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Opening extract from

The Beneath

Written by

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CHAPTER 1

I slumped down on my usual seat at the end of the deserted platform, my phone stuffed deep into my pocket. As the Tube train finally rounded the corner I glanced down the tunnel. A figure was silhouetted against the headlights – it was a girl, her long hair streaming out around her, running fast. I watched in horror, drawn to the edge of the platform. She was still a long way back. Too far back.

The train driver saw her too, and the huge noise of the horn shook the walls. The noise quickly transformed into the squeal of brakes, but it was clear that there wasn't going to be enough time.

"Run faster!" I screamed as loudly as I could. "You have to run faster!"

The electrified rail was horribly close to her feet as she

sped along. She was going to die from either that or the train. The noise of the horn was constant, and the squeal of the brakes hurt deep inside my ears. At last I could see her face; she looked terrified, but she was getting closer.

"Come on! You can make it!" I leapt over the barrier near the end of the platform and leaned out towards her, reaching with one hand and holding on to the railings with the other. "Come ON!"

Her dark hair was whipping around her face as the wall of air being pushed by the train propelled her forward, and she nearly stumbled as she tried to wipe it aside to see. The face of the train driver was crystal clear in the cab right behind her, a face equally full of terror. I could see his arms braced against the impact – not that her thin frame was going to make much impression on that wall of speeding metal – and then I saw him close his eyes, not wanting to see her end.

The front of the train was almost on her, but she was so close! Her hair cleared from her face for a second and she reached out her hand towards me, grazing my outstretched fingers. Without thinking I grabbed her firmly by the wrist and pulled.

"JUMP!" I hollered, and yanked at her with all my might, throwing myself backwards as the train shot past just centimetres from my nose. The two of us fell on our backs in a tangle of arms and legs on the tiny piece of access platform that sloped down towards the tunnel, and the Tube train thundered past, screeching to a halt

halfway down the platform.

Before I could ask her what she thought she was doing she was on her feet, looking around her as if she was being hunted. She grabbed my hand and hauled me up, and then, reaching behind us on the smooth tunnel wall, she clicked something. A panel swung inwards, revealing a dark void. I could hear people running along the platform and the driver shouting. The curve of the platform meant that we were out of sight, but it was only going to be for a moment.

The girl grabbed my hand and looked into my eyes.

"Please?" she whispered in a strange accent.

Whatever the reason for her flight, I needed to know more. I was fed up hiding out on the Tube platform where the text messages couldn't reach me instead of going home. Jenny Tait was just going to have to find someone else to bully for a while. I stepped into the gloom and the panel swiftly shut behind me, leaving no trace of either of us on the platform.

The panel clicks shut and we are alone. I can't believe it. I'm in the Aboves' old tunnel. I'm in the Aboves' tunnel with one of them. A real one. But one who just saved my life.

I whisper to her to stay quiet, then hold her hand more firmly and walk further into the passage, making sure I avoid all the rubbish on the floor. I feel the excitement of being somewhere I've never been before, even though

I can see it in my mind's eye on the map and I've been drilled in how to get in and out. The place is really filthy, not like the tunnels at home. The dust and the muck sit around in thick layers and it's not really safe. But for now it will have to do.

I lead the girl down the steep steps and along the narrow access corridor until we get to the main platform. There is a single greenish light on, casting deep shadows across the walls. I hear her gasp, but her steps don't falter. She's brave then. All the time we walk along in the gloom my mind is racing. What am I doing? I still have my mission to complete – to find Lily Blackthorne and take her down to Dane.

But I can't resist the temptation to talk to the girl who saved my life. Near the light are some old seats. I stop and turn to look at her. She's looking around with her mouth open.

"Here, let's sit down for a moment."

It took me a second to realise what she was saying. Her accent was weird, but I was glad of what she was suggesting. I sank down on to the hard bench and tried to fathom out exactly where I was. We had been at the very end of the platform at the Tube station when I rescued her, and then she had pulled me through the wall. Now we were on another, completely different, disused platform. I could read the station name on the wall – Baker Street – but the advertising posters

were hanging in shreds and too mucky to make out. I wondered how long it had been since someone was last here. The only sign of life was the eerie glow of the Emergency Exit sign. Without it I could have believed that she had whisked me into the past.

"Where are we?"

She shrugged, dropping down on to a seat further up the bench. "In a place no one uses any more. We'll be safe here for a while."

"What on earth were you doing on the track?" I sat up and turned to look at her. "You were almost killed!"

"I was trying to find my way, took a wrong turn and that was it. All of a sudden it was coming up behind me." She glanced briefly at me and then looked down. "Thank you for saving me," she continued in a soft voice.

"Any time. I was pretty sure that I was going to fail though. That train came so close – half a second longer and you would have been under the wheels, and we wouldn't have been having any sort of conversation."

"I can't believe that you managed to pull me out of the way. You don't look strong enough."

I couldn't help smiling. "Me too." I looked at my hands. "I didn't know I had it in me."

I realised that my heart was still racing, the adrenalin pumping through my veins. I took several deep breaths to try and calm down.

"Are you all right? Are you going to be ill?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just a bit stunned with all of this." I

waved my hand around. "How do you know this place? How did you just open up a blank wall like that? What's going on?"

She leapt up from the bench and started to pace up and down, her arms folded tightly across her chest. She was thin, and, from what I could see in the dim light, was wearing a hippy-style cheesecloth shirt, unbuttoned to show a stretchy exercise top in lurid green underneath, and flared pinstripe trousers that looked as if they came from a 1970s man's suit. She was mumbling to herself, and for the first time I began to doubt the sanity of my decision to follow her. No one knew I was here, and if something happened no one would ever find me. My heart, which had begun to slow down a little, picked up pace again and I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up. What would Nan do if I just disappeared?

"Anyway," I asked brightly. "I'm Lily. Are you from round here too?"

She stopped and stared at me, saying nothing.

I can't believe it. The person who I've been sent here to find is the girl who's just saved my life. Dane said she is always on the platform at this time of day but I didn't think for a moment this could be her. How am I supposed to complete my mission now? She's not what I expected, but then I never really thought of her as a real person, just as someone we need.

She is still talking.

"So, what's your name?"

"Aria."

"That's a pretty name. I've not heard that one before. Do you live close by?"

I can't answer so she carries on anyway. I don't know what to do, and walk up and down the platform wishing I could ask Dane's advice. But I know what he'll say, and I know what's expected of me. I have to get her back through the caves, where he is waiting for us.

"Look, Lily, I need your help. I need you to—"

A movement down the old, disused tunnel makes me freeze. Is it a figure in the shadows? I look around and see the mice on the track, and I feel as if I have been punched in the chest. I know what's coming.

Aria had stopped talking and was staring at something on the old tracks. I stepped forward to see what it was and then hurriedly stepped back. Mice were running along in the same direction, away from a noise that was becoming noticeable above the distant rumble of the trains. It was the sound of far-off slithering, low and somehow menacing. It electrified Aria. She ran the few steps towards me and grabbed my hand again.

"We have to go. Now. There's no time to waste!"

The noise was getting louder. I couldn't work out what might be making it, but as we started back towards the place where we had come in I was conscious of something big moving across the floor in the tunnel

ahead of us. It was too dark to make it out but I could see the shadows shifting. Aria stopped dead and whipped round, dragging me with her. We sprinted towards the other end of the platform, but the noise coming from that direction was worse. It was the same slithering sound as before, but with a distinct undertone of scratching. We skidded to a halt in a small cloud of dust. The mice on the tracks were in a frenzy, running to and fro, then trying to bury themselves in whatever small space they could find. Aria looked from tunnel to tunnel, fear on her face.

"What … what do we do now?" I whispered, as the hideous scratching noise got even louder.

"There's no other way out," gasped Aria. "They've got us surrounded. This is it."

"Why don't we just go out of the exit?" I asked, edging towards the white and green light.

The shadows in the dark at either end of the platform were beginning to take on a long, low shape, and a musty, dead stench filled my nose, making me want to gag. Whatever creature smelled like that, I didn't want to meet one.

"What exit?" she asked.

"The one right here," I shouted as the noise increased.

Grasping her hand tightly, I pulled her through the archway under the sign and up the stairs in front of us. But the further up we went, the darker it became, and at the top we could see nothing. The noise was coming closer and Aria seemed almost paralysed with fear. I

pulled her round to face me and shook her sharply.

"We need to find the door!" I hissed.

I can't believe that the Crop has come this far up. Did it follow me through the tunnels or has the Farmer sent it to finish me off? I don't understand where she's taking me. How does she know the way? We only have minutes before the end, just moments before the Crop makes it up the stairs and we'll be cornered. We're both going to die.

Lily is shouting from further along the dark corridor.

"I can see light under a door – this is the way out, come on!"

I turn and run, but know from the sudden smell that the Crop has made it to the top of the stairs. I hate to turn my back; I don't want to die like that but I have to run. I can hear Lily at the door, fighting with the handle. With a final grunt she wrenches it free and it opens up with a rusty squeal. Light floods the far part of the corridor, but not where I am. Running into the light will mean that the Crop can see me, but I run towards it anyway. As I reach the door she grabs me and pulls me through, slamming it shut behind us. The door shudders as the Crop throws itself at it, angry at missing its prey.

"What the hell was that?" she asks, turning to look at the door.

I hope that it will hold. It seems to be all right; it's not budging. I finally notice where we are standing. It's one

of the Aboves' walking tunnels. It's light and clean, and the walls are covered with pictures in startlingly bright colours, most of which seem to be of girls kissing boys. There are people too, some wearing tiny clothes that show all of their arms and legs. No one seems to be taking any notice of us.

"Come on, this way," she says. "I want to get as far away from whatever that was as possible, and then you can tell me what it was – or they were."

I drag my eyes away from a picture and we walk quickly down the tunnel, but there are more and more people showing their legs. I don't know where to look. The fear tightens in my chest – this can't happen. I was supposed to get her and take her through the caves, not go running around with the Aboves in their tunnels. But I don't know what else to do so I follow her. We can't go back.

Finally we get to the end and walk into a big chamber. There are dozens of people here, coming out of tunnels, some going into others. But what takes my breath away is at the end of the chamber. Lots of metal steps are leading up, up an impossible distance, almost as far as I can see, and they are moving. The people are just standing on them and the steps are carrying them towards the light. Other steps are carrying people down towards us. Lily grabs my hand again and pulls me on to them – steps that are flat at first, and then suddenly lift us up. On the walls are small squares with moving pictures. I'm staring at them, trying to work out what they

can be for, when I hear a noise, a thumping on the wall of the moving steps right next to me. Surely it can't be the Crop? Can it have got out from the old tunnel and be beneath this stairway? Is there any other way for it to get out?

Lily hears the noise too, and looks at me.

"It's nothing, just a banging escalator. This one does it all the time."

"How can you be sure?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Maybe we should run then," she says.

We set off up the steps as fast as we can. I nearly miss the top, where the steps suddenly go flat, and I stumble as I find myself on solid ground again. Lily drags me towards a low wall that runs across the room.

"We're in luck," she tells me as she pulls me through a gap. "The ticket barriers aren't often left open."

And suddenly everything is gone. There is no roof, no ceiling and the light burns my eyes. For the first time in my life I am Above.