

Chapter One

‘Is there anything that’s puzzled you? Something you’ve never been able to find an answer for?’ It was a simple question but an unexpected one and Levi frowned and glanced up at his uncle Seymour while he considered a reply. He would later come to reflect that it was on this day, and with this question that his childhood truly died.

The pair were walking along one of the narrow lanes that led out of town. The dull, red brick walls of West Street’s old terraced cottages were behind them and the quiet lane, flanked by wild verges and leafless hedgerows, snaked on ahead between flat, dun coloured fields.

‘C’mon, it wasn’t a trick question,’ pushed his uncle, smiling down at him. ‘Anything.’

Levi skipped up to keep pace with his uncle’s long legs and shrugged his rucksack higher, pulling the straps tight to his chest. ‘I suppose so,’ he said, the quickening breeze whipping his blond hair.

‘Such as?’

‘Such as, how come young birds leap out of a nest before they know how to fly? That’s one.’

Seymour nodded in approval. ‘And a good one. Why do you think?’

‘No idea, that’s why it’s a puzzle.’

Seymour laughed, a deep belly laugh, one that always made Levi feel good when he heard it. ‘Well,’ the man started, pausing a moment, ‘how will the bird know it can fly if it doesn’t try? Surely it has to leap into the unknown to make such a discovery.’

Levi remained silent as he considered his uncle’s words. It was true, he guessed, the young bird would have to leap at some point. He was thankful that he was a thirteen-year-old school-boy and not a bird. He didn’t think he’d be brave enough, and would have to stay in the nest all his life.

‘Okay, while you mull that one over,’ began his uncle, interrupting his thoughts, ‘here’s one that’s puzzled me for years. C’mon, we can talk as we walk.’ Seymour led the way around a bend and onto a side road. This was even narrower, its muddy verges blurring the lane’s edges as though nature was gradually eating into the tarmac, reclaiming the land once more.

Levi’s mind drifted as his uncle’s voice faded into the background. He was pleased in a way that his sister, Poppy, had decided not to come on the walk with them. Yes, he got on well with his sister – after all, following the death of their mum, and their dad had suffered a breakdown and gone to stay with friends, to ‘get himself together’ people said – they needed each other. Besides, he liked her company. But, he also enjoyed having Seymour to himself. It didn’t happen often. Besides, Levi reflected, sudden sadness constricting his throat, Seymour reminded him of his dad. He turned and glanced back towards the distant town.

Thin grey tendrils now hung from the dark and swollen belly of the clouds, reaching down to the rooftops. The picture reminded him of an old painting he’d once seen; a grim skyline of dark mills and tenements, stained by a thick pall of smog. He jumped as Seymour tapped his shoulder.

‘You’ve not listened to a word I’ve been saying, have you?’ Seymour said.

‘Sorry, Uncle Seymour,’ replied Levi, forcing a tight smile.

‘Come on, lad, you’ve a face like a slapped backside.’

‘Sorry.’

Seymour stopped and looked down at Levi, regarding the young boy’s sorry demeanour. ‘Look,’ he began kindly, ‘I know things have been ... tough ... for you, and for Poppy.’ He paused, framing his next words carefully. ‘I know about the school bullies and –’

Levi twisted sharply and scowled at his uncle, his face colouring. ‘Poppy,’ he said, sourly.

‘Yes. Poppy. Your sister cares about you. As do I. I’ve heard all about Barry Clark and his cronies, but you’re with me now. Enjoy today ... let’s live for the moment and leave past events where they belong.’

Levi shrugged. ‘Sorry, Uncle.’

‘No need. And I think if we’re to be gentlemen of the road for a while we may dispense with the ‘Uncle’ bit. I don’t call you Nephew Levi, do I now?’ With that, Seymour turned and resumed walking, Levi stepping into line beside him.

Levi glanced up and flashed Seymour a genuine smile. The unexpected lack of formality heightened his sense of adventure. They were, indeed, explorers on a mysterious quest; comrades in arms.

‘When I was your age,’ began Seymour, ‘I used to come out here with my mates to the old abbey down the road.’ Levi craned his neck as he searched among the trees ahead. ‘Oh, it’s a way yet,’ Seymour added. ‘Anyway, we’d spend hours there, hiding, seeking and such like.’

Levi knew little of his uncle’s past and felt privileged to hear this story.

‘Well,’ his uncle went on, ‘high up on the outer wall there’s this door. Old, dark and mysterious. And we lads soon realised we hadn’t seen it on the inside. I mean, we knew the place like the backs of our hands by then, and we’d never seen that door from within. And that was it ... so began a quest to find the hidden door.’ Seymour paused theatrically for effect, deliberately building the tension. The wind was whipping them fiercely by then. Small birds darted here and there, frantically seeking shelter. Levi tugged his collar up.

‘Go on then,’ he said, impatiently. ‘Did you find it?’

‘I’m coming to that. In all the years that followed, all the trips to the abbey, the many searches up narrow staircases and down musty old passages, we never found it. I even brought your dad a couple of times, but even Paul was flummoxed. That, you see, was my puzzle – and I was determined to discover the answer.’

As they walked, the road bent sharply once again, this time to the

left, skirting the edge of a large, open field. Beyond this stood a line of trees, oak and beech mostly, their ancient limbs twisted like the gnarled fingers of old men. Behind them loomed a tall and imposing limestone building.

‘There she is,’ said Seymour, pointing. ‘The abbey itself is nothing more than a crumbling ruin yon side. What you see there is the gatehouse. Splendid, isn’t it.’

It certainly is, thought Levi. He couldn’t understand how he could have lived so close for so long and never seen the place. He also felt a twinge of regret that no one had brought him out here before now, to play in the ruin as his uncle had done.

‘Did you discover it?’ he asked, keen to hear the answer to Seymour’s puzzle.

‘Childhood memories faded,’ Seymour said, gazing towards the distant ruin, ‘buried by the demands of maturity – until earlier this year when I was travelling this road to fetch timber from the wood-yard down on the Haven.’

Levi’s interest suddenly peaked. *Earlier this year*. One of his own puzzles immediately sprang to mind. His uncle had mysteriously disappeared earlier that year, returning after three weeks, without a word of explanation about where he’d gone. With mounting anticipation, he felt sure he was about to discover the missing piece to that puzzle. Seymour went on.

‘One weekend I –’

‘In July?’ interrupted Levi.

‘About that time, yes,’ nodded Seymour. ‘I decided to have another go, but again I failed. Then, I realised, there was another door on that front wall, at right-angles to the mystery one, at the end of a narrow ledge. I realised that I knew where I’d seen that on the inside and made for it.’

‘And what then?’

‘There was a huge padlock on the door but, peeping through a hole

in the timbers, I could see my door. I tell you, Levi, it was tantalisingly close. It was then that I realised that the padlock hasp was open. This door wasn't locked.'

Levi could stand no more and decided to fill in. 'So, you opened the door, stepped onto the ledge and then through your mystery door – and you were gone for three weeks.'

There was a long pause. High above them, in the uppermost branches of an over-reaching oak, a huge black crow 'cawed' at them, its raucous call dark and menacing. Seymour finally spoke, his voice seemingly lower than before.

'That's right, lad. You see, this wasn't just a doorway in an old abbey – and if I told you now where it led me, you'd never believe it.'

Levi strode out in an effort to match his uncle's speed as they hurried towards the abbey. He considered his uncle's words. If the door *didn't* simply open into the building, then where could it possibly lead? This surely was one of Seymour's jokes. He felt sure that, once he was there, he would find that the mysterious door was nothing more than that – a door. But, if that were so, why was his uncle trekking out here to an old dilapidated ruin?

Levi trudged on, head down, watching the surface of the road pass beneath his feet as questions swam around his brain. Rather than satisfy his curiosity concerning his uncle's disappearance, Seymour's tale had only added to the mystery. He glanced up.

They had skirted the field edge and the stark and brooding façade of Thornley Abbey's gatehouse now reared before them. He immediately sought the door Seymour had spoken of. Sure enough, high in the wall and right of centre was the timber door. Even at this distance Levi could clearly see a large stone lintel above the door, engraved with ornate carvings. A thrill of excitement ran through him and he gave a slight,

involuntary gasp.

‘Now do you believe me?’ asked Seymour.

Levi shrugged. ‘I never doubted there was a door, but what else is there to believe? You’ve told me nothing.’ He sneaked a sidelong glance at his uncle, hoping he would now explain all. Instead, he saw Seymour was smiling down at him, knowingly.

‘And nor will I,’ Seymour replied. ‘Like I said, you’d never believe me if I told you. You’ll have to find out for yourself.’ He nodded towards the looming, dark clouds. ‘Thing is, I think we should get a move on if we’re to escape a drenching.’

As Levi suddenly realised the temperature had plunged, he felt the first icy plop of rain on his exposed neck. Already, Seymour was several paces ahead of him, trotting briskly, his pack bouncing on his back. ‘C’mon quick, lad, here it comes.’

When it hit, the rain lashed at them with shocking ferocity, whipping up leaves and twigs and casting them about like missiles. Levi needed no further prompting and dashed towards the abbey. He stumbled on, bent double with eyes half closed, darts of rain stinging his skin and penetrating his clothes. In no time at all his hair was sopping wet, slick mats of it plastered to his face and neck. Ahead of him Seymour’s tan jacket had changed to a muddy brown and rivulets of rain streamed off his pack, adding to the deluge that bounced off the road, drenching their shoes and socks.

The limestone walls of the abbey, previously the mellow colour of old cornstalks, now appeared dark and grim beyond a shimmering curtain. The rain flowed unchecked down the neck of Levi’s jacket and soaked through his clothes in an instant, chilling him to the core. Just as he was beginning to believe his blood had frozen in his veins he saw Seymour stoop to enter a low opening in the ancient monument’s fence. Several foot-squelching seconds later he, too, entered the abbey grounds and dashed for the archway ahead. Once there, freezing, wet and utterly miserable, he stepped out of the rain and into the shelter of the

building's entrance.

Here a large ornately carved arch loomed above him. The remains of two colossal gates hung on massive hinges, their timbers held open by thick rusting chains bolted to the walls. To the right of one of the gates was a narrow doorway and it was to here Seymour was heading.

'C'mon, it's a tad drier in here,' Seymour called, stooping to avoid the low stone lintel.

'Flippin' well wants to be,' Levi replied.

Once Levi reached the door he saw that the ancient steps, cold and narrow, coiled upwards out of sight. Already, Seymour had disappeared round the first tight bend. Levi paused a second, considering the uneven treads. Each step was smooth, dished at its leading edge like a pillow after a long night's sleep.

Seymour's voice echoed down to him as though from a great distance. 'C'mon, lad, I don't wait for sluggards, you know.'

Levi stepped up, reaching for the thin iron railing bracketed precariously to the wall. His eyes adjusted to the gloom and he followed the line of curving stones as the staircase corkscrewed higher and higher into the tower. He was just feeling the first dull ache of fatigue in his legs when a chill breeze swept down from somewhere above him.

'S-Seymour, you there?' The panic in Levi's voice bounced back at him in the confined space. His echo was the only reply. Involuntarily he tightened his fingers around the railing and stared ahead, straining to hear any sound. Someone had chiselled what appeared to be Roman numerals into one of the wall stones in front of him. As he stared at the medieval carving the walls seemed to close in on him, the stones appearing to bulge and ripple at the edges of his vision. His cheeks cooled instantly as the blood drained from his face and, with buckling knees, he began to sway.

Levi did not need to look down to see how steeply the curving staircase dropped away behind him – did not have to see the hard, unforgiving edges of the stone steps to realise a fall from here would be

appalling. He snatched at the railing with his free hand and held on tight.

‘UNCLE SEYMOUR.’

Levi’s shrill cry carried up the staircase and echoed along unseen corridors and through hidden chambers. Then, as the yell pealed into the distance, Seymour’s friendly face appeared before him, brows creased in concern.

‘What is it?’ Seymour’s eyes widened once he recognised Levi’s distress. He rushed down to him. ‘Good Lord, what is it? You’re as white as a bedsheet.’ He pried Levi’s clenched fingers from the railing and took the boy’s hand in his own, rubbing it briskly. Levi instantly felt the warmth of his uncle’s hands and his panic swiftly receded.

‘Is it the staircase?’ Seymour asked him. ‘Aye, I bet that’s it. There’s a lot of folk who don’t like these – makes them feel squiffy. Sorry, I should have asked you first. You okay to go on?’

Levi nodded. The walls were rock-solid once again, and the moody silence had diminished. ‘I think I must have panicked, that’s all.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ Seymour said, giving Levi’s hand a last squeeze, ‘we’re nearly there. Just around this bend and we’re into the main hall. No more stairs then.’

Levi followed his uncle upwards and, several steps later, was relieved to see a side stair branch off from the main spiral, leading to a small landing. Seymour smiled down at him.

‘There, what did I say?’ He led Levi up to the landing and stooped under a low entrance to step into the room beyond. Levi followed his uncle, stepping over the ancient threshold into a wide, dimly lit space. The sound of their feet on the floorboards was loud, booming around the empty hall.

To Levi’s left was a huge, leaded glass window. Muted daylight filtered through its grimy panes casting pale bands of light into the room, painting the floor with a dull mosaic. To the right, several yards away at the other end of the hall, was the largest fireplace he’d ever seen. He

was sure that the dining table from home would fit comfortably in there, and the four chairs, too, most probably. Several doorways opened onto narrow, branching corridors that were dimly lit by slender arrow slits. He could see that this would have been the perfect place for hide and seek.

Seymour was already making for one of the narrow openings opposite. Not wishing to be left alone anywhere else today Levi quickly stepped into line behind him. Together they crossed the hall and entered the slender passage, branching left. The air here was close and musty, reminding Levi of the small under-stairs cupboard back home. He hurried to keep close to his uncle, who was stooping along the low passage, his shoulders brushing both walls.

‘I guess chaps were smaller them days,’ Seymour said, chuckling. ‘Not to worry though, not far now.’

Not far, thought Levi. *Not far to where?* All he wanted to do was get out of his wet clothes, have a good bath and get warm again. Something told him that it would be a long while before he could do any of those things. Levi collided with his uncle’s back. Seymour had stopped suddenly and was pointing to the wall ahead.

‘Door’s somewhere here,’ he said, tapping one of the stones to their right. ‘On the outer wall. The other one – our access onto the ledge – is just along there.’ He leaned back allowing Levi to see. The passage stretched on to a dark chamber at its end. Halfway down Levi could see a narrow opening in the right hand wall. He guessed the other door was somewhere down there. Seymour turned and scuttled along the cramped passage, laughing childishly now. Infected by his uncle’s mood, Levi skipped into line behind him, grinning. This was it. Their adventure was about to begin.

The opening Levi had seen was nothing more than a small, square chamber set into the passage. In one of its three walls was a large, black door studded with formidable square-headed bolts. Half way up the door, on one side, was a thick, iron hasp. Sure enough, the brass padlock

hanging from it was open. Seymour turned and grinned at him.

‘Here, have a look through this,’ he said, pointing to a knot-hole half way up the door. Levi squatted and peered through the hole.

The door opened onto the side of a narrow ledge. The storm that had chased them to the abbey had blown over, the rain stopping as quickly as it had begun. The ledge was mottled with mosses and lichen. Levi followed it as it ran directly away from him, the gatehouse wall to the right. Seymour’s mystery door was only six feet away. While Levi was looking, a pigeon landed on the ledge and he could see that, with its tail brushing against the medieval stonework, the bird’s head overlooked the ledge’s rim. He stood up, his mouth suddenly dry.

‘So I’m expected to walk along a shelf one pigeon wide,’ he said. He was pleased the small hole had prevented him seeing the drop to the ground.

‘Ready for this?’ said Seymour, tightening his pack’s straps.

‘You’re mad, Uncle Seymour,’ replied Levi, his mouth hanging open in disbelief at what his uncle was now expecting him to do.

‘That’s been said many times.’

Levi continued to stare in bewilderment. Somehow he did not find that revelation to be the least bit encouraging. Ignoring Levi’s doubts Seymour removed the padlock and pushed the door open. The startled pigeon launched itself into space, its wings flapping loudly like flags in a gale.

‘Now look, I’ll go first. Do what I do and be careful, you’ll be fine.’

Levi stepped back a pace. ‘What if I fall?’

‘You won’t.’

‘What if I do? I’ll be jam. Down there,’ he said, pointing but refusing to look. Seymour turned and placed his hands gently on Levi’s shoulders.

‘Look, we need to be careful, both of us. But if I thought I was placing you in real danger we wouldn’t be here. Okay? Have faith in yourself, Levi. Remember the young bird leaving the nest? Well, you’re

that bird right now.'

Levi nodded and forced a smile. His face felt tight.

'Just watch the moss,' Seymour added. 'After this rain it's bound to be a tad greasy.' With that he stepped out onto the ledge, his fingers clutching a gap in the stonework. Levi watched his uncle edge sideways, the man's long legs carrying him quickly to the other door. A second later he had the door open. Seymour turned and cocked his head, beckoning Levi to follow.

Levi swallowed hard, his throat suddenly stiff and clogged. Then, without a downward glance, he stepped out. His foot seemed to be in mid-air for ages, slowly descending towards the ledge. Levi's stomach tilted horribly as, just when he thought he'd over-stepped and was about to pitch himself into space, his foot finally found purchase on the slick, moss-covered surface.

He peered sidelong towards the mystery door. Seymour was no longer there. Wherever the strange opening led to, his uncle was already there. He warily shuffled along as he'd seen his uncle do, and was soon at the doorway. He glanced up to the engraved lintel he'd first viewed from the road. Carved images of several animals spanned the huge stone beam. These were animals unlike any he'd seen before. Ratty looking, armour-clad creatures, standing upright and brandishing fearsome weapons, paraded across the stone's surface. The effect was sinister and ominous – far more than the procession of diabolic gargoyles that stared down accusingly from the wall above.

A shiver swept through Levi's already chilled body and he finally diverted his eyes to the opening before him. At first he thought a curtain hung there – a blackout curtain with dense folds swaying to and fro. But, he quickly saw that the screen lacked substance. Instead it shimmered like the surface of a soapy bubble.

Acting on a sudden impulse Levi half turned to take one last look at the landscape behind him, as though doubting he'd ever see it again. No sooner had he turned when a crazy patchwork of fields strung with

hedgerows and trees spun wildly across his vision and a sudden giddiness threatened to pluck him from the narrow ledge. Grabbing frantically for the doorframe, he quickly spun back to face the wall, spotting, as he did, a splash of colour on the ground below.

In the split second it took his brain to unravel the confused image into that of a brightly dressed figure, he had grasped the doorframe and launched himself through the oddly glistening film into whatever it was that lay beyond.

Levi stepped from daylight into darkness. Not the shadowy murk of a moonless night, or the gloom of a small cupboard. This was absolute blackness.

Stepping through the strange opening had stripped him of his other senses, too. He no longer felt the ground beneath his feet. For all he knew he could be free-falling through space. But, without sight, sound or touch he had no idea whether he was safe or spiralling madly towards his doom.

Amazingly he remained calm. The panic he'd felt earlier had gone and, into this tranquillity, his senses gradually returned. First of all the light touch of a soft warm breeze caressed his skin, lifting goose-bumps on his forearms, shoulders and neck. From the tingling sensation, that was more thrilling than unpleasant, a light jingling seemed to rise from his quivering gooseflesh, the sound gradually evolving into the ringing of a bell, slowing, becoming clearer, more distinct, like ...

... like a call to prayer.

The thought came involuntarily to Levi's mind and, as it did so, he heard voices. Men's voices – a choir singing in beautiful harmony. Levi forgot his own plight, straining instead to hear more clearly. At first indistinct the sound shifted gradually as words then phrases formed themselves within the harmonies, until Levi finally understood. The

song was in Latin. *Of course!* This was the sound of monks, their psalms echoing across the centuries.

As though triggered by this sudden insight, the gently melodious song suddenly increased in volume, taking on a rough edge, becoming a harsh shrieking; a din that became louder and louder still, until Levi felt that hacksaw blades were dragging across his ear drums. He screwed his face against the agonising racket and waited for the syrupy wetness of his own blood to trickle out of his ears and down his checks and neck.

Instead, the pain receded quickly as the screeching lost its edge, moderating, evolving into a wind; not a howling gale but a mild whooshing – a stream of air that whistled past his face. This was it, he thought, the realisation becoming a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach, he was falling after all. Falling fast.

The strangeness of his predicament and his gradual awaking senses had served to mollify him, diverting his attention from the dilemma he faced. But now the sudden shocking realisation bound his chest with icy tendrils of fear.

Mercifully there were no painful screams now. They had receded to the white noise of a badly tuned radio, the harshly chaotic hissing characterising his fear as he hurtled towards the impact he knew was to come.

There was no way of telling how long he'd been falling; no way that he could measure the time – whether it was seconds, minutes or a lifetime. Either way, he knew the end of his short life was only heartbeats away.

Would there be pain, he thought. Would his crushed brain register the agony before death took him?

Levi tensed instinctively, bracing himself for the impending impact when, with a sickening jolt, his feet connected with something solid – but, instead of the devastating collision he'd expected, he could have simply stubbed a toe against an uneven pavement. His body jolted, his teeth seeming to rattle inside his skull as his arms flailed for balance,

and he pitched forward, his body flopping untidily onto something that was both soft and cool.