Chapter One

My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as "agitated," even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I am boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying "calm." I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it.

Anyway, I'm not making any big claims for myself. I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don't get half the credit. If you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful–about my bedsit, my car, above all, the way I get to pick and choose who I look after. And I'm a Hailsham student–which is enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up. Kathy H., they say, she gets to pick and choose, and she always chooses her own kind: people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates. No wonder she has a great record. I've heard it said enough, so I'm sure

you've heard it plenty more, and maybe there's something in it. But I'm not the first to be allowed to pick and choose, and I doubt if I'll be the last. And anyway, I've done my share of looking after donors brought up in every kind of place. By the time I finish, remember, I'll have done twelve years of this, and it's only for the last six they've let me choose.

And why shouldn't they? Carers aren't machines. You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end, it wears you down. You don't have unlimited patience and energy. So when you get a chance to choose, of course, you choose your own kind. That's natural. There's no way I could have gone on for as long as I have if I'd stopped feeling for my donors every step of the way. And anyway, if I'd never started choosing, how would I ever have got close again to Ruth and Tommy after all those years?

But these days, of course, there are fewer and fewer donors left who I remember, and so in practice, I haven't been choosing that much. As I say, the work gets a lot harder when you don't have that deeper link with the donor, and though I'll miss being a carer, it feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end of the year.

Ruth, incidentally, was only the third or fourth donor I got to choose. She already had a carer assigned to her at the time, and I remember it taking a bit of nerve on my part. But in the end I managed it, and the instant I saw her again, at that recovery centre in Dover, all our differences–while they didn't exactly vanish–seemed not nearly as important as all the other things: like the fact that we'd grown up together at Hailsham, the fact that we knew and remembered things no one else did. It's ever since then, I suppose, I started seeking out for my donors people from the past, and whenever I could, people from Hailsham.

There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting. It had to do with this particular donor I had once, in my third year as a carer; it was his reaction when I mentioned I was from Hailsham. He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it. He could hardly breathe, but he looked towards me and said: "Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place." Then the next morning, when I was making conversation to keep his mind off it all, and I asked where he'd grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realised then how desperately he didn't want reminded. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham.

So over the next five or six days, I told him whatever he wanted to know, and he'd lie there, all hooked up, a gentle smile breaking through. He'd ask me about the big things and the little things. About our guardians, about how we each had our own collection chests under our beds, the football, the rounders, the little path that took you all round the outside of the main house, round all its nooks and crannies, the duck pond, the food, the view from the Art Room over the fields on a foggy morning. Sometimes he'd make me say things over and over; things I'd told him only the day before, he'd ask about like I'd never told him. "Did you have a sports pavilion?" "Which guardian was your special favourite?" At first I thought this was just the drugs, but then I realised his mind was clear enough. What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. That was when I first understood, really understood, just how lucky we'd been–Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us.

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: "Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!" Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere. In particular, there are those pavilions. I spot them all over the country, standing on the far side of playing fields, little white prefab buildings with a row of windows unnaturally high up, tucked almost under the eaves. I think they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties, which is probably when ours was put up. If I drive past one I keep looking over to it for as long as possible, and one day I'll crash the car like that, but I keep doing it. Not long ago I was driving through an empty stretch of Worcestershire and saw one beside a cricket ground so like ours at Hailsham I actually turned the car and went back for a second look.

We loved our sports pavilion, maybe because it reminded us of those sweet little cottages people always had in picture books when we were young. I can remember us back in the Juniors, pleading with guardians to hold the next lesson in the pavilion instead of the usual room. Then by the time we were in Senior 2–when we were twelve, going on thirteen–the pavilion had become the place to hide out with your best friends when you wanted to get away from the rest of Hailsham.

The pavilion was big enough to take two separate groups without them

bothering each other–in the summer, a third group could hang about out on the veranda. But ideally you and your friends wanted the place just to yourselves, so there was often jockeying and arguing. The guardians were always telling us to be civilised about it, but in practice, you needed to have some strong personalities in your group to stand a chance of getting the pavilion during a break or free period. I wasn't exactly the wilting type myself, but I suppose it was really because of Ruth we got in there as often as we did.

Usually we just spread ourselves around the chairs and benches–there'd be five of us, six if Jenny B. came along–and had a good gossip. There was a kind of conversation that could only happen when you were hidden away in the pavilion: we might discuss something that was worrying us, or we might end up screaming with laughter, or in a furious row. Mostly, it was a way to unwind for a while with your closest friends.

On the particular afternoon I'm now thinking of, we were standing up on stools and benches, crowding around the high windows. That gave us a clear view of the North Playing Field where about a dozen boys from our year and Senior 3 had gathered to play football. There was bright sunshine, but it must have been raining earlier that day because I can remember how the sun was glinting on the muddy surface of the grass.

Someone said we shouldn't be so obvious about watching, but we hardly moved back at all. Then Ruth said: "He doesn't suspect a thing. Look at him. He really doesn't suspect a thing."

When she said this, I looked at her and searched for signs of disapproval about what the boys were going to do to Tommy. But the next second Ruth gave a little laugh and said: "The idiot!"

And I realised that for Ruth and the others, whatever the boys chose to do was pretty remote from us; whether we approved or not didn't come into it. We were gathered around the windows at that moment not because we relished the prospect of seeing Tommy get humiliated yet again, but just because we'd heard about this latest plot and were vaguely curious to watch it unfold. In those days, I don't think what the boys did amongst themselves went much deeper than that. For Ruth, for the others, it was that detached, and the chances are that's how it was for me too.

Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong. Maybe even then, when I saw Tommy rushing about that field, undisguised delight on his face to be accepted back in the fold again, about to play the game at which he so excelled, maybe I did feel a little stab of pain. What I do remember is that I noticed Tommy was wearing the light blue polo shirt he'd got in the Sales the previous month–the one he was so proud of. I remember thinking: "He's really stupid, playing football in that. It'll get ruined, then how's he going to feel?" Out loud, I said, to no one in particular: "Tommy's got his shirt on. His favourite polo shirt."

I don't think anyone heard me, because they were all laughing at Laura–the big clown in our group–mimicking one after the other the expressions that appeared on Tommy's face as he ran, waved, called, tackled. The other boys were all moving around the field in that deliberately languorous way they have when they're warming up, but Tommy, in his excitement, seemed already to be going full pelt. I said, louder this time: "He's going to be so sick if he ruins that shirt." This time Ruth heard me, but she must have thought I'd meant it as some kind of joke, because she laughed half-heartedly, then made some quip of her own.

Then the boys had stopped kicking the ball about, and were standing in a pack in the mud, their chests gently rising and falling as they waited for the team picking to start. The two captains who emerged were from Senior 3, though everyone knew Tommy was a better player than any of that year. They tossed for first pick, then the one who'd won stared at the group.

"Look at him," someone behind me said. "He's completely convinced he's going to be first pick. Just look at him!"

There was something comical about Tommy at that moment, something that made you think, well, yes, if he's going to be that daft, he deserves what's coming. The other boys were all pretending to ignore the picking process, pretending they didn't care where they came in the order. Some were talking quietly to each other, some re-tying their laces, others just staring down at their feet as they trammelled the mud. But Tommy was looking eagerly at the Senior 3 boy, as though his name had already been called.

Laura kept up her performance all through the team-picking, doing all the different expressions that went across Tommy's face: the bright eager one at the start; the puzzled concern when four picks had gone by and he still hadn't been chosen; the hurt and panic as it began to dawn on him what was really going on. I didn't keep glancing round at Laura, though, because I was watching Tommy; I only knew what she was doing because the others kept laughing and egging her on. Then when Tommy was left standing alone, and the boys all began sniggering, I heard Ruth say:

"It's coming. Hold it. Seven seconds. Seven, six, five..."

She never got there. Tommy burst into thunderous bellowing, and the boys, now laughing openly, started to run off towards the South Playing Field.

Tommy took a few strides after them–it was hard to say whether his instinct was to give angry chase or if he was panicked at being left behind. In any case he soon stopped and stood there, glaring after them, his face scarlet. Then he began to scream and shout, a nonsensical jumble of swear words and insults.

We'd all seen plenty of Tommy's tantrums by then, so we came down off our stools and spread ourselves around the room. We tried to start up a conversation about something else, but there was Tommy going on and on in the background, and although at first we just rolled our eyes and tried to ignore it, in the end–probably a full ten minutes after we'd first moved away–we were back up at the windows again.

The other boys were now completely out of view, and Tommy was no longer trying to direct his comments in any particular direction. He was just raving, flinging his limbs about, at the sky, at the wind, at the nearest fence post. Laura said he was maybe "rehearsing his Shakespeare." Someone else pointed out how each time he screamed something he'd raise one foot off the ground, pointing it outwards, "like a dog doing a pee." Actually, I'd noticed the same foot movement myself, but what had struck me was that each time he stamped the foot back down again, flecks of mud flew up around his shins. I thought again about his precious shirt, but he was too far away for me to see if he'd got much mud on it.

"I suppose it is a bit cruel," Ruth said, "the way they always work him up like that. But it's his own fault. If he learnt to keep his cool, they'd leave him alone."

"They'd still keep on at him," Hannah said. "Graham K.'s temper's just as bad, but that only makes them all the more careful with him. The reason they go for Tommy's because he's a layabout."

Then everyone was talking at once, about how Tommy never even tried to be creative, about how he hadn't even put anything in for the Spring Exchange. I suppose the truth was, by that stage, each of us was secretly wishing a guardian would come from the house and take him away. And although we hadn't had any part in this latest plan to rile Tommy, we had taken out ringside seats, and we were starting to feel guilty. But there was no sign of a guardian, so we just kept swapping reasons why Tommy deserved everything he got. Then when Ruth looked at her watch and said even though we still had time, we should get back to the main house, nobody argued.

Tommy was still going strong as we came out of the pavilion. The house was over to our left, and since Tommy was standing in the field straight ahead of us, there was no need to go anywhere near him. In any case, he was facing the other way and didn't seem to register us at all. All the same, as my friends set off along the edge of the field, I started to drift over towards him. I knew this would puzzle the others, but I kept going–even when I heard Ruth's urgent whisper to me to come back.

I suppose Tommy wasn't used to being disturbed during his rages, because his first response when I came up to him was to stare at me for a second, then carry on as before. It was like he was doing Shakespeare and I'd come up onto the stage in the middle of his performance. Even when I said: "Tommy, your nice shirt. You'll get it all messed up," there was no sign of him having heard me.

So I reached forward and put a hand on his arm. Afterwards, the others thought he'd meant to do it, but I was pretty sure it was unintentional. His arms were still flailing about, and he wasn't to know I was about to put out my hand. Anyway, as he threw up his arm, he knocked my hand aside and hit the side of my face. It didn't hurt at all, but I let out a gasp, and so did most of the girls behind me.

That's when at last Tommy seemed to become aware of me, of the others, of himself, of the fact that he was there in that field, behaving the way he had been, and stared at me a bit stupidly.

"Tommy," I said, quite sternly. "There's mud all over your shirt."

"So what?" he mumbled. But even as he said this, he looked down and noticed the brown specks, and only just stopped himself crying out in alarm. Then I saw the surprise register on his face that I should know about his feelings for the polo shirt.

"It's nothing to worry about," I said, before the silence got humiliating for him. "It'll come off. If you can't get it off yourself, just take it to Miss Jody."

He went on examining his shirt, then said grumpily: "It's nothing to do with you anyway."

He seemed to regret immediately this last remark and looked at me sheepishly, as though expecting me to say something comforting back to him. But I'd had enough of him by now, particularly with the girls watching–and for all I knew, any number of others from the windows of the main house. So I turned away with a shrug and rejoined my friends.

Ruth put an arm around my shoulders as we walked away. "At least you got

him to pipe down," she said. "Are you okay? Mad animal."

Chapter Two

This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is that my approaching Tommy that afternoon was part of a phase I was going through around that time–something to do with compulsively setting myself challenges–and I'd more or less forgotten all about it when Tommy stopped me a few days later.

I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week–usually up in Room 18 at the very top of the house–with stern Nurse Trisha, or Crow Face, as we called her. That sunny morning a crowd of us was going up the central staircase to be examined by her, while another lot she'd just finished with was on its way down. So the stairwell was filled with echoing noise, and I was climbing the steps head down, just following the heels of the person in front, when a voice near me went: "Kath!"

Tommy, who was in the stream coming down, had stopped dead on the stairs with a big open smile that immediately irritated me. A few years earlier maybe, if we ran into someone we were pleased to see, we'd put on that sort of look. But we were thirteen by then, and this was a boy running into a girl in a really public situation. I felt like saying: "Tommy, why don't you grow up?" But I stopped myself, and said instead: "Tommy, you're holding everyone up. And so am I."

He glanced upwards and sure enough the flight above was already grinding to a halt. For a second he looked panicked, then he squeezed himself right into the wall next to me, so it was just about possible for people to push past. Then he said:

"Kath, I've been looking all over for you. **I** meant to say sorry. I mean, I'm really, really sorry. I honestly didn't mean to hit you the other day. I wouldn't dream of hitting a girl, and even if I did, I'd never want to hit you. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's okay. An accident, that's all." I gave him a nod and made to move away. But Tommy said brightly:

"The shirt's all right now. It all washed out."

"That's good."

"It didn't hurt, did it? When I hit you?"

"Sure. Fractured skull. Concussion, the lot. Even Crow Face might notice it. That's if I ever get up there."

"But seriously, Kath. No hard feelings, right? I'm awfully sorry. I am, honestly."

At last I gave him a smile and said with no irony: "Look, Tommy, it was an accident and it's now one hundred percent forgotten. I don't hold it against you one tiny bit."

He still looked unsure, but now some older students were pushing behind him, telling him to move. He gave me a quick smile and patted my shoulder, like he might do to a younger boy, and pushed his way into the flow. Then, as I began to climb, I heard him shout from below: "See you, Kath!"

I'd found the whole thing mildly embarrassing, but it didn't lead to any teasing or gossip; and I must admit, if it hadn't been for that encounter on the stairs, I probably wouldn't have taken the interest I did in Tommy's problems over the next several weeks.

I saw a few of the incidents myself. But mostly I heard about them, and when I did, I quizzed people until I'd got a more or less full account. There were more temper tantrums, like the time Tommy was supposed to have heaved over two desks in Room 14, spilling all the contents on the floor, while the rest of the class, having escaped onto the landing, barricaded the door to stop him coming out. There was the time Mr. Christopher had had to pin back his arms to stop him attacking Reggie D. during football practice. Everyone could see, too, when the Senior 2 boys went on their fields run, Tommy was the only one without a running partner. He was a good runner, and would quickly open up ten, fifteen yards between him and the rest, maybe thinking this would disguise the fact that no one wanted to run with him. Then there were rumours almost every day of pranks that had been played on him. A lot of these were the usual stuff–weird things in his bed, a worm in his cereal–but some of it sounded pointlessly nasty: like the time someone cleaned a toilet with his toothbrush so it was waiting for him with shit all over the bristles. His size and strength–and I suppose that temper–meant no one tried actual physical bullying, but from what I remember, for a couple of months at least, these incidents kept coming. I thought sooner or later someone would start saying it had gone too far, but it just kept on, and no one said anything.

I tried to bring it up once myself, in the dorm after lights-out. In the Seniors, we were down to six per dorm, so it was just our little group, and we often had our most intimate conversations lying in the dark before we fell asleep. You could talk about things there you wouldn't dream of talking about any other place, not even in the pavilion. So one night I brought up Tommy. I didn't say much: I just summed up what had been happening to him and said it wasn't really very fair. When I'd finished, there was a funny sort of silence hanging in the dark, and I realised everyone was waiting for Ruth's response–which was usually what happened whenever something a bit awkward came up. I kept waiting, then I heard a sigh from Ruth's side of the room, and she said:

"You've got a point, Kathy. It's not nice. But if he wants it to stop, he's got to change his own attitude. He didn't have a thing for the Spring Exchange. And has he got anything for next month? I bet he hasn't."

I should explain a bit here about the Exchanges we had at Hailsham. Four times a year–spring, summer, autumn, winter–we had a kind of big exhibition-cum-sale of all the things we'd been creating in the three months since the last Exchange. Paintings, drawings, pottery; all sorts of "sculptures" made from whatever was the craze of the day–bashed-up cans, maybe, or bottle tops stuck onto cardboard. For each thing you put in, you were paid in Exchange Tokens–the guardians decided how many your particular masterpiece merited–and then on the day of the Exchange you went along with your tokens and "bought" the stuff you liked. The rule was you could only buy work done by students in your own year, but that still gave us plenty to choose from, since most of us could get pretty prolific over a three-month period.

Looking back now, I can see why the Exchanges became so important to us. For a start, they were our only means, aside from the Sales–the Sales were something else, which I'll come to later–of building up a collection of personal possessions. If, say, you wanted to decorate the walls around your bed, or wanted something to carry around in your bag and place on your desk from room to room, then you could find it at the Exchange. I can see now, too, how the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all. If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures–that's bound to do things to your relationships. The Tommy business was typical. A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at "creating."

Ruth and I often found ourselves remembering these things a few years ago, when I was caring for her down at the recovery centre in Dover.

"It's all part of what made Hailsham so special," she said once. "The way we

were encouraged to value each other's work."

"True," I said. "But sometimes, when I think about the Ex-changes now, a lot of it seems a bit odd. The poetry, for instance. I remember we were allowed to hand in poems, instead of a drawing or a painting. And the strange thing was, we all thought that was fine, we thought that made sense."

"Why shouldn't it? Poetry's important."

"But we're talking about nine-year-old stuff, funny little lines, all misspelt, in exercise books. We'd spend our precious tokens on an exercise book full of that stuff rather than on something really nice for around our beds. If we were so keen on a person's poetry, why didn't we just borrow it and copy it down ourselves any old afternoon? But you remember how it was. An Exchange would come along and we'd be standing there torn between Susie K.'s poems and those giraffes Jackie used to make."

"Jackie's giraffes," Ruth said with a laugh. "They were so beautiful. I used to have one."

We were having this conversation on a fine summer evening, sitting out on the little balcony of her recovery room. It was a few months after her first donation, and now she was over the worst of it, I'd always time my evening visits so that we'd be able to spend a half hour or so out there, watching the sun go down over the rooftops. You could see lots of aerials and satellite dishes, and sometimes, right over in the distance, a glistening line that was the sea. I'd bring mineral water and biscuits, and we'd sit there talking about anything that came into our heads. The centre Ruth was in that time, it's one of my favourites, and I wouldn't mind at all if that's where I ended up. The recovery rooms are small, but they're well-designed and comfortable. Everything–the walls, the floor–has been done in gleaming white tiles, which the centre keeps so clean when you first go in it's almost like entering a hall of mirrors. Of course, you don't exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times, but you almost think you do. When you lift an arm, or when someone sits up in bed, you can feel this pale, shadowy movement all around you in the tiles. Anyway, Ruth's room at that centre, it also had these big glass sliding panels, so she could easily see the outside from her bed. Even with her head on the pillow she'd see a big lot of sky, and if it was warm enough, she could get all the fresh air she wanted by stepping out onto the balcony. I loved visiting her there, loved those meandering talks we had, through the summer to the early autumn, sitting on that balcony together, talking about Hailsham, the Cottages, whatever else drifted into our thoughts.

"What I'm saying," I went on, "is that when we were that age, when we were eleven, say, we really weren't interested in each other's poems at all. But remember, someone like Christy? Christy had this great reputation for poetry, and we all looked up to her for it. Even you, Ruth, you didn't dare boss Christy around. All because we thought she was great at poetry. But we didn't know a thing about poetry. We didn't care about it. It's strange."

But Ruth didn't get my point–or maybe she was deliberately avoiding it. Maybe she was determined to remember us all as more sophisticated than we were. Or maybe she could sense where my talk was leading, and didn't want us to go that way. Anyway, she let out a long sigh and said:

"We all thought Christy's poems were so good. But I wonder how they'd look to us now. I wish we had some here, I'd love to see what we'd think." Then she laughed and said: "I have still got some poems by Peter B. But that was much later, when we were in Senior 4. I must have fancied him. I can't think why else I'd have bought his poems. They're just hysterically daft. Takes himself so seriously. But Christy, she was good, I remember she was. It's funny, she went right off poems when she started her painting. And she was nowhere near as good at that."

But let me get back to Tommy. What Ruth said that time in our dorm after lights-out, about how Tommy had brought all his problems on himself, probably summed up what most people at Hailsham thought at that time. But it was when she said what she did that it occurred to me, as I lay there, that this whole notion of his deliberately not trying was one that had been doing the rounds from as far back as the Juniors. And it came home to me, with a kind of chill, that Tommy had been going through what he'd been going through not just for weeks or months, but for years.

Tommy and I talked about all this not so long ago, and his own account of how his troubles began confirmed what I was thinking that night. According to him, it had all started one afternoon in one of Miss Geraldine's art classes. Until that day, Tommy told me, he'd always quite enjoyed painting. But then that day in Miss Geraldine's class, Tommy had done this particular watercolour–of an elephant standing in some tall grass–and that was what started it all off. He'd done it, he claimed, as a kind of joke. I quizzed him a lot on this point and I suspect the truth was that it was like a lot of things at that age: you don't have any clear reason, you just do it. You do it because you think it might get a laugh, or because you want to see if it'll cause a stir. And when you're asked to explain it afterwards, it doesn't seem to make any sense. We've all done things like that. Tommy didn't quite put it this way, but I'm sure that's how it happened.

Anyway, he did his elephant, which was exactly the sort of picture a kid three

years younger might have done. It took him no more than twenty minutes and it got a laugh, sure enough, though not quite the sort he'd expected. Even so, it might not have led to anything–and this is a big irony, I suppose–if Miss Geraldine hadn't been taking the class that day.

Miss Geraldine was everyone's favourite guardian when we were that age. She was gentle, soft-spoken, and always comforted you when you needed it, even when you'd done something bad, or been told off by another guardian. If she ever had to tell you off herself, then for days afterwards she'd give you lots of extra attention, like she owed you something. It was unlucky for Tommy that it was Miss Geraldine taking art that day and not, say, Mr. Robert or Miss Emily herself–the head guardian–who often took art. Had it been either of those two, Tommy would have got a bit of a telling off, he could have done his smirk, and the worst the others would have thought was that it was a feeble joke. He might even have had some students think him a right clown. But Miss Geraldine being Miss Geraldine, it didn't go that way. Instead, she did her best to look at the picture with kindness and understanding. And probably guessing Tommy was in danger of getting stick from the others, she went too far the other way, actually finding things to praise, pointing them out to the class. That was how the resentment started.

"After we left the room," Tommy remembered, "that's when I first heard them talking. And they didn't care I could hear."

My guess is that from some time before he did that elephant, Tommy had had the feeling he wasn't keeping up–that his painting in particular was like that of students much younger than him–and he'd been covering up the best he could by doing deliberately childish pictures. But after the elephant painting, the whole thing had been brought into the open, and now everyone was watching to see what he did next. It seems he did make an effort for a while, but he'd no sooner have started on something, there'd be sneers and giggles all around him. In fact, the harder he tried, the more laughable his efforts turned out. So before long Tommy had gone back to his original defence, producing work that seemed deliberately childish, work that said he couldn't care less. From there, the thing had got deeper and deeper.

For a while he'd only had to suffer during art lessons–though that was often enough, because we did a lot of art in the Juniors. But then it grew bigger. He got left out of games, boys refused to sit next to him at dinner, or pretended not to hear if he said anything in his dorm after lights-out. At first it wasn't so relentless. Months could go by without incident, he'd think the whole thing was behind him, then something he did–or one of his enemies, like Arthur H.–would get it all going again.

I'm not sure when the big temper tantrums started. My own memory of it is that Tommy was always known for his temper, even in the Infants, but he claimed to me they only began after the teasing got bad. Anyway, it was those temper tantrums that really got people going, escalating everything, and around the time I'm talking about–the summer of our Senior 2, when we were thirteen–that was when the persecution reached its peak.

Then it all stopped, not overnight, but rapidly enough. I was, as I say, watching the situation closely around then, so I saw the signs before most of the others. It started with a period–it might have been a month, maybe longer–when the pranks went on pretty steadily, but Tommy failed to lose his temper. Sometimes I could see he was close to it, but he somehow controlled himself; other times, he'd quietly shrug, or react like he hadn't noticed a thing. At first these responses caused disappointment; maybe people were resentful, even, like he'd let them down. Then gradually, people got bored and the pranks became more half-hearted, until one day it struck me there hadn't been any for over a week.

This wouldn't necessarily have been so significant by itself, but I'd spotted other changes. Little things, like Alexander J. and Peter N. walking across the courtyard with him towards the fields, the three of them chatting quite naturally; a subtle but clear difference in people's voices when his name got mentioned. Then once, towards the end of an afternoon break, a group of us were sitting on the grass quite close to the South Playing Field where the boys, as usual, were playing their football. I was joining in our conversation, but keeping an eye on Tommy, who I noticed was right at the heart of the game. At one point he got tripped, and picking himself up, placed the ball on the ground to take the free kick himself. As the boys spread out in anticipation, I saw Arthur H.–one of his biggest tormentors–a few yards behind Tommy's back, begin mimicking him, doing a daft version of the way Tommy was standing over the ball, hands on hips. I watched carefully, but none of the others took up Arthur's cue. They must all have seen, because all eyes were looking towards Tommy, waiting for his kick, and Arthur was right behind him–but no one was interested. Tommy floated the ball across the grass, the game went on, and Arthur H. didn't try anything else.

I was pleased about all these developments, but also mystified. There'd been no real change in Tommy's work–his reputation for "creativity" was as low as ever. I could see that an end to the tantrums was a big help, but what seemed to be the key factor was harder to put your finger on. There was something about Tommy himself–the way he carried himself, the way he looked people in the face and talked in his open, good-natured way–that was different from before, and which had in turn changed the attitudes of those around him. But what had brought all this on wasn't clear.

I was mystified, and decided to probe him a bit the next time we could talk in private. The chance came along before long, when I was lining up for lunch and spotted him a few places ahead in the queue.

I suppose this might sound odd, but at Hailsham, the lunch queue was one of the better places to have a private talk. It was something to do with the acoustics in the Great Hall; all the hubbub and the high ceilings meant that so long as you lowered your voices, stood quite close, and made sure your neighbours were deep in their own chat, you had a fair chance of not being overheard. In any case, we weren't exactly spoilt for choice. "Quiet" places were often the worst, because there was always someone likely to be passing within earshot. And as soon as you looked like you were trying to sneak off for a secret talk, the whole place seemed to sense it within minutes, and you'd have no chance.

So when I saw Tommy a few places ahead of me, I waved him over–the rule being that though you couldn't jump the queue going forwards it was fine to go back. He came over with a delighted smile, and we stood together for a moment without saying much–not out of awkwardness, but because we were waiting for any interest aroused by Tommy's moving back to fade. Then I said to him:

"You seem much happier these days, Tommy. Things seem to be going much better for you."

"You notice everything, don't you, Kath?" He said this completely without sarcasm. "Yeah, everything's all right. I'm getting on all right."

"So what's happened? Did you find God or something?"

"God?" Tommy was lost for a second. Then he laughed and said: "Oh, I see. You're talking about me not... getting so angry."

"Not just that, Tommy. You've turned things around for yourself. I've been watching. So that's why I was asking."

Tommy shrugged. "I've grown up a bit, I suppose. And maybe everyone else has too. Can't keep on with the same stuff all the time. Gets boring."

I said nothing, but just kept looking right at him, until he gave another little laugh and said: "Kath, you're so nosy. Okay, I suppose there is something. Something that happened. If you want, I'll tell you."

"Well, go on then."

"I'll tell you, Kath, but you mustn't spread it, all right? A couple of months back, I had this talk with Miss Lucy. And I felt much better afterwards. It's hard to explain. But she said something, and it all felt much better."

"So what did she say?"

"Well... The thing is, it might sound strange. It did to me at first. What she said was that if I didn't want to be creative, if I really didn't feel like it, that was perfectly all right. Nothing wrong with it, she said."

"That's what she told you?"

Tommy nodded, but I was already turning away.

"That's just rubbish, Tommy. If you're going to play stupid games, I can't be bothered."

I was genuinely angry, because I thought he was lying to me, just when I deserved to be taken into his confidence. Spotting a girl I knew a few places back, I went over to her, leaving Tommy standing. I could see he was bewildered and crestfallen, but after the months I'd spent worrying about him, I felt betrayed, and didn't care how he felt. I chatted with my friend–I think it was Matilda–as cheerfully as possible, and hardly looked his way for the rest of the time we were in the queue.

But as I was carrying my plate to the tables, Tommy came up behind me and said quickly:

"Kath, I wasn't trying to pull your leg, if that's what you think. It's what happened. I'll tell you about it if you give me half a chance."

"Don't talk rubbish, Tommy."

"Kath, I'll tell you about it. I'll be down at the pond after lunch. If you come down there, I'll tell you."

I gave him a reproachful look and walked off without responding, but already, I suppose, I'd begun to entertain the possibility that he wasn't, after all, making it up about Miss Lucy. And by the time I sat down with my friends, I was trying to figure out how I could sneak off afterwards down to the pond without getting everyone curious.

Chapter Three

The pond lay to the south of the house. To get there you went out the back entrance, and down the narrow twisting path, pushing past the overgrown bracken that, in the early autumn, would still be blocking your way. Or if there were no guardians around, you could take a short cut through the rhubarb patch. Anyway, once you came out to the pond, you'd find a tranquil atmosphere waiting, with ducks and bulrushes and pond-weed. It wasn't, though, a good place for a discreet conversation–not nearly as good as the lunch queue. For a start you could be clearly seen from the house. And the way the sound travelled across the water was hard to predict; if people wanted to eavesdrop, it was the easiest thing to walk down the outer path and crouch in the bushes on the other side of the pond. But since it had been me that had cut him off in the lunch queue, I supposed I had to make the best of it. It was well into October by then, but the sun was out that day and I decided I could just about make out I'd gone strolling aimlessly down there and happened to come across Tommy.

Maybe because I was keen to keep up this impression–though I'd no idea if anyone was actually watching–I didn't try and sit down when I eventually found him seated on a large flat rock not far from the water's edge. It must have been a Friday or a weekend, because I remember we had on our own clothes. I don't remember exactly what Tommy was wearing–probably one of the raggy football shirts he wore even when the weather was chilly–but I definitely had on the maroon track suit top that zipped up the front, which I'd got at a Sale in Senior 1. I walked round him and stood with my back to the water, facing the house, so that I'd see if people started gathering at the windows. Then for a few minutes we talked about nothing in particular, just like the lunch-queue business hadn't happened. I'm not sure if it was for Tommy's benefit, or for any onlookers', but I'd kept my posture looking very provisional, and at one point made a move to carry on with my stroll. I saw a kind of panic cross Tommy's face then, and I immediately felt sorry to have teased him, even though I hadn't meant to. So I said, like I'd just remembered:

"By the way, what was that you were saying earlier on? About Miss Lucy telling you something?"

"Oh..." Tommy gazed past me to the pond, pretending too this was a topic he'd forgotten all about. "Miss Lucy. Oh that."

Miss Lucy was the most sporting of the guardians at Hailsham, though you might not have guessed it from her appearance. She had a squat, almost bulldoggy figure, and her odd black hair, when it grew, grew upwards so it never covered her ears or chunky neck. But she was really strong and fit, and even when we were older, most of us–even the boys–couldn't keep up with her on a fields run. She was superb at hockey, and could even hold her own with the Senior boys on the football pitch. I remember watching once when James B. tried to trip her as she went past him with the ball, and he was the one sent flying instead. When we'd been in the Juniors, she'd never been someone like Miss Geraldine who you turned to when you were upset. In fact, she didn't tend to speak much to us when we were younger. It was only in the Seniors, really, we'd started to appreciate her brisk style.

"You were saying something," I said to Tommy. "Something about Miss Lucy telling you it was all right not to be creative."

"She did say something like that. She said I shouldn't worry. Not mind what other people were saying. A couple of months ago now. Maybe longer."

Over at the house, a few Juniors had stopped at one of the upstairs windows and were watching us. But I now crouched down in front of Tommy, no longer pretending anything.

"Tommy, that's a funny thing for her to say. Are you sure you got it right?"

"Of course I got it right." His voice lowered suddenly. "She didn't just say it once. We were in her room and she gave me a whole talk about it."

When she'd first asked him to come to her study after Art Appreciation, Tommy explained, he'd expected yet another lecture about how he should try harder–the sort of thing he'd had already from various guardians, including Miss Emily herself. But as they were walking from the house towards the Orangery–where the guardians had their living quarters–Tommy began to get an inkling this was something different. Then, once he was seated in Miss Lucy's easy chair–she'd remained standing by the window–she asked him to tell her the whole story, as he saw it, of what had been happening to him. So Tommy had begun going through it all. But before he was even half way she'd suddenly broken in and started to talk herself. She'd known a lot of students, she'd said, who'd for a long time found it very difficult to be creative: painting, drawing, poetry, none of it going right for years. Then one day they'd turned a corner and blossomed. It was quite possible Tommy was one of these.

Tommy had heard all of this before, but there was something about Miss Lucy's manner that made him keep listening hard.

"I could tell," he told me, "she was leading up to something. Something different."

Sure enough, she was soon saying things Tommy found difficult to follow. But she kept repeating it until eventually he began to understand. If Tommy had genuinely tried, she was saying, but he just couldn't be very creative, then that was quite all right, he wasn't to worry about it. It was wrong for anyone, whether they were students or guardians, to punish him for it, or put pressure on him in any way. It simply wasn't his fault. And when Tommy had protested it was all very well Miss Lucy saying this, but everyone did think it was his fault, she'd given a sigh and looked out of her window. Then she'd said:

"It may not help you much. But just you remember this. There's at least one person here at Hailsham who believes otherwise. At least one person who believes you're a very good student, as good as any she's ever come across, never mind how creative you are."

"She wasn't having you on, was she?" I asked Tommy. "It wasn't some clever way of telling you off?"

"It definitely wasn't anything like that. Anyway..." For the first time he seemed worried about being overheard and glanced over his shoulder towards the house. The Juniors at the window had lost interest and gone; some girls from our year were walking towards the pavilion, but they were still a good way off. Tommy turned back to me and said almost in a whisper:

"Anyway, when she said all this, she was shaking."

"What do you mean, shaking?"

"Shaking. With rage. I could see her. She was furious. But furious deep inside."

"Who at?"

"I wasn't sure. Not at me anyway, that was the most important thing!" He gave a laugh, then became serious again. "I don't know who she was angry with. But she was angry all right."

I stood up again because my calves were aching. "It's pretty weird, Tommy."

"Funny thing is, this talk with her, it did help. Helped a lot. When you were saying earlier on, about how things seemed better for me now. Well, it's because of that. Because afterwards, thinking about what she'd said, I realised she was right, that it wasn't my fault. Okay, I hadn't handled it well. But deep down, it wasn't my fault. That's what made the difference. And whenever I felt rocky about it, I'd catch sight of her walking about, or I'd be in one of her lessons, and she wouldn't say anything about our talk, but I'd look at her, and she'd sometimes see me and give me a little nod. And that's all I needed. You were asking earlier if something had happened. Well, that's what happened. But Kath, listen, don't breathe a word to anyone about this, right?"

I nodded, but asked: "Did she make you promise that?"

"No, no, she didn't make me promise anything. But you're not to breathe a word. You've got to really promise."

"All right." The girls heading for the pavilion had spotted me and were waving and calling. I waved back and said to Tommy: "I'd better go. We can talk more about it soon."

But Tommy ignored this. "There's something else," he went on. "Something else she said I can't quite figure out. I was going to ask you about it. She said we weren't being taught enough, something like that."

"Taught enough? You mean she thinks we should be studying even harder than we are?"

"No, I don't think she meant that. What she was talking about was, you know, about us. What's going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that."

"But we have been taught about all that," I said. "I wonder what she meant. Does she think there are things we haven't been told yet?"

Tommy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think she meant it like that. She just thinks we aren't taught about it enough. Because she said she'd a good mind to talk to us about it herself."

"About what exactly?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I got it all wrong, Kath, I don't know. Maybe she was meaning something else completely, something else to do with me not being creative. I don't really understand it."

Tommy was looking at me as though he expected me to come up with an

answer. I went on thinking for a few seconds, then said:

"Tommy, think back carefully. You said she got angry..."

"Well, that's what it looked like. She was quiet, but she was shaking."

"All right, whatever. Let's say she got angry. Was it when she got angry she started to say this other stuff? About how we weren't taught enough about donations and the rest of it?"

"I suppose so..."

"Now, Tommy, think. Why did she bring it up? She's talking about you and you not creating. Then suddenly she starts up about this other stuff. What's the link? Why did she bring up donations? What's that got to do with you being creative?"

"I don't know. There must have been some reason, I suppose. Maybe one thing reminded her of the other. Kath, you're getting really worked up about this yourself now."

I laughed, because he was right: I'd been frowning, completely lost in my thoughts. The fact was, my mind was going in various directions at once. And Tommy's account of his talk with Miss Lucy had reminded me of something, perhaps a whole series of things, little incidents from the past to do with Miss Lucy that had puzzled me at the time.

"It's just that..." I stopped and sighed. "I can't quite put it right, not even to myself. But all this, what you're saying, it sort of fits with a lot of other things that are puzzling. I keep thinking about all these things. Like why Madame comes and takes away our best pictures. What's that for exactly?"

"It's for the Gallery."

"But what is her gallery? She keeps coming here and taking away our best work. She must have stacks of it by now. I asked Miss Geraldine once how long Madame's been coming here, and she said for as long as Hailsham's been here. What is this gallery? Why should she have a gallery of things done by us?"

"Maybe she sells them. Outside, out there, they sell everything."

I shook my head. "That can't be it. It's got something to do with what Miss Lucy said to you. About us, about how one day we'll start giving donations. I don't know why, but I've had this feeling for some time now, that it's all linked in, though I can't figure out how. I'll have to go now, Tommy. Let's not tell anyone yet, about what we've been saying."

"No. And don't tell anyone about Miss Lucy."

"But will you tell me if she says anything else to you like that?"

Tommy nodded, then glanced around him again. "Like you say, you'd better go, Kath. Someone's going to hear us soon."

The gallery Tommy and I were discussing was something we'd all of us grown up with. Everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew for sure that it did. I'm sure I was pretty typical in not being able to remember how or when I'd first heard about it. Certainly, it hadn't been from the guardians: they never mentioned the Gallery, and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence.

I'd suppose now it was something passed down through the different generations of Hailsham students. I remember a time when I could only have been five or six, sitting at a low table beside Amanda C., our hands clammy with modelling clay. I can't remember if there were other children with us, or which guardian was in charge. All I remember is Amanda C.–who was a year older than me–looking at what I was making and exclaiming: "That's really, really good, Kathy! That's so good! I bet that'll get in the Gallery!"

I must by then have already known about the Gallery, because I remember the excitement and pride when she said that–and then the next moment, thinking to myself: "That's ridiculous. None of us are good enough for the Gallery yet."

As we got older, we went on talking about the Gallery. If you wanted to praise someone's work, you'd say: "That's good enough for the Gallery." And after we discovered irony, whenever we came across any laughably bad work, we'd go: "Oh yes! Straight to the Gallery with that one!"

But did we really believe in the Gallery? Today, I'm not sure. As I've said, we never mentioned it to the guardians and looking back, it seems to me this was a rule we imposed on ourselves, as much as anything the guardians had decided. There's an instance I can remember from when we were about eleven. We were in Room 7 on a sunny winter's morning. We'd just finished Mr. Roger's class, and a few of us had stayed on to chat with him. We were sitting up on our desks, and I can't remember exactly what we were talking about, but Mr. Roger, as usual, was making us laugh and laugh. Then Carole H.

had said, through her giggles: "You might even get it picked for the Gallery!" She immediately put her hand over her mouth with an "oops!" and the atmosphere remained light-hearted; but we all knew, Mr. Roger included, that she'd made a mistake. Not a disaster, exactly: it would have been much the same had one of us let slip a rude word, or used a guardian's nickname to his or her face. Mr. Roger smiled indulgently, as though to say: "Let it pass, we'll pretend you never said that," and we carried on as before.

If for us the Gallery remained in a hazy realm, what was solid enough fact was Madame's turning up usually twice–sometimes three or four times–each year to select from our best work. We called her "Madame" because she was French or Belgian–there was a dispute as to which–and that was what the guardians always called her. She was a tall, narrow woman with short hair, probably quite young still, though at the time we wouldn't have thought of her as such. She always wore a sharp grey suit, and unlike the gardeners, unlike the drivers who brought in our supplies–unlike virtually anyone else who came in from outside–she wouldn't talk to us and kept us at a distance with her chilly look. For years we thought of her as "snooty," but then one night, around when we were eight, Ruth came up with another theory.

"She's scared of us," she declared.

We were lying in the dark in our dorm. In the Juniors, we were fifteen to a dorm, so didn't tend to have the sort of long intimate conversations we did once we got to the Senior dorms. But most of what became our "group" had beds close together by then, and we were already getting the habit of talking into the night.

"What do you mean, scared of us?" someone asked. "How can she be scared of us? What could we do to her?"

"I don't know," Ruth said. "I don't know, but I'm sure she is. I used to think she was just snooty, but it's something else, I'm sure of it now. Madame's scared of us."

We argued about this on and off for the next few days. Most of us didn't agree with Ruth, but then that just made her all the more determined to prove she was right. So in the end we settled on a plan to put her theory to the test the next time Madame came to Hailsham.

Although Madame's visits were never announced, it was always pretty obvious when she was due. The lead-up to her arrival began weeks before, with the guardians sifting through all our work–our paintings, sketches, pottery, all our essays and poems. This usually went on for at least a fortnight, by the end of which four or five items from each Junior and Senior year would have ended up in the billiards room. The billiards room would get closed during this period, but if you stood on the low wall of the terrace outside, you'd be able to see through the windows the haul of stuff getting larger and larger. Once the guardians started laying it out neatly, on tables and easels, like a miniature version of one of our Exchanges, then you knew Madame would be coming within a day or two.

That autumn I'm now talking about, we needed to know not just the day, but the precise moment Madame turned up, since she often stayed no longer than an hour or two. So as soon as we saw the stuff getting displayed in the billiards room, we decided to take turns keeping look-out.

This was a task made much easier by the way the grounds were laid out. Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides. That meant that from almost any of the classroom windows in the main house–and even from the pavilion–you had a good view of the long narrow road that came down across the fields and arrived at the main gate. The gate itself was still a fair distance off, and any vehicle would then have to take the gravelled drive, going past shrubs and flowerbeds, before at last reaching the courtyard in front of the main house. Days could sometimes go by without us seeing a vehicle coming down that narrow road, and the ones that did were usually vans or lorries bringing supplies, gardeners or workmen. A car was a rarity, and the sight of one in the distance was sometimes enough to cause bedlam during a class.

The afternoon Madame's car was spotted coming across the fields, it was windy and sunny, with a few storm clouds starting to gather. We were in Room 9–on the first floor at the front of the house–and when the whisper went around, poor Mr. Frank, who was trying to teach us spelling, couldn't understand why we'd suddenly got so restless.

The plan we'd come up with to test Ruth's theory was very simple: we–the six of us in on it–would lie in wait for Madame somewhere, then "swarm out" all around her, all at once. We'd all remain perfectly civilised and just go on our way, but if we timed it right, and she was taken off-guard, we'd see–Ruth insisted–that she really was afraid of us.

Our main worry was that we just wouldn't get an opportunity during the short time she was at Hailsham. But as Mr. Frank's class drew to an end, we could see Madame, directly below in the courtyard, parking her car. We had a hurried conference out on the landing, then followed the rest of the class down the stairs and loitered just inside the main doorway. We could see out into the bright courtyard, where Madame was still sitting behind the wheel,

rummaging in her briefcase. Eventually she emerged from the car and came towards us, dressed in her usual grey suit, her briefcase held tightly to herself in both arms. At a signal from Ruth we all sauntered out, moving straight for her, but like we were all in a dream. Only when she came to a stiff halt did we each murmur: "Excuse me, Miss," and separate.

I'll never forget the strange change that came over us the next instant. Until that point, this whole thing about Madame had been, if not a joke exactly, very much a private thing we'd wanted to settle among ourselves. We hadn't thought much about how Madame herself, or anyone else, would come into it. What I mean is, until then, it had been a pretty light-hearted matter, with a bit of a dare element to it. And it wasn't even as though Madame did anything other than what we predicted she'd do: she just froze and waited for us to pass by. She didn't shriek, or even let out a gasp. But we were all so keenly tuned in to picking up her response, and that's probably why it had such an effect on us. As she came to a halt, I glanced quickly at her face–as did the others, I'm sure. And I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it: it was like we'd walked from the sun right into chilly shade. Ruth had been right: Madame was afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how we would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders.

By the time we'd crossed the courtyard and reached the grass, we were a very different group from the one that had stood about excitedly waiting for Madame to get out of her car. Hannah looked ready to burst into tears. Even Ruth looked really shaken. Then one of us–I think it was Laura–said:

"If she doesn't like us, why does she want our work? Why doesn't she just leave us alone? Who asks her to come here anyway?"

No one answered, and we carried on over to the pavilion, not saying anything more about what had happened.

Thinking back now, I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves–about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside–but hadn't yet understood what any of it meant. I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings. Because it doesn't really matter how well your guardians try to prepare you: all the talks, videos, discussions, warnings, none of that can really bring it home. Not when you're eight years old, and you're all together in a place like Hailsham; when you've got guardians like the ones we had; when the gardeners and the delivery men joke and laugh with you and call you "sweetheart."

All the same, some of it must go in somewhere. It must go in, because by the time a moment like that comes along, there's a part of you that's been waiting. Maybe from as early as when you're five or six, there's been a whisper going at the back of your head, saying: "One day, maybe not so long from now, you'll get to know how it feels." So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you–of how you were brought into this world and why–and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange.