly have been a lot worse. Even the blood – though there was quite a lot. I might have been embraced by razor blades.

Doreen and Harry were both, as I'd suspected, in their seventies. For some reason they dressed as if they were in a fashion time warp, he in grey flannels and she wearing a wrap-around pinny. Both were more appalled by the sight of all my blood than was reassuring.

'The trouble is,' Ian said, 'I can't take you to A&E. We need an ambulance for that.'

'But I don't need A&E. GP surgery or Minor Injuries, maybe. The scratches are all pretty superficial. Aren't they?'

He was checking them carefully, and was clearly inclined to agree. But there was no doubt he registered my pathetic shaking.

‘I’ve only just had a tetanus booster,’ I added, as if that would put an end to the discussion. ‘It’s surely just a matter of putting dressings on the worst.’

At this point, Doreen – it turned out she was Harry’s sister, not his wife – insisted that we all adjourn to their bungalow so that the paramedic could treat me there and then in what she called decent privacy. I was very grateful, even though she kept popping in and out of the lounge – a strange choice of room, perhaps – with towels and bowls of hot water, as if I was an injured hero in an old black and white Western. Ian pretended to be appreciative, although he had a seemingly endless supply of disposable wipes; my husky thanks for the pot of tea for both of us were absolutely sincere, however. The cup rattled less and less in the saucer.

‘I suppose you didn’t get the reg of the guy that ran you off the road?’ he asked, probably to distract me while he diligently extracted a thorn.

‘He came up from behind. I think. I can’t recall seeing anyone coming my way. Bloody hell, Ian!’

‘Soon be done. There’s no one who’s out to get you, I suppose?’

Now wasn’t the time to regale him with my life story.

At last he announced he was satisfied. I was to take a taxi home and call my GP or the NHS helpline if I had any problems. We waved him off.

Doreen, who clearly disapproved of wasting money on a taxi, declared that Harry and she would drive me back to my cottage, even though my bike would have to await its turn in their front garden – a charming picture-book place with old-fashioned flowers surrounding an immaculate

lawn. It was so lovely that I asked, flourishing my phone, if I could take a photo with them in it, but she simply pointed to a loft window she'd left ajar and dashed in to close it. Then she had to double-check she'd locked the front door. And nip round the back to see that all was secure there. Shades of my paranoid mother.

Harry let himself into an elderly two-door Fiesta, which looked as if it had last been cleaned the year he bought it: it was completely out of place against the neatness of the house. It had left a patch of oil on the driveway at the side of the cottage. Doreen was checking that all was clear for him to reverse into the lane, reassuring him with decidedly ambiguous arm movements.

'What I can't work out,' he said through the open driver's window, as he pulled up with two wheels on the verge, 'is why that man drove at you. He did, you know, didn't he? That man?' he prompted as Doreen held the front passenger door open and tipped forward the seat. Somehow I was to get into the back seat. At last I managed. I dared not speculate on how I'd get out.

'What man?' She took her place beside him.

'The man that drove at Jane, here. In the big car.'

'Oh, the blue one.'

'No, it was black. With tinted windows.'

'Blue with tinted windows. One of those that look like a van. Ugly great things.'

'More like a young lorry. What do they call them on *Neighbours*? Utes? Only with the back section covered up. Yes, you ought to tell the police, Jane. Who would want to do that to an innocent woman?'

'I've no idea.' Nor had I. Not precisely. The trouble was

that though Simon was still in prison, he had plenty of cronies on the outside. On the other hand, I'd have thought they'd have done a more efficient job of despatching me. Who else could it have been? – assuming, of course, that it wasn't a simple accident. I'd had problems when I'd arrived in the village but now I seemed to be on reasonably good terms with everyone.

'We'd be witnesses,' she continued.

'Thank you,' I said, without irony. 'I don't suppose you managed to remember any of the registration number?'

'They've got such complicated ones these days, haven't they?'

I took that as a negative. 'Or the make?' I added, more in hope than expectation.

As if they were an old married couple, bound together for fifty years, they bickered all the way to Wrayford: make; model; colour? Somehow I didn't think there was much for the police to work on, even if I'd been able to make any intelligent guesses.

The only time they were silent was when, ready to say goodbye, I asked them for their address and phone number. They flinched as if I'd asked them to give classified information.

'So I can phone you before I come and collect my bicycle,' I whispered gently.

'Oh, there's no need for that. All you need to do is open the gate.'

I shook my head, trying to be patient and to sound even more grateful than I was. 'You know, I think I must have banged my head after all. I haven't,' I declared truthfully, 'a clue where it all happened.'

Their contact details safe in my phone, I waved them goodbye, unable, however, to rid myself of the idea that they wanted nothing further to do with me. I wouldn't have been surprised if the cycle had appeared unannounced in my own front garden. But it hadn't when I ordered a large bunch of thank-you flowers online next morning, including the message that I'd arrive in my car the following day.

I did. To find the bike still in place. It was absolutely pristine: they must have cleaned it when they cleaned their car, which I presumed they must do occasionally – an annual treat, perhaps. Meanwhile, far from spruce, wilting on the sun-baked doorstep, sat a large bouquet.

It must have been a combination of the virus and the accident that meant I could only stare, nonplussed, for what seemed like several minutes. They were out. That was all. Or perhaps it wasn't. I took a prowl round the bungalow. A peep through a window showed me that everything was almost unnaturally tidy: it reminded me of how my mother used to leave the family home before our summer exodus to the seaside; my family hadn't discovered cheap package tours abroad. Even the dishcloth was hung carefully to dry over the mixer tap. Some fairly deep tyre tracks led me to a long shed, the roof of which was so concave I couldn't imagine it holding up much longer. What it held would remain a mystery, because it dawned on me that what I was doing was snooping. Even so I registered another puzzle: why two people should need such an inordinately long washing line. But perhaps they had once offered B&B accommodation and needed to dry loads of bedlinen.

But none of this was anything to do with me. I gathered up the flowers so I could return them to the Canterbury

florist. Next time they might not leave anything unsigned for lying casually for all to see. All? Well, the odd sheep.

In the cycle shop, as the mean and lean owner sucked his teeth over the damage to the bike and worked out an estimate for repairing it, I looked at helmet cameras. The next person running me off the road had better smile.