

## CHAPTER 1



Unbeknown to Tom Richards, events that summer were about to change the course of his life dramatically.

Had he foreseen what was about to befall him, it was doubtful he would have been able to do anything about it anyway. But perhaps it was best he didn't see the very thing which was going to knock him flat on his back; the very thing which would leave him feeling as though his world had been turned upside down.

In Tom's case, it really was better not to know.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Tom Richards groaned. He felt the warm heaviness of the air and could almost smell the heat which baked the countryside, locking it in a vice-like grip. Even at such an early hour the heat lingered from the night before. The air felt sticky and he knew it was going to be another unpleasant day.

## DAVID JOWSEY

Tom spent the early part of the morning mooching about in his room, fiddling with this, tinkering with that, but as the day stretched towards noon a dusty heat-haze formed across the distant hills. The horizon shimmered and distorted and the landscape melted and reformed the way faces quickly grow and change in the flames of an open fire. Only the trees offered any welcome shade, their leafy branches casting dappled glimmers of sunlight across the cool grass beneath.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, Tom stepped outside into the oppressive heat. Sighing, he shuffled his feet grumpily before kicking out at a stone. He watched as it skittered its way across the lawn, disappearing from sight in a clump of long grass. With a mutter he toed at the hard ground before him, digging up clumps of dry earth with a scuffed training shoe before finally losing interest and sloping off towards the corner of the house.

Stepping into shadow, Tom looked up at his home. Admittedly, the Old Vicarage was an impressive building, but it wasn't the house that appealed to him. It was the surroundings.

Tom cast his eye over the skyline. He had learned some of the local landmarks during the last year but his Dad knew them all from his childhood. He was eager to show his family where he had grown up, and when work had offered him the opportunity to leave Manchester and return home he'd jumped at the chance, and mum had been more than happy to give up her florist's job. Now she indulged her creative side as painter. She'd even sold a couple but hadn't made much from them. 'Painting is a route to poverty,' she often said. 'You'll be living on the bread-line if it's left to me.'

## DRAGONS IN THE SKY

Tom's younger sister, Abi, thought their new home was fabulous, but then she was eight, two years younger than Tom and happy in the world of her imagination. She would play amongst the trees, make fairy houses between the roots and sit in the shade to read, whereas Tom wanted to be off doing other things. Sometimes they would have a game of hide and seek using the apple trees, shed and dry stone walls as hiding places, but, after a while, even that lost its appeal.

Tom felt as though he should be allowed more freedom to go wherever he wanted – there were so many things he wanted to do, so many places he wanted to explore, but he was tied by his parents' reluctance to let him roam free. He had a sense of anticipation, a sense of something waiting out there for him and he was desperate to find it.

With a sigh of frustration he crossed the lawn and sauntered towards the gate where he leant against the stone pillar, its stonework warm in the heat of the sun. A lone dog trotted past, glancing casually in Tom's direction, but it neither slowed nor paid him any real attention: Tom was as interesting to the dog as it was to him.

Leaning his chin on his arms Tom drifted, but a sound broke into his thoughts and he looked up into the sky trying to trace its source. He squinted into the bright sunlight as two fighters closed the distance from the horizon. The sky was suddenly filled with the hard edged throaty roar of their engines as the planes raced towards him. Within seconds they were overhead, seeming to skim the rooftops before leaving the village behind, dwindling to dark specks as they disappeared towards the north. Tom watched until there was nothing left to see and their sound faded. Silence returned.

## DAVID JOWSEY

He was just about to turn and walk away when another sound split the air. It was a highly charged crackling sound, as if something electrical was sparking and burning out. The air seemed to vibrate with it. He could feel it in his chest the way the concussion of a powerful firework can sometimes be felt on Bonfire Night, the sound all around, yet not seeming to originate from anywhere in particular. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ceased.

‘That’s funny,’ murmured Tom. He quickly looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of something, anything which might explain the sound he had just heard.

He stood and listened for a little while longer, but, just as he began to lose interest, the air was assaulted by one final crack like a tree snapping under immense pressure, followed by a rolling echo from the direction of the hilltops.

Then all was still.