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Opening extract from

Deeper

Selected and narrated by

Roderick Gordon & Brian Williams

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Part One

Breaking Cover





Chapter One



With a hiss and a clunk, the doors whisked shut, depositing the woman by the bus stop. Apparently indifferent to the whipping wind and the pelting rain, she stood watching as the vehicle rumbled into motion again, grinding the gears as it wound its way laboriously down the hill. Only when it finally vanished from sight behind the briar hedges did she turn to gaze at the grassy slopes that rose on either side of the road. Through the downpour they seemed to fade into the washed-out grey of the sky itself, so that it was difficult to tell where the one started and the other finished.

Clutching her coat tightly at the neck, she set off, stepping over the pools of rainwater in the crumbling asphalt at the edge of the road. Although the place was deserted, there was a watchfulness about her as she scanned the road ahead and occasionally glanced back over her shoulder. There was nothing particularly furtive about this – any young woman in a similarly isolated spot might have taken the same care.

Her appearance offered little clue as to who she was. The wind constantly flurried her brown hair across her wide-jawed face, obscuring her features in an ever-shifting veil, and her

clothing was unremarkable. If anyone had happened by, they would most likely have taken her to be a local, perhaps on her way home to her family.

The truth couldn't have been more different.

She was Sarah Jerome, an escaped Colonist who was on the run for her life.

Walking a little further along, she suddenly strode up the verge and hurled herself through a parting in the briar hedgerow. She alighted in a small hollow on the other side and, keeping low, spun about so she had a clear view of the road. Here she remained for a full five minutes, listening and watching and animal alert. But other than the beat of the rain and the bluster of the wind in her ears, there was nothing. She was truly alone.

She knotted a scarf over her head, then scrambled from the hollow. Moving quickly away from the road, she crossed the field before her in the lee of a loose stone wall. Then she climbed a steep incline, maintaining a fast pace as she reached the crest of the hill. Here, silhouetted against the sky, Sarah knew she was exposed, and wasted no time in continuing down the other side, into the valley that opened out before her.

All around, the wind, channelled by the contours, was driving the rain into confused twisting vortices, like diminutive hurricanes. And through this, something jarred, something registered in the corner of her eye. She froze, turning to catch a brief glimpse of the pale form. A chill shot down her spine . . . the movement didn't belong to the sway of the heathers or the beat of the grasses . . . it had a different rhythm to it.

She fixed her eyes on the spot until she saw what it was. There, on the valley side, a young lamb came fully into view,

prancing a chaotic gambol between the tussocks of Fescue. As she watched, it suddenly bolted behind a copse of stunted trees, as if it had been frightened by something. Sarah's nerves jangled. *What had driven it away? Was there somebody else close by – another human being?* Sarah tensed, then relaxed as she saw the lamb emerge into the open once again, this time escorted by its mother, who chewed vacantly as the youngster began to nuzzle her flank.

It was a false alarm, but there was no hint of relief in Sarah's face, or of amusement. Her eyes didn't stay on the lamb as it began to scamper about again, its fleece fresh as virgin cotton wool, in marked contrast to its mother's coarse, mud-streaked coat. There was no room for such diversions in Sarah's life, not now, *not ever*. She was already checking the opposite side of the valley, scouring it for anything that didn't fit.

Then she was off again, picking her way through the Celtic stillness of the lush green vegetation and over the smooth slabs of stone, until she came to a stream nestled in the crook of the valley. Without a moment's hesitation, she strode straight into the crystal-clear waters, altering her course to that of the stream, and sometimes using the moss-covered rocks as stepping stones when they afforded her a faster means through it.

As the level of the water rose, threatening to seep in over the top of her shoes, she hopped back on to the bank, which was carpeted with a springy green pad of sheep-cropped grass. Still she maintained the same unrelenting pace and, before long, a rusted wire fence came into view, and then the raised farm track that she knew ran behind it.

Then she spotted what she'd come for. Where the farm track intersected the stream there stood a crude stone bridge,

its sides crumbling and badly in need of repair. Her course beside the stream was taking her straight towards it, and she broke into a trot in her haste to get there. Within minutes she had arrived at her destination.

Ducking under the bridge, she paused to wipe the moisture from her eyes. Then she crossed to the other side, where she held completely still as she studied the horizon. The evening was drawing in and the rose-tinged glow of newly-lit street lights was just beginning to filter through a screen of oak trees, which hid all but the tip of the church steeple in the distant village.

She returned to a point halfway along the underside of the bridge, stooping as her hair snagged on the rough stone above. She located an irregular block of granite, which was slightly proud of the surface. With both hands, she began to prise it out, levering it left and right and then up and down, until it came free. It was the size and weight of several house bricks, and she grunted with the effort as she bent to place it on the ground by her feet.

Straightening up, she peered into the void, then inserted her arm all the way to her shoulder and groped around inside. Her face pressed against the stonework, she found a chain, which she tried to pull down on. It was stuck fast. Try as she might, she couldn't move it. She swore and, taking a deep breath, braced herself for another attempt. This time it gave.

For a second nothing happened as she continued to pull one-handed on the chain. Then she heard a sound like distant thunder emanating from deep within the bridge.

Before her, hitherto invisible joints broke open with a spray of mortar dust and dried lichen, and an uneven, door-sized hole opened up before her as a section of the wall lifted back,

then up. After a final thud which made the whole bridge quake, all was silent again except for the gurgle of the stream and the patter of rain.

Stepping into the gloomy interior, she took a small key-ring torch from her coat pocket and switched it on. The dim circle of light revealed she was in a chamber some fifteen metres square, with a ceiling that was sufficiently high to allow her to stand upright. She glanced around, registering the dust motes as they drifted lazily through the air, and the cobwebs, as thick as rotted tapestries, which festooned the tops of the walls.

It had been built by Sarah's great-great-grandfather in the year before he'd taken his family underground for a new life in the Colony. A master stonemason by trade, he'd drawn on all his skills to conceal the chamber within the crumbling and dilapidated bridge, intentionally choosing a site miles from anywhere on the seldom-used farm track. And why exactly he'd gone to all this trouble, neither of Sarah's parents had been able to provide any answers. But whatever its original purpose, this was one of the very few places she felt truly safe. Rightly or wrongly, she believed that nobody would ever find her here. She pulled off her scarf and shook her hair free, allowing herself to relax.

Her feet on the grit-covered floor broke the tomb-like silence as she moved to a narrow stone shelf on the wall opposite the entrance. At either end of the shelf were two rusty vertical iron prongs, with sheaths of thick hide covering their tips.

'Let there be light,' she said softly. She reached out and simultaneously tugged off both the sheaths to expose a pair of luminescent orbs, which were held in place on top of each

prong by flaking red iron claws.

No larger than nectarines, an eerie green light burst forth from these glass spheres with such intensity that she was forced to shield her eyes. It was as if their energy had been building and building under the leather covers, and they now revelled in their newfound freedom. She brushed one of the spheres with her fingertips, feeling its ice-cold surface and shuddering slightly, as if its touch conferred some sort of connection with the hidden city where they were commonplace.

The pain and suffering she had endured under this very light.

She dropped her hand to the top of the shelf, sifting through the thick layer of silt covering it.

Just as she'd hoped, her hand closed on a small polythene bag. She smiled, snatching it up and shaking it to remove the grime. The bag was sealed with a knot, which she quickly unpicked with her cold fingers. Removing the neatly-folded piece of paper from inside, she lifted it to her nose to sniff at it. It was damp and fusty. She could tell that the message had been there for several months.

Although there wasn't something waiting for her every time she visited, she kicked herself for not coming sooner. But she rarely allowed herself to check at less than six-monthly intervals as this 'dead letterbox' procedure held its dangers for all concerned. These were the only times that she came into indirect contact with anyone from her former life. There was always a risk, however small, that the courier could have been shadowed as he'd broken out of the Colony and emerged on the surface in Highfield. She also couldn't ignore the possibility that he might have been spotted on the journey up from London itself. Nothing could be taken for granted. The enemy was patient, sublimely patient and calculating, and

Sarah knew they would never cease in their efforts to capture and kill her. She had to beat them at their own game.

She glanced at her watch. She always varied her routes to and from the bridge, and she hadn't allowed much time for the cross-country hike to the neighbouring village where she would catch the bus for the journey home.

She should be on her way, but her craving for news of her family was just too great. This piece of paper was her only connection with her mother, brother and two sons – it was like a lifeline to her.

She had to know what was in it. She smelt the note again.

Apart from her need for any information about them, there was something else that was impelling her to break from the carefully devised procedures she followed so unfailingly every time she paid a visit to the bridge.

It was as if there was a distinctive and unwelcome smell to the paper, rising above the mingled odours of mould and mildew in the dank chamber. It was sharp and unpleasant – it was the reek of *bad news*. Her premonitions had served her well before, and she wasn't about to start ignoring them now.

With a mounting sense of dread, she stared deep into the light of the nearest orb, fidgeting with the piece of paper while she fought the urge to read it. Then, appalled with herself for being so weak, she grimaced and opened it out. Standing before the stone shelf, she examined it under the green-tinged illumination.

She frowned. The first surprise was that the message wasn't in her brother's hand. The childish handwriting was unfamiliar to her. Tam *always* wrote them. Her premonition had been right – she knew at once that something was amiss. She flipped it over and scanned to the end to see if there was a

name written there. 'Joe Waites,' she spoke aloud, feeling more and more uneasy. That wasn't right; Joe occasionally acted as the courier, but the message should have been from Tam.

She bit her lip in trepidation, and began to read, darting through the first lines.

'Oh dear God,' she gasped, shaking her head.

She read the first side of the letter again, unable to accept what was there, telling herself that she must have misunderstood it, or that it had to be some sort of a mistake. But it was as clear as day; the simplistically-formed words left no room for confusion. And she had no reason to doubt what it was saying – these messages were the one thing she relied on, a constant in her shifting and restless life. They gave her a reason to go on.

'No, not Tam . . . *not Tam*,' she howled.

As surely as if she had been struck, she sagged against the stone shelf, leaning heavily on it to support herself.

She took a deep, tremulous breath, and forced herself to turn the letter over and read the rest, shaking her head vehemently and mumbling 'No, no, no, no . . . it can't be . . .'

As if the first page hadn't been bad enough, what was on the reverse was just too much for her to take in. With a whimper, she pushed away from the shelf and into the centre of the chamber. Swaying on her feet and hugging herself, she raised her head to look unseeingly at the ceiling.

All of a sudden she had to get out. She tore through the doorway in a frantic haste. Leaving the bridge behind her, she didn't stop. As she stumbled blindly by the side of the stream, the darkness was gathering rapidly and the rain was still falling in a persistent drizzle. Not knowing or caring where she was

going, she was sliding and slipping over the wet grass.

She hadn't gone very far when she blundered straight off the bank and into the stream, landing with a splash. She lowered to her knees, the clear waters closing around her waist. But her grief was so all-consuming, she didn't feel their icy chill. Her head was swivelling on her shoulders as if she was gripped by the most intense agony.

She did something she hadn't done since the day she'd escaped Topsoil, the day she'd abandoned her two young children and husband. She began to cry, a few tears at first, and then she was unable to control herself and they gushed down her cheeks in floods, as if a dam had been broken.

She wept and wept until there was nothing left. Her face was set in a mask of stone-cold anger as she rose slowly to her feet, bracing herself against the surging flow of the stream. Her dripping hands tightened into fists and she threw them at the sky as she screamed at the top of her lungs, the raw, primeval sound rolling through the empty valley.