

## Extract from **In the Blood**

### Chapter six

For most of its length, the road that led to the Abbey, site of, was no more than a lane running between hedges and across the muddy entrances of cowhouses. Where it was bordered by a rough moor, it was unfenced, crossed by cattle grids. However, the position of the abbey was clear, beyond the apex of a sharp bend, but reaching this, Rigby could see no signpost or stile, only a path that led to a house.

'Have you lost yourself?' a voice addressed him. It came from somewhere between a pair of Wellington boots and hands that pegged out washing.

'I'm looking for an old abbey.'

A head pushed round a sheet already plumped with wind. 'Don't tell me you're another.'

'I could be.' Another. He got off his cycle and laid it on the grass.

'There's not a soul interested, years and years on end,' the woman smacked the sheet aside and squelched across the grass, 'then we have two in as many days.'

'When did the other person come?'

'Yesterday. Round tea time.'

'Thank you.' He was at least sixteen hours behind Gilbert.

'You know him, then?'

'If he's who I think he is.'

She laughed. 'Aren't you the cagey one? Why's that, I wonder? He's a real gentleman. "What a beautiful garden," he said to me. Of course, he was referring to the border.' She pointed to a few browning chrysanthemums and some balding roses. 'I keep on top of that. The rest goes to pot nearing winter.'

Rigby nodded agreement.

That was a mistake. Cross, she told him, 'There's a lot of work. It's not like something you can get through, evenings, after a nine to five job, and mine's round the clock. The other one didn't need that pointing out. He'd seen a bit more of the world than you have. "I'd regard it as an honour," he said, that's exactly what he said, "I'd be honoured if you would make me a gift of a single rose."' Repeating the request cured her sharp tone. ' "With your permission I am about to visit where the abbey stood," he said, "and a rose out of your garden would be prettier than any plastic poppy.'"

'I see.'

'Do you, now? I don't. Well, not altogether. Have they started sticking poppies in the back of beyond? Not that we mind, but they should ask permission.'

'I don't think it's official.'

'Roses or poppies, they won't last long, what with the sheep.' She spoke as if the creatures were liable to stampede, iron pattens buckled to their hooves.

'Is it alright if I have a look?' he asked her.

'So long as you don't start a fashion. The abbey was somewhere behind the house. The old gentleman knew his way; he'd been here before, he said, but I've never seen him. There's nothing there, except for the monks' well. Hasn't been for centuries. I expect the stone was taken for building, and why not? Better to be put to use.'

Though Rigby had not expected picturesque ruins, he had hoped for a stump of a pillar, a gargoyle grinning out of a bed of nettles. There was nothing to indicate a building had once stood there. The monks' well, too, was disappointing; it was a pond banked by bushes, saved from stagnation by a trickle of water that drained through. Rigby could not imagine what possible interest the place held for Gilbert.

The pond was roofed by trees. Under them, and among the bushes, the grass was high. Where he stood, many of its stalks were bent over; they had not yet recovered from the crush of a person's tread. He followed this pale track.

And discovered, threaded through ivy that wound over an ash, a flower. What petals remained were limp and at a more advanced stage of decay than those left on the bush in front of the house, and impaled on the stem was a piece of paper. It was a plain page torn from the end of a diary and headed: Notes for June 1944. Diagonally across it in his grandfather's hand were the words: You found her beads in the rubble and took them to the wounded nun.

Rigby leant against the bole of the ash. The strange pain in his head told him that he was holding his breath and he let it out slowly. Then delicately, without causing another petal to fall, he rearranged the rose so that it did not droop. He could not guess who was the 'you' in Gilbert's dedication but as he returned from the site of the abbey he thought of its chiselled stones that had fallen and been pillaged for building and of the villages shelled to rubble along the Normandy coast.

He was picking up his cycle when the woman came out of the house and called, 'Seen the well, have you?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Have you any more thoughts on whether you know the old gentleman?'

'I know who it was who came.'

'Will you be seeing him?'

'I hope so.'

'In that case, you can give him this. I invited him in for a cup of tea, he was looking under the weather.' She handed Rigby a cigarette lighter. 'I don't know why he had it; he didn't smoke, just sat over his tea with it in his hand.'

'I'll see that he gets it.'

On his cycle he rode slowly although knowing he should not delay. He had been right to deduce that the circles on the map might lead him to Gilbert but when he stopped to choose the next, instead of the map, he drew his grandfather's account from his pocket. Straddling his cycle, he unwrapped the little package, looked through what he had read and continued:

We had been detailed to search a farmhouse. It was as big as a regular hall, high and grand, standing one side of a great yard like a quadrangle and the other sides mostly filled in with tall barns, stables and such. We went into them first, observing the proper procedure, nothing there except a few chickens scratching. Then we tackled the house. The door was unlocked and had not a dent in the wood, the whole place had escaped the bombardments. It was a miracle.

We tiptoed in making no noise. We were in the kitchen with a great fireplace and pans hanging, a long table and not a speck of dust. In the middle of it was a jug of milk. None of us leaned forward to pick it up, take a swig. Through the window we could see clothes, soft and clean, pegged on a line. We stood, resting. There was not a scrap of sound. It seemed that if we stayed long enough, the war would go away. Then Peter said, 'I'd forgotten what quiet was. Better check upstairs,' and he walked through the door. But that did not quite break the spell. What did, was a shot and Peter slithering down. Immediately a German stood in the doorway, a gun hanging in his hand. His jacket and collar were unbuttoned, he had been enjoying a nap. He said, and his accent rang clear as a crystal glass, 'I suppose I should take you prisoner, Troopers, but what in the world should I do with you? The only solution is,' and as he raised his gun to his head, a round from Rufe went through his throat.

We carried them out and laid them side by side in a barn. Then Rufe shouted, 'Doesn't it bother you I've killed a prisoner?'

When little Ted pointed out that the German considered we were *his* prisoners, Rufe said, impatient, 'That was bravado. He would have been ours eventually.' By that he meant, after we had overcome him, and no doubt one or more of us getting the cop.

I reminded him that the German intended to shoot himself anyway, and Ted told him, 'Gil's right. That's what the man wanted.'

'But not *how* he wanted it,' Rufe snapped.

'Look,' the sergeant came in, 'we're not running a Jesuit seminary, we're fighting a war.' (I do not give all his words, Doctor, you being a lady.)

The truth was, we were all rattled. We had not known who that officer was aiming for when he raised his revolver and he had time to kill at least one of us. He'd seen Peter out.. German and Allied knew that death was measured in the slimmest shaving of a moment. If you took breath before squeezing the trigger, you didn't take any more. It did not matter that in that sliver of time we saw that the officer was aiming at himself. Three of us had taken that breath. No wonder we didn't feel inclined to give Rufe a hearing. Quibbling over the finer technicalities was less important than the fact that our fingers had not moved.

Sergeant Theaker said, 'My report will state a German officer was holed up in the farmhouse. We entered without incident but he resisted being taken prisoner. Understood, Rufe?'

He flushed up. 'There's no need to ask.'

'Just making sure. I'll keep the Walther.' It was already in his pocket, he having the highest rank. Unfortunately, he did not keep it long. It went to Ted soon after and I was the last to have it. Sergeant added, 'That is, if you have no objection,' as if sorry to be spoilt of one.

Ted bent down and straightened Pete's jacket. 'Look at it this way, you ugly sinner,' he told him, he had a job spitting out the words. 'You're lucky to be stretched out in one piece, and tidy in a barn, nice and comfy on a bed of straw.'

1 'He'll get a proper burial,' Rufe comforted. 'The French are respectful of the dead.'

**Rigby looked up. Coming towards him was a figure. It wore combat dress but carried no rifle. Carefully Rigby parcelled up the pages. As he replaced them in his pocket,**

his mobile phone bulged, demanding. He brought it out, saw that a text message waited: Nuz plez. C.

Then Watkins came to a halt beside him, greeting with: 'We must stop meeting like this.'

'Spare me, Watkins.' Steam blossomed in the valley below them and carriages rattled. He asked, 'Have you come by train?'

The other was piqued, which was satisfying. 'You don't seem to realise I'm on an exercise. You might even call it survival practice. Anyway, I can tell you I'm glad train travel isn't allowed.' He spoke without conviction. 'I mean, the journey's only five miles and the rate that engine goes, it would be quicker to walk, as well as the carriages being full of people who get a buzz on smoke and whistles and steam. Frankly, I think it's an over rated experience.'

'You're lucky to miss it, then.' Rigby grasped the handlebars of his cycle, prepared to move off, but Watkins did not shift.

He asked, 'Would you be good enough to let me use your mobile, Rigby? I ought to be giving my Dad a call now. He's spent hours working out the route, timing each section.' He was looking at his watch. 'He is monitoring all stages.'

Rigby handed him the phone.

'I'll just text him. That'll cost you less.'

'It also avoids questions you might not want to answer.'

The other responded, stiff, 'Speak for yourself,' and Rigby murmured silently: You've got a point.

As he returned the phone, Watkins saw the cigarette lighter still tucked in Rigby's palm. 'I didn't know you smoked, Rig.'

'There's a lot of things you don't know, Wat.'

'It's a bad habit to form.' He ran through the risks with relish, ending, 'My father wouldn't let a cigarette into the house.'

'Do you have many trying to get in?'

'You can smile, but you could face a horrible future. Bronchial complications alone can put you out of effective action, you can get so you have to have an oxygen mask.' His breath caught and he began to cough.

'You really should cut down,' Rigby advised.

'It's all that smoke at the station.'

'It must be. You've no antibodies against it if you've got a Pure Air Dependence.'

'I might have a cold coming. I didn't feel too good when I got up, but I said to myself it was probably nerves.'

'Watkins, I'm sorry, but I don't want to stand here gossiping about your psychological condition. The subject's too big and I have to get on.'

'You're surprised by me referring to nerves, but I've never done anything like this before---spend twenty four hours covering the miles, except for the ones in the tent--- and I don't want to disappoint Dad.'

'If I were you, I would chance that. He's not your sergeant major.' He looked at the combat dress, the gadgets hanging from the belt, the rucksack, the roll of tent, the boots that Watkins had said were too big. 'Now, if you wouldn't mind stepping to one side.'

Watkins fixed his eyes on the cigarette lighter. 'May I have a look?' he asked. 'It's an old fashioned one.'

Rigby held it out.

'What I thought,' Watkins announced. 'I bet you don't know the troops gave this name to Sherman tanks.'

'You're right, I didn't.'

'You see, this lighter is a Ronson.'

'Is it?'

'Yes. And Sherman tanks brewed up faster. Dad told me. They were used in the second world war.'

'Was he in it?'

'Do you mind? That would make him old enough to be my grandad! But he's made a study of it.'

'I'll bet.'

'And I bet you're dying to know why the troops called Sherman tanks, Ronsons.'

'And you're dying to tell me.'

'The advertisement for Ronson lighters was: They light first time. A shell or a mortar hit a Sherman, and...'

'I've got the picture.'

They were silent. Rigby was thinking: Grandfather saw that. He asked, 'How many men did they hold?'

'Five. If you were lucky, if the hatch was still working, you might get out, but not generally everyone, before...'

The early mist had gone; it was a bright autumn morning. The sun was on Rigby's face, and his eyes through glowing lids saw his fingers locked on a metal handle, the blisters rising and the skin darkening, peeling away, as the flames punctured his denims, consumed the hairs, scowered his private parts, while his rib cage swelled with smoke, with the fumes of oil and cordite, of cindered flesh, and his mouth was a black hole, open, out of which no more screams came.

Watkins said, 'Enough to send you batty.' He stepped back, adjusted the straps on his shoulders. 'I'm afraid I can't stay any longer. I have to do a loop----up Great Fell then descend to this road further along. You aren't by any chance going in that direction?'

'I could be.'

'That's a slice of luck. You could do me a favour.'

'I'm contemplating a change of plan.'

Watkins persisted. 'You could take my equipment to where the path enters the road.'

'Well thanks, but I'll have to decline the treat.'

'I don't see why. You don't have to trudge up that fell.' He stabbed a finger towards the distant slopes. Then with one sweep of an arm he levelled the lane's steep gradient. 'When you're cycling along here, it would be no burden.'

Rigby put a foot on a pedal, was ready to go.

'It's not much to ask. It's not as if I'm asking you to go out of your way.' The other sulked, accusing.

'Look, Watkins, I have to consider your father's plans; I just wouldn't be able to square my conscience.'

'I reckon Dad would be tolerant. One has to be a bit of an opportunist, and I've got a blister coming on this heel.'

Rigby did not believe him but he said, 'Shut up, and I'll take it.'

He had to suffer the gratitude, the toadying compliments on his generosity, the instructions: 'Would you please leave it ten or so metres off the road, and cover it with bracken.' To which he answered, feeling a fool with it strapped to his shoulder,

'Sure you wouldn't prefer me to stand guard?' Then he had to push off, the pack rigid on his back, the tent scraping his neck, leaving Watkins unencumbered, jaunty as a green recruit marching to a bloodless war. Unaware of the true reason why Rigby had agreed.

He had not been persuaded by argument but by the recollection of Watkins's white face as he had said, 'Enough to send you batty.' And because his fingers had shaken as he turned the cigarette lighter over and over in his palm.

#### Author's comments.

Years ago I had an idea for a story concerning an old man and his granddaughter who together fled from home. He was trying to silence the memories of his time as a soldier and she was wishing to get away because she was bullied at school. Much later when I returned to it, the granddaughter had changed into a grandson (Rigby) who was not accompanying his grandfather (Gilbert) but searching for him, and the original idea of a young girl escaping from bullies had grown into something more subtle----the difficulty some people have of forming relaxed relationships. This became a characteristic of a contemporary of Rigby's, Watkins, and to a certain extent, of Gilbert.

By this time I knew rather more about the second world war; there was a more public acknowledgement of the effects of combat on many servicemen and it seemed that this made it possible for some of them to talk about what they had witnessed. (Members of my family fought in both world wars and I am told that, like many other servicemen, they never spoke of their experience. In the book, Gilbert only records his to please a psychologist, and he still retains a crucial part.)

I knew very early why the ex-soldier of **In the Blood**, Gilbert, was wandering over the moors and I had a very strong picture of the other soldier, Rufe. So I quickly found that I was dealing with four young men: these two whose formative experiences occurred in warfare and the others, Rigby and Watkins, who were growing up in the present day. How they interacted, often unknowingly, became a major feature of their story. And what began for Rigby as a fairly simple job of sleuthing grew into his own private quest.

Naturally I set this in the Yorkshire dales but, also naturally, I adjusted landscape to fit the needs of the plot.

**Rigby's delight in maps mirrors my own, but he is much more competent using them. No doubt that is an example of wishful author-identification.**