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opening extract from

Tunnels

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Chapter One

SCHLAAK! The pickaxe hit the wall of earth and, sparking on an unseen shard of flint, sank deep into the clay, coming to a sudden halt with a dull thud.

'This could be it, Will!'

Dr Burrows crawled forwards in the cramped tunnel. Sweating and breathing heavily in the confined space, he began feverishly clawing at the dirt, his breath clouding in the damp air. Under the combined glare of their helmet lamps each greedy handful revealed more of the old wooden planking beneath, exposing its tar-coated grain and splintery surface.

'Pass me the crowbar.'

Will rummaged in a satchel, found the stubby blue crowbar and handed it to his father, whose gaze was fixed on the area of wood before him. Forcing the flat edge of the tool between two of the planks, Dr Burrows grunted as he put all his weight behind it to gain some purchase. He then began levering from side to side. The planks creaked and moaned against their rusted fixings until, finally, they bellied out, breaking free with a resounding crack. Will recoiled slightly as a clammy breeze bled from the ominous gap Dr Burrows had created.

Urgently they pulled two more of the planks out of place, leaving a shoulder-width hole, and paused for a moment in silence. Father and son turned and looked at each other, sharing a brief conspiratorial smile. Their faces, illuminated in each other's light beams, were smeared with a war paint of dirt.

They turned back to the hole and stared in wonder at the dust motes floating like tiny diamonds, forming and reforming unknown constellations against the night-black opening.

Dr Burrows warily leaned into the hole, Will squeezing in beside him to peer over his shoulder. As their helmet lamps cut into the abyss a curved, tiled wall came into sharp focus. Their beams, penetrating deeper, swept over old posters whose edges were peeling away from the wall and waving slowly, like tendrils of seaweed caught in the drift of powerful currents at the bottom of the ocean. Will raised his head a little, scanning even further along until he caught the edge of an enamelled sign. Dr Burrows followed his son's gaze until the beams of their lamps joined together to clearly show the name.

'*Highfield & Crossly North*! This is it, Will, this is it! We found it!' Dr Burrows' excited voice echoed about the dank confines of the disused train station. They felt a slight breeze on their faces as something blew along the platform and down on to the rails, as if sent into an animated panic by this rude intrusion, after so many years, into its sealed and forgotten catacomb.

Will kicked wildly at the timbers at the base of the opening, throwing up a spray of splinters and hunks of rotting wood, until suddenly the ground below him slid away and spilled into the cavern. He scrambled through the opening, grabbing his spade as he went. His father was immediately

behind him as they crunched a few paces on the solid surface of the platform, their footsteps echoing and their helmet lamps cutting swathes into the surrounding gloom.

Cobwebs hung in skeins from the roof, and Dr Burrows blew as one draped itself across his face. As he looked around, his light caught his son, a strange sight with a shock of white hair sticking out like bleached straw from under his battle-scarred miner's helmet, his pale-blue eyes flashing with enthusiasm as he blinked into the dark. It was difficult to describe Will's clothes, other than to say that they appeared to be of the same red-brown hue and texture as the clay he had been working in. Such was the pasting, it covered him right up to his neck, making him appear like an artist's sculpture which had been miraculously infused with life.

As for Dr Burrows himself, he was a wiry man of average height – one wouldn't have described him as tall or, for that matter, short, just somewhere in the middle. He had a round face with piercing brown eyes that appeared all the more intense due to his gold-rimmed pebble glasses.

'Look up there, Will, look at that!' he said, as his light picked out a sign above the gap through which they had just emerged. WAY OUT, it read in large black letters. They turned on their hand-held torches, and the beams combined with those of their weaker helmet lamps, ricocheting through the darkness to reveal the full length of the platform. Roots hung from the roof, and the walls were caked with efflorescence and streaked with chalky limescale where fissures had seeped moisture. They could hear the sound of running water somewhere in the distance.

'How's this for a find?' Dr Burrows said with a self-congratulatory air. 'Just think, nobody has set foot down here

since the new Highfield line was built in 1895.' They had emerged on to one end of the platform, and Dr Burrows now shone his torch into the opening of the train tunnel to their side. It was blocked by a mound of rubble and earth. 'It'll be just the same down the other end – they would've sealed both tunnels,' he said.

As they picked their way along the platform, gazing at the walls, it was just possible to make out blocks of crazily cracked cream tiles with dark-green edging. Gas lamps sprouted every three metres or so, a number with glass shades still on them.

'Dad, Dad, over here!' Will called. 'Have you seen these posters? You can still read them. I think they're adverts for land or something? And here's a good one . . . *Wilkinson's Circus . . . to be held on the Common . . . 10th day of February 1895.* There's a picture,' he said breathlessly as his father joined him. The poster had been spared any water damage, and they could make out the crude colours of the red big top, with a blue man in a top hat standing in front of it. 'And look at this,' Will said. '*Too Fat? Doctor Gordon's Elegant Pills!*' The heavy line drawing depicted a portly man with a beard, holding up a small container.

They walked further along, stepping around a mountain of rubble that spilled on to the platform from an archway. 'That would've led through to the other platform,' Dr Burrows told his son.

They paused to look at an ornate cast-iron bench. 'This'll go nicely in the garden. All it needs is a rub down and a few coats of gloss,' Dr Burrows was muttering as Will's torch beam alighted on a dark wooden door hidden in the shadows.

'Dad, wasn't there an office or something on your plan?' Will asked, staring at the door.

'An office?' Dr Burrows replied, fumbling through his pockets until he found the piece of paper he was searching for. 'Let me have a look.'

Will didn't wait for an answer, pushing at the door, which was stuck fast. Quickly losing interest in his plan, Dr Burrows went to the aid of his son and together they tried to shoulder the door open. It was badly warped in the frame, but on the third attempt it suddenly gave and they tumbled into the room, a downpour of silt covering their heads and shoulders. Coughing, and rubbing dust from their eyes, they pushed their way through a shroud of cobwebs.

'Wow!' Will exclaimed quietly. There, in the middle of the small office, they could make out a desk and chair, furred with dust. Will moved cautiously behind the chair and, with his gloved hand, brushed away the layer of cobwebs on the wall to reveal a large, faded map of the railway system.

'Could've been the stationmaster's office,' Dr Burrows said as he swept dust off the top of the desk with his arm to reveal a blotter, upon which rested a grimy teacup and saucer. Next to them a small object, discoloured with age, leaked green on to the surface of the desk. 'How fascinating! A railway telegraph, exquisitely made – brass, I would say.'

Two of the walls were lined with shelves stacked with decaying cardboard boxes. Will selected a box at random and carried it over to the desk quickly, as it threatened to fall apart in his hands. He lifted off the misshapen lid and looked in wonder at the bundles of old tickets. He picked one of them out, but the perished rubber band crumbled, sending a confetti of tickets spewing over the desktop.

'They're blanks – they won't have been printed up,' Dr Burrows said.

'You're right,' Will confirmed, never ceasing to be amazed at his father's knowledge, as he studied one of the tickets. But Dr Burrows wasn't listening. He was kneeling down and tugging at a heavy object on a lower shelf, wrapped in a rotten cloth that dissolved at his touch. 'And here,' Dr Burrows announced as Will turned to look at the machine, which resembled an old typewriter with a large pull handle on its side, 'is an example of an early ticket-printing machine. Bit corroded, but we can probably get the worst off.'

'What, for the museum?'

'No, for *my* collection,' Dr Burrows replied. He hesitated, and his face took on a serious expression. 'Look, Will, we're not going to breathe a word about this, any of this, to anyone. Understand?'

'Huh?' Will spun around, a slight frown creasing his brow. It wasn't as if either of them went around broadcasting the fact that they embarked on these elaborate underground workings in their spare time – not that anyone would be seriously interested anyway. Their common passion for the buried and the as yet undiscovered was something they didn't share with anyone else, something that brought father and son together . . . a bond between them.

They stood in the office, their miner's lamps lingering on each other's faces. As his son hadn't made any sort of response, Dr Burrows fixed him with a stare, and went on.

'I don't have to remind you what happened last year with the Roman villa, do I? That bigwig professor turned up, hijacked the dig and grabbed all the glory. *I* discovered that site, and what did I get? A tiny acknowledgement buried in his pathetic effort of a paper.'

'Yeah, I remember,' Will said, recalling his father's frustration

and outbursts of fury at the time.

'Want that to happen again?'

'No, of course not.'

'Well, I'm not going to be a footnote on this one. I'd rather *nobody* knew about it. They're not going to nick this from me, not this time. Agreed?'

Will nodded in assent, sending his light bouncing up and down the wall.

Dr Burrows glanced at his watch. 'We really ought to be getting back, you know.'

'All right,' Will replied grudgingly.

His father caught his tone. 'There's no real hurry, is there? We can take our time to explore the rest tomorrow night.'

'No, I suppose,' Will said half-heartedly, moving towards the door.

Dr Burrows patted his son affectionately on his hard hat as they were leaving the office. 'Sterling work, Will, I must say. All those months of digging really paid off, didn't they?'

They retraced their steps to the opening and, after a last look at the platform, clambered back into the tunnel. Six metres or so in, the tunnel blossomed out so they could walk side by side. If Dr Burrows stooped slightly, it was just high enough for him to stand.

'We need to double up on the braces and props,' Dr Burrows announced, examining the expanse of timbers above their heads. 'Instead of one every metre, as we discussed, they're about one in two.'

'Sure. No problem, Dad,' Will assured him, rather unconvincingly.

'And we need to shift this lot out,' Dr Burrows continued, nudging a mound of clay on the tunnel floor with his boot.

'Don't want to get too constricted down here, do we?'

'Nope,' Will replied vaguely, not really intending to do anything about it at all. The sheer thrill of discovery resulted all too often in him flouting the safety guidelines his father tried to lay down. His passion was to dig, and the last thing on his mind was to waste time on 'housekeeping', as Dr Burrows called it And, in any case, his father rarely volunteered to help with any of the digging itself, only making an appearance when one of his 'hunches' paid off.

Dr Burrows whistled abstractedly through his teeth as he slowed to inspect a tower of neatly stacked buckets and a heap of planking. As they continued on their way the tunnel climbed, and he stopped several more times to test the wooden props on either side. He smacked them with the palm of his hand, his obscure whistling rising to an impossible squeak as he did so.

The passage eventually levelled out and widened into a larger chamber, where there was a trestle table and a pair of sorry-looking armchairs. They dumped some of their equipment on the table, then climbed the last stretch of tunnel to the entrance.

Just as the town clock finished striking seven, a length of corrugated-iron sheeting lifted a couple of centimetres in a corner of the Temperance Square car park. It was early autumn, and the sun was just tipping over the horizon as father and son, satisfied the coast was clear, pushed the sheeting back to reveal the large timber-framed hole in the ground. They poked their heads a little way out, double-checking that there was nobody else in the car park, then clambered from the hole. Once the sheeting was back in place over the entrance, Will kicked dirt over it to disguise it.

A breeze rattled the hoardings around the car park and a newspaper rolled along the ground like tumbleweed, scattering its pages as it gained momentum. As the dying sun silhouetted the surrounding warehouses and reflected off the burgundy-tiled façade of a nearby Peabody Estate tenement block, the two Burrows ambling out of the car park looked every inch a pair of prospectors leaving their claim in the foothills to return to town.