

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-coloured 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 actually 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 dungarees I always wore had been worn by several people before me and they didn't do me any favours.

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 any more. 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 round 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 short cut 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 ("pre-medieval," 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 all 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 favourite 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 at once. 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 just 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 trainers 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.

"You're at the church," I said. It was such an odd question. I wasn't sure how to answer.

"What church? Where is it?"

"The church is called St Botolph's. It's in the village."

The boy looked at me as if I didn't know what I was talking about. Then he gave up on me. "This isn't right," he said. "I have to go back."

"Back where?"

But he wasn't listening to me. He had already got up and gone back to the door. He closed it, then opened it again. I don't know what he was expecting to find on the other side but, like I've already explained, it opened into this little yard with just a few tufts of grass sprouting out of the gravel. The boy went through the door, shutting it behind him. I walked round so I could see him on the other side. He was standing there, breathing heavily. He seemed to have forgotten the wound on his head. Then he noticed me watching him. "It's broken," he said.

"What's broken?"

"The door. It should have sent me back."

"Whoa! Slow down." I stepped forward and almost grabbed hold of him, then thought better of it. "It's just a door. It opens and closes. What else is it meant to do?"

"I just told you. I want it to take me where I came from. I have to find my brother. I have to go back."

"Go back where?"

"Hong Kong."

I had been worried that the boy might need to see a doctor for the wound in his head, and that would cause all sorts of problems because he would have to explain how he'd arrived in the village and they'd probably beat him up and interrogate him before they even thought about treating him. But that was only half of it. It seemed that he was delirious. He said he had come from Hong Kong, which was on the other side of the world, and even if there had been any commercial planes flying, which there weren't, that would have been impossible.

And there was something else that I only noticed now. His accent. He certainly wasn't from the village or anywhere close by. He didn't even sound English.

I had more or less made up my mind by this point. It was time to be on my way. The boy was hurt, foreign, deranged and uninformed – all of which added up to serious trouble. But it didn't need to be my trouble. I would continue home and leave someone else to look after him. But even as I was about to make my move, he glanced up at me as if he had somehow read my mind and suddenly he looked so hopelessly lost and afraid that I knew I couldn't leave him.

"Hermione?" he asked.

I couldn't remember telling him that. "That is my name," I said. "But my friends call me Holly."

"Holly..." He looked dazed.

"How did you hurt yourself?" I asked.

He put his hand to his head, then examined the blood on his fingertips as if noticing it for the first time. "I don't know. I guess something must have hit me. The whole place was being torn down ... this temple in Hong Kong. There was a typhoon. You must have seen it on TV."

"There is no TV. Not any more." There was something else that didn't add up. "When were you in Hong Kong?" I asked.

"Right now. Just a minute ago."

That was when I knew he was crazy and I would have been on my way except at that moment I heard voices: two men crossing the graveyard from the north side. I knew at once who they were – Mike Dolan and Simon Reade. They worked together on the outer perimeter and must have been on their way there now as they were both carrying guns. If they saw the boy, it would all be over. He was a stranger. He had no place here. They would blast him full of holes without even asking him his name – something that, incidentally, I hadn't yet done myself.

"You have to get out of sight," I whispered.

"What?"

"Just do it!" I shoved the boy away and he crouched down right in the corner, where the ancient wall jutted away from the church. It was dark there, out of the sun, and a shadow fell over him like a piece of tarpaulin. A second later, the two men saw me. "What are you doing out here, Holly?" Dolan asked. "Shouldn't you be at home?" That was typical of him. Just because he carried a gun he thought he had the right to boss everyone around. He was a big, thick-set man with a beard and dirty clothes. Well, we all had dirty clothes but his were worse than most. I'd never much liked him.

"I was just on my way," I said.

"What's that you've got on your hands? Have you hurt yourself?"

I looked down and saw the boy's blood. I must have got some on myself when I pushed him. "It's nothing," I said. "I cut myself."

"On an apple tree?" They both laughed.

Then Reade turned on me with laser eyes. He was the smaller of the two, thin and pale. He liked hanging around with Dolan because it made him feel important. He was suspicious of everything, like a dog always sniffing at your feet. "Did I hear you talking to someone?" he asked.

"No."

"I think I did."

I didn't know what to say. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the boy scrunched up in the corner and I wondered why I was lying on his behalf. What could I possibly have been doing here that would make these two men leave me alone? My mind scrambled for an answer and it was given to me by the church. "I was praying," I said.

The two of them nodded. They both had wives who could have been nuns if they weren't married ... the sort who crossed themselves ten times a day and actually cried when they read the Bible. There were a lot of people in the village like that. They even had prayer meetings on their afternoons off. I smiled and tried to look holy. Somehow, it worked.

"It's good to pray," Dolan said. "We need all the help we can get. But it'll be dark soon. You'd best be home."

"Absolutely, Mr Dolan."

They went on their way, the two of them chatting together with their guns slanting across their shoulder blades. I waited until they had gone, then hurried over to the boy. To my astonishment, he had fallen asleep – although it was more likely that shock and exhaustion had knocked him out. I shook him awake.

"Scott...?" he muttered.

"Who is Scott?" I asked.

"My brother..."

"Well, I'm afraid I'm not Scott. I'm Holly. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know. I'm confused."

"You haven't told me your name."

"You haven't asked."

"I'm asking now."

"It's Jamie. I'm Jamie Tyler..." He tried to get to his feet but he was too weak and dizzy. "You have to help me," he said.

"I've already helped you. I just stopped you from getting shot. And maybe I'll help you some more. But you have to tell me where you came from – where you really came from – and who you are. You don't understand how much trouble I could get into, even for talking to you."

"OK." He swallowed and I saw a wave of pain pass across his eyes. "Do you have any water?"

I reached for my backpack and opened it. I'd had a full bottle of water when I started work but now there wasn't much left. I handed it to him and he emptied it at once, as if he had no idea how valuable it was. The water seemed to revive him a little. He straightened up. The blood was drying in what was left of the afternoon sun. "What country is this?" he asked.

I shrugged. What sort of question was that? "What country do you think it is?" I exclaimed. "It's England. Where else would it be?"

"Are we near London?"

"I've never been to London. I've got no idea." I was rapidly losing my patience. "Tell me what I want to know or I'm going to be on my way and leave you here."

"No. Don't do that." He put out a hand, stopping me. "I'll tell you what I can. But it won't help you. You won't believe me."

"Try me." And you'd better get on with it, I wanted to add. The sun was dipping behind the steeple. The gravestones were

throwing out shadows that reached ever further. I would already be expected home.

"Is there somewhere else we can talk? Can we go inside?"

"Tell me now."

But he never did ... at least, not then. I hadn't heard the foot-steps behind me. I hadn't realized that Mike Dolan and Simon Reade had come back until I turned round and saw them, saw them standing there, aiming at Jamie.

"There you are," Reade said. "I told you something was up."

"Who is he?" Dolan demanded, then, to Jamie, "Who are you?"

"I'm Jamie."

"How did you get here?"

Jamie hesitated. I could see him thinking what to say. "I took a bus," he said, finally.

It was the wrong answer. Almost lazily, Dolan swung his rifle so that the butt crashed into the side of Jamie's head and he went sprawling. It was the side that had been undamaged. Until that moment anyway. I shouted out but Reade stepped in front of me, blocking my way. Jamie lay still. Dolan stood over him. He turned to me. "You've got some explaining to do, Holly," he said. "But that can come later. Right now you'd better get home." He nodded at Simon. "Let's get this boy tied up and locked somewhere safe. And find the Reverend Johnstone. We're going to have to call an Assembly."

And that was it. I could only stand there and watch as the two men scooped up the boy and dragged him away.