

The Village

ONE

It was the week before my sixteenth birthday when the boy fell out of the door and everything changed. Is that a good start? Miss Keyland, who taught me at the village school, used to say that you have to reach out and grab the reader with the first sentence. If you waste time with descriptions of the sky or the weather or the smell of freshly cut grass or whatever, people may not bother to read on, and I've got a big story to tell. In fact, it's the biggest story in the world. The end of the world . . . and stories don't get any bigger than that.



Maybe that's where I should have begun. All these different things were happening in Britain, in America, in the Middle East — and, of course, in Antarctica. That's where the armies were heading. There was going to be this huge battle in which the future of everything and everyone would be decided. And I didn't know anything about it. I didn't even realize how horrible everything had become.

Well, it's too late now. I've started so I might as well keep going. Me. The boy. The door. Let's take them one by one.

My name is Holly — at least, that's what everyone used to call me. I was christened Hermione but that was considered much too posh for the sort of girl I became, and, anyway, "Holly" was easier to spell. Nobody ever used my family name. Like a lot of kids in the village, my parents were dead and everyone found it easier just to stick to first names. I expect you want to know what I look like. I'm not sure how to describe myself but I might as well say straight off that, back then, I wasn't pretty. I had straw-colored hair and unfortunately it looked a bit like straw too, long and tangled like something falling out of a mattress.

I had round cheeks and freckles and bright blue eyes. I'd been working on the farm since I was old enough to push a wheelbarrow (which was very young indeed) so I was quite stocky. My nails were chipped and full of dirt. If I'd ever had nicer clothes, I might have looked all right, but the shirt and jeans I always wore had been worn by several people before me and they didn't do me any favors.

I lived with my grandparents. Actually, they weren't related to me at all. We didn't have any shared blood. But that was how I thought of them. Their names were Rita and John and they must have been in their late seventies . . . they were the sort of age that's so old, you don't bother trying to guess anymore. To be fair, they were both in pretty good shape: slow but they could get around and they were fully compos mentis. (*Compos* meaning "in command" and *mentis* meaning "of the mind," from the Latin. Miss Keyland taught me that.) If I had a problem with them, it was that they didn't talk very much. They liked to keep themselves to themselves — which wasn't that easy once they'd adopted me and taken me into their house. They had been married for as long as anyone could remember and they would have been lost without each other.

There was a church in the middle of the village, St. Botolph's, which dated back to the Normans. It stood at the crossroads next to the main square and it was a grim, old place, bashed around by the centuries and rebuilt so often that it was a complete patchwork, as if a bulldozer had crashed into it at some time and they'd had to put it back together quickly before anyone noticed. It was full every Sunday, but then, nobody in the village would have thought of not going to Sunday service, and even Rita and John put on their best clothes and hobbled down there, arm in arm. Personally, I hated the place. For a start, I didn't believe in God and often used to think that if there was a God, even He would get bored of the same hymns and prayers week after week. That didn't stop the vicar, though. His sermons went on for hours and they never varied. *Pray for mercy. We're being punished for our*

sins. We're all doomed. He may have had a point but I never believed the answer was to be found on my knees, on that hard stone floor.

The church was also used for village meetings every Wednesday, but we weren't allowed to go to them until we were sixteen. Until then, you weren't considered grown-up enough to join in the discussion, even if you were grown-up enough to slog your guts out from dawn to dusk. It was funny how it worked.

The door wasn't actually in the church. It was around the back. The church was surrounded by a cemetery full of wonky gravestones with a gravel path running through the middle, and I often used it as a shortcut home. On the other side, there was an even older church, or the remains of one that had originally stood on the site. Not much of it was left — just a couple of crumbling archways and a wall with two gaping holes that might once have been magnificent windows, stained glass, and all the rest of it, and beneath them, a wooden door.

There had always been something strange about the door because, first of all, it didn't go anywhere. There were a couple of tombstones in front of it and a small gravel yard behind, but it didn't lead into a sacristy or a cloister or any other part of the building. And there was a sort of question mark over the door itself. That is to say, who made it and when? The ruins were literally hundreds of years old ("premedieval," Miss Keyland said) and yet the door didn't look ancient at all. I mean, if it had been there for centuries, how come the wood hadn't rotted? Obviously, someone must have replaced it, but Rita, who had been born in the village, told me it hadn't happened in her lifetime and that must have been almost a century in itself. It was very weird.

And one evening at the end of August, it suddenly opened and a boy fell out.

I was on my way home from the orchards, where I had been apple picking, one of my least favorite jobs, although to be honest, anything to do with the growing and storing of food is hard work — boring and repetitive. The worst things about apple picking? Realizing that the

overripe Golden Delicious you've just spent half an hour shaking off the branch is actually going to be neither golden nor delicious. Finding that a wasp has burrowed into its rotten core and getting a nasty sting on your palm as a result. Spiking yourself for the fiftieth time on a bramble that's been waiting a whole year to gouge into your flesh. Lugging the basket back to the collection point in the full heat of the afternoon, with blisters on your shoulders and worse ones on your fingers. And the endlessness of it. Mr. Bantoft — farm manager, fruit division — had said there were fewer apples that year. He said the entire orchard was beginning to fail. But it didn't seem that way to me.

Anyway, I was tired and I was grubby and I wasn't thinking of very much when the door in the old wall opened and this boy staggered forward and crumpled onto the grass. He was quite skinny, with long, very black hair cut straight across his forehead, and I was puzzled because I didn't recognize him. But then, one side of his face was streaked with blood. In fact, there were pints of the stuff pouring down the side of his cheek. It was dripping onto his shoulder and his shirt was soaked. I ran over to him and stopped, with my heart pounding, biting on my knuckles, which is what I always do when I'm shocked by something. And here was the thing. I had never seen this boy. Impossible though it was, I knew at once.

He wasn't from the village.

He saw me and his eyes widened, reminding me of a rabbit right before you put an arrow through its throat. He wasn't as badly hurt as I had first thought. Something had whacked into the side of his head just above the temple and he had a nasty cut, but I didn't think his skull was fractured. He was wearing a shirt, jeans, and sneakers, and they looked new. He was about as strange as a stranger could be. He didn't even look English. His eyes were as dark as his hair. And there was something about his nose and his cheekbones . . . it was as if they'd been carved out of wood.

"Where am I?" he asked.