

DIG DEEPER

by Rick Limentani

In a forgotten village, in the rural heart of Lincolnshire, GABRIEL is only fifteen but is already drinking, gambling, and above all rebelling. He and his father EDWARD, a gravedigger with traditional values, are arguing about the trouble Gabriel is getting in. ANAIS, a local farm girl with a very protective and disapproving father, has captured Gabriel's heart. Edward is doing his best to steer his son away from real trouble and forbids Gabriel to see Anais again, but as always his counsel is ignored. Gabriel's made up his mind and won't be swayed, complaining about Edward's interfering, "I can see why mom left". With a backhand Edward puts an end to the argument – and their relationship.

Eight years later, muscles straining, with skill born from many years of experience, Edward digs his last grave. It's hard work for the old-timer, but digging is in his blood. He grits his teeth and gets the job done. His best friend and business partner, ARNOLD, skillfully puts the finishing touches on the grave's headstone. Once the open grave is neatly dug and the headstone squarely set in place the friends admire their work. This will be Edward's grave.

Four months later Gabriel is on his way home for his father's funeral and most importantly to collect his inheritance. He hasn't been back to the village since he ran away nearly a decade ago. Over the last few years he's gone from being a delinquent to a petty card shark, owing money to criminals. VINCENT, a small time crook in his own right, drops Gabriel off just in time to interrupt the first toast at his father's wake. Gabriel is as sarcastic as ever and with a cruel remark manages to provoke an ugly scene.

The next morning, hung over from a hard night of drinking at the local pub, Gabriel has to be dragged to his father's funeral. He couldn't care less about the ceremony; he's there for one thing, the reading of the will. His plan is to sell off his father's half of the business and the cottage to pay his debts and finally get back into the black, but he's horrified to learn that all his father has actually left him is a plot in the graveyard, a shovel, and the assurance that some dead relatives will take care of him.

Angry at having been cheated out of his inheritance by his father, Gabriel aims for the first train back to the city, but he's broke and finds that his efforts are dogged at every turn by bad luck and old enemies. Finally giving up, he returns to his father's cottage for the night only to find it locked. Gabriel desperately searches for somewhere else to stay the night, but only one door is open to him: the graveyard gates. Furious, desperate, and with nowhere left to go, Gabriel scream at his dead father one last time. In need of shelter and with nothing but the deed to a grave plot and a shovel Gabriel only really has one option - he digs.

Gabriel spends the night in his poorly dug excuse for a grave and is woken the next morning by Arnold, armed with a proposal. Arnold wants Gabriel to become the village gravedigger in the hopes that it will straighten him out. Gabriel turns the job down and spends the rest of his long day trying to get out of the village. Without a penny to his name, Gabriel tries to hitchhike out of the village and finally gets lucky only to find himself driven back to the village square by one of Arnold's co-conspirators.

Mary scolds her husband for playing games with Gabriel. She assures Arnold that if Gabriel is determined enough he'll find a way to get out. Arnold is confident he won't and that he'll take the job first. "Why?" She presses him. Arnold shamefacedly admits that Gabriel has no food.

Cursing his father, Gabriel rushes around the graveyard searching for the dead relatives that are meant to take care of him. Finding their overgrown graves he threatens to dig them up. Frustrated, angry, and mad with hunger he sinks his shovel into the earth only to discover their beautiful secret. The graves are overgrown with carrots, and the trees overhead are full of apples.

No longer hungry but as defiant as ever, Gabriel still refuses the job. He heads back to the local pub to earn the cost of a train ticket the only way he knows how: gambling. Unfortunately the local yokels don't like his cheating ways, and physically toss him out onto the street. Lying bruised and bleeding on the cobbles Gabriel is unexpected reunited with Anais's father CHARLES. The old man hasn't changed a bit and still despises Gabriel. Charles roughs Gabriel up some more, lets him know that Anais is married with a kid and offers him a small piece of advice – "leave".

Gabriel has hit rock bottom. Defeated, curled in a ball at the bottom of his awkward grave, he lies sobbing. The only option left is to take the job, earn enough money to leave the village, and forget the place forever. Unfortunately Arnold's offer comes with a catch: there's no pay, only food and bedding. Left with no choice, Gabriel agrees, becoming the thing he hates the most in the world, a gravedigger.

Despite her disdain for her husband's tactics, Mary is happy to have Gabriel around again. Never a mother herself she feels a real attachment to Gabriel. Arnold on the other hand isn't interested in parenting Gabriel and reminds Mary that he's not their son. A little fact she conveniently likes to forget.

On the job, Gabriel proves worthless. He's never done a day's physical labour in his life. Arnold does his best to show Gabriel the ropes, teaching him to keep the graveyard looking prim and proper for the villagers. Arnold teaches Gabriel how to trim the trees, but Gabriel's lack of attention leads to an accident: SMACK! Arnold is suddenly crushed under a falling branch.

Gabriel does the right thing and carries Arnold back to his house, but not without stealing the old man's wallet.

A train ticket in his pocket and a bottle of whisky in hand, Gabriel is ready to leave for good, but at the last moment he's overcome by temptation. He can't resist the urge to track down Anais and see how time has treated her. Drunk, Gabriel stumbles across the countryside towards her farm. From the crest of a hill he sees her home. BANG! A shotgun rings out – he's hit.

Arnold arrives at the police station with a broken arm to collect a slightly peppered Gabriel from the only cell. Pinned to his chest is a note from Charles: "Last Warning!".

CHOP! CHOP! Gabriel swings his axe, splitting log after log. He's having some trouble because of his bleeding shoulder and stinging hangover. With every swing he grows angrier until finally, in a moment of rage, he throws the axe at his father's gravestone as hard as he can. CLANG! It knocks a chunk off, much to Gabriel's instant horror...

... He can't face Arnold; the old man will never forgive him for defacing the gravestone. Gabriel decides to do what he does best, and run away again. In a rush to the train station Gabriel cuts through the village square, but is caught off guard by someone yelling, "Gabriel". He turns to find Anais, looking as beautiful as ever. Gabriel is thrilled to see her. She has something to tell him, but before she can get the words out Arnold comes flying into the square. Furious beyond words he throws a few banknotes at Gabriel and tells him to "get lost" - even Arnold has given up on him.

Waiting for his train, Gabriel doesn't bother to look up when Mary unexpectedly takes a seat next to him. She knows that he wants to be alone, but that is exactly what she thinks is worst for him. She reminds him that as child he spent a lot of time with her and Arnold. Gabriel is still trying to wear his thick skin and acts like he doesn't care, so Mary has to play it tough. "Well you were a coward then, too." Gabriel is shocked and looks up. "Now don't be an idiot and get in the car." Gabriel obeys.

Back at Mary and Arnold's, Mary is dressing Gabriel's wounds when the phone RINGS – it's Anais and she needs to see him.

Gabriel and Anais meet in one of their old hiding places. She wants to warn him about some disreputable characters trying to find him. She's thrown them off the scent, so as long as he stays in the village he'll be safe. Gabriel appreciates the warning, but is more interested in discussing her husband, and why she didn't wait for him. She leaves upset.

Weeks later Gabriel has toiled in the graveyard in the hope of winning back Arnold's friendship, but Arnold is ignoring him, closeted in his workshop with Edward's damaged headstone, desperately seeking an aesthetic solution. Mary tries to force the two to reconcile over a tense dinner, but an unfortunate comment from Gabriel just makes matters worse.

On the last Sunday of the month the graveyard is filled with mourners. Not sure how to deal with this invasion, Gabriel hides in the bushes, only to be discovered by THOMAS, an inquisitive boy who turns out to be Anais' son. Gabriel is shocked to learn that Thomas is there with his mother, visiting his father's grave. Before Gabriel has time to digest this revelation Arnold approaches him for the first time since the accident. He's not forgiven, but he's needed for a job.

Their shovels in hand, Arnold takes Gabriel out to the middle of nowhere to help him in burying a cow. Gabriel is shocked by the unusual request, but it apparently the animal had sentimental value. Gabriel just rolls his eyes and starts digging. Hours later they're both exhausted, but the hole is ready. When they have trouble pushing the dead cow in, Arnold reminisces that he and Edward once had a similar problem when burying a car. Gabriel asks him how they did it and Arnold replies "we took the handbrake off." The mood has lightened up a bit and Arnold talks more about Edward. The two were best friends as far back as he can remember and talking about him helps Arnold's anger melt away. By the time the cow is in the ground and covered up Gabriel and Arnold are back in each other's good graces.

The autumn leaves start to fall and while Gabriel works constantly to rake them up, Arnold is busy finishing the repairs on Edward's headstone. He and Gabriel replace the improved stone and agree to celebrate at the local pub with some friends. Gabriel is finally beginning to be accepted by the villagers, but before he can enjoy it a sinister message from the city arrives. The men to whom Gabriel owes money have tracked him down, and are on their way to collect.

That night it rains for the first time. Gabriel tries to hide from the rain, covering his grave with a tarpaulin, but wakes in the night to find himself covered with wiggling earthworms. He runs screaming from the graveyard to find Arnold waiting for him with the keys to his father's cottage. Gabriel sleeps under a roof for the first time in a couple of months.

The next day Gabriel is working in the graveyard when his city friend Vincent surprises him. Not completely thrilled to see Vincent, Gabriel knows that his creditors have sent Vincent to collect. Vincent offers Gabriel a chance to come back to the city, but Gabriel surprises himself by turning it down. He's happy digging and knows that heading back means dealing with a life he has outgrown. Vincent leaves, but not before warning Gabriel that his new-found happiness has a price and that his debts are still outstanding.

That afternoon Gabriel tells Arnold he's going to have to hide for a while. Arnold offers to help, but Gabriel knows what he's doing. Arnold trusts him.

Gabriel climbs up to an old tree-house, unused for years. He reaches the top and is surprised to find Anais already there. It turns out that the whole village has heard about the trouble brewing, and she guessed that he'd hide here. The two of them share a romantic moment, but are interrupted by her father, again with his shotgun. He fires a shot.

The gangsters arrive to find a funeral taking place. The entire village is gathered around Gabriel's grave. It has been filled in, and a headstone mourns the loss of our hero. The gangsters ask around, but everyone tells them the same story. An angry father shot Gabriel dead. The gangsters leave, unsatisfied but convinced.

In a back-room of the bar Gabriel and Charles wait until the villagers arrive, celebrating the success of their ruse. The whole village grouped together to protect Gabriel because he's one of them now, and he's happy about it. He kisses Anais.

THE END