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opening extract from

# Closer - Book 4 of the Tunnels Series

Written by

## Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams

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We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

*The Secret Sits,* by Robert Frost, 1942

You've never seen me
You've never hoped, too fair to say
You just can't explain yourself
You can't explain yourself
I can't explain this pain ...

*I Betray My Friends,* by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark

Am Tag aller Summierung, tragen Sie Ihren Körper vorwärts auf dem Wrack Ihrer Tage. Für Sie seien nicht, was Sie waren, aber was Sie anstrebten.

*German Book of Catastrophes*,
Author(s) Unknown, 17th Century

# Part One

# Revelations



# Chapter One



Waves of flame, red through white. Hair singes, skin contracts. The sound of a rushing, howling gale as all the oxygen is sucked from the place, then the splash of water as Rebecca Two throws herself into the pool, taking her sister with her. Stunned and barely conscious, Rebecca One's body is limp like a rag doll's, but even the chill water fails to shock her to her senses.

They sink below the surface. Beneath the intense heat.

Rebecca Two clasps a hand over her sister's mouth and nose, in an attempt to seal them. Then she forces herself to think. *Sixty seconds at the outside,* she tells herself as her lungs begin to strain. *What now?*

She glances at the raging inferno above, waves of crimson refracted by waves of water. Ignited by Elliott's charges, the bone-dry vegetation is feeding the firestorm, clogging the surface of the pool with thick black ash. And just to make matters worse, Elliott is still up there – *the half-breed bitch!* – watching and waiting and ready to pick them off the moment they show themselves. How does Rebecca Two know this? Because that's precisely what she'd do in the same situation.

*No, there's no going back.* Not if they want to make it through this.

Fumbling with her shirt pocket, she takes out a spare luminescent orb. More seconds wasted, but she needs to see where she's going.

*Must decide soon . . . now . . . while I still can*.

For want of any alternative, she decides to push deeper down into the murky half-light, tugging her sister after her. Rebecca Two can see that the girl is bleeding from her stomach wound, the trail of blood like wispy red ribbons swirling behind her.

*Fifty seconds.*

Light-headedness. The first sign of air deprivation.

Amongst the tumult of bubbles and the rush of water in her ears, Rebecca Two catches her sister's cries. The lack of air has brought the girl around, and her words are panicked and indistinct. She begins to struggle weakly, but Rebecca Two digs her fingers hard into her arm – she seems to understand and goes limp again, allowing herself to be borne down.

*Forty seconds.*

Fighting the compulsion to open her mouth and breathe, Rebecca Two continues to dive. The halo cast by her luminescent orb reveals a vertical weed-covered surface. A school of tiny fish darts away, their metallic blue scales iridescent in the light of the orb.

*Thirty seconds.*

Then Rebecca Two spots a shadowy opening. As she kicks out her legs and drives herself and her sister into it, her mind flashes back to a former life: to all those school swimming lessons up in Highfield.

*Twenty seconds.*





She finds that it's a channel. *Maybe*, she dares to let herself hope. *Maybe*. Her chest is burning – she can't hold on for much longer, but still she swims further into the channel, checking around her as she goes.

*Ten seconds.*

She's disorientated – no longer sure what's up or what's down. Then she notices the reflection. A few metres away, light from her orb ripples back from a shifting, mirror-like patch. With her remaining strength, she takes them both towards it.

Their heads break the surface of the water, bursting into a pocket of air trapped in the roof of the channel.

Rebecca Two fills her racked lungs, grateful that it's not methane or an accretion of some other harmful gas. Once her coughing and spluttering subsides, she checks her sister. Although the injured girl's head is clear of the water, it lolls forward.

'Come on! Wake up!' Rebecca Two cries, shaking her.

Nothing.

Then she slips her arms around the girl's ribcage and squeezes her hard several times.

Still nothing.

She pinches the girl's nose shut and gives her the kiss of life.

'That's it! Breathe!' Rebecca Two shouts, her voice booming in the enclosed space as her sister makes a small gurgling sound and water spews from her mouth. Then she inhales fully, but it only makes her choke up more water and she starts to thrash around in a blind panic. 'Easy, easy,' Rebecca Two tells her. 'We're okay now.'

After a while, Rebecca One becomes calm and her

breathing regular, if shallow. Clutching her stomach under the water, she's clearly in terrible pain from her wound. Her face is deadly white.'You're not going to pass out again?' Rebecca Two asks, eying her with concern.

Rebecca One doesn't respond. The two girls look at each other, knowing they are safe – at least for the time being. Knowing they've survived.

'I'm going to check further along,' Rebecca Two says.

Rebecca One stares vacantly back. Then she makes a huge effort to speak, but only gets as far as forming a 'W' with her lips.

'Why?' Rebecca Two articulates the word for her. 'Look above you,' she says, prompting her sister to focus on what she's instinctively sought out as a handhold. Several snake-thick cables are fixed to the roof of the channel – old power lines coiled together with their casings broken away and their cores visible, crusted with slimy brown rust. 'We're in some sort of excavation. There could be another way out.'

Rebecca One nods slightly and closes her eyes, barely clinging to consciousness.



# Chapter Two



After more than two days on the subterranean river, Chester steered the launch towards the long quayside.

'Use your light! See what's there!' he shouted at Martha over the roar of the outboard motor.

Martha lifted her luminescent orb, directing its beam at the shadowy structures to the rear of the quayside. As he eased off the throttle and the launch coasted along, Chester took in the buildings and dockside crane. This harbour was certainly much more substantial than any of the other, smaller ones along the route, where they'd stopped to refuel and catch an hour or two of rest. Chester's heart thumped with anticipation as he dared to let himself think that they'd finally reached the end of their journey.

The launch bumped against the side, and Chester cut the engine. Martha grabbed hold of one of the bollards, tying the mooring line up to it. Then she shone her light again, and Chester spied a large archway picked out in white paint. He remembered what Will had told him about the bricked-up entrance to the harbour, and how he'd said it was wide enough to drive a lorry through. It had to be the same one.

Although he was sopping wet and very cold, Chester was filled with elation. *I made it! I bloody made it!* he was shouting inwardly, but he didn't utter a word as they hauled themselves from the launch and onto dry land.

*I'm back Topsoil again!*

But despite the fact that he was almost home, the situation was far from ideal.

He shot a glance at Martha as she lumbered a few clumsy steps along the quayside. The rotund woman, in her many layers of filthy clothing, was making grunting noises like a wild boar about to charge. That was nothing new – her behaviour had always been rather erratic – but now he watched as she jerked her head round to the darkness and cursed as if someone was there. There wasn't.

Chester just wished Will had come back with him. Or one of the others. The way the cards had fallen, Chester had been stranded with this woman. She grunted again, even louder this time, then yawned so widely he caught a flash of her stained teeth. Chester knew she must be exhausted from the journey, and also that the full force of gravity probably wasn't helping. Even he felt it tugging down on his body, so he imagined it must be that much worse for Martha, who hadn't experienced anything like it in years.

And it also struck Chester how strange this moment must be for her. Raised in the Colony, Martha had never been to the surface before, and she was about to see the sun for the very first time. She certainly hadn't led the easiest of lives: she and her husband had been Banished by the Styx to the Deeps five miles below the Colony. Here they'd become part of the roving, lawless brigade of renegades, who were just as likely to kill each other as they were to succumb to the dangers of





those darklands. Incredibly, she'd given birth to a son, Nathaniel, whilst in the Deeps, but her husband had later attempted to murder both of them by shoving them over the side of the Pore.

Although they'd survived the fall, Nathaniel had later died of a fever, leaving Martha to fend for herself. For more than two years she'd been totally cut off from any other living soul. Barricading herself in an old shack, she'd survived by trapping and eating the bizarre creatures which were in plentiful supply down there.

When Will, Chester and a badly injured Elliott had arrived on the scene, she had instantly formed attachments to the boys, as if they were substitutes for the beloved son she'd lost. In fact, these attachments had been so strong, she'd been quite prepared for Elliott to die so that the two boys weren't put at risk. She'd kept it from them that there was supply of modern medicines in a submarine that had been sucked down another of the pores. But after Will had discovered the truth, she redeemed herself by taking him and Chester there, effectively saving Elliott's life. And the boys had forgiven her for her deception.

That had been then.

Right now Chester hadn't the faintest idea what he was going to do next. He had Martha to cope with, on top of the ever-present threat of the Styx, who would be after him wherever he went Topsoil. He had nowhere to go, and no one he could go to for help, except Drake. Drake was his only hope, his only lifeline.

*Drake, please, please be here!* Chester thought as he scoured the murky darkness of the quay, wishing the man would just appear. Chester wanted to scream out his name, but he didn't, because no doubt Martha would take it badly if she learnt he

had tried to contact him. Chester knew how over-protective and possessive she was, and the last thing he needed now was for her to go into one of her protracted sulks. And Chester had no way of knowing if Drake had received the message he'd left on the remote server for him. Or even if he was still alive.

Still without speaking, Chester and Martha followed Will's instructions and hauled the launch from the water. They were so unused to anything like the full force of gravity that in no time at all both of them were short of breath. However, with much groaning and cursing from Martha, they eventually lugged it over to one of the empty buildings, where they propped it up.

As Chester leant with his hands on his knees to recover, he realised all he wanted to do was to go to London and see his parents again. Whatever the risk. Maybe his mother and father would be able to sort this terrible mess out. Maybe they could just hide him away somewhere. He didn't care – he had to see them and let them know he was all right.



Rebecca Two swam quickly back to her sister. She was relieved to find that she still had her fingers hooked around the electrical cables. The Styx girl had managed to hold herself above the water, but her strength was failing rapidly. Her head was slumped against her raised arm, and her eyes were firmly shut. It took Rebecca Two several seconds to rouse her. It was becoming imperative that she be moved somewhere dry and warm before shock set in.

'Take in as much air as you can. I'm going to get us out of here,' Rebecca Two said. 'There's a place up ahead.'

'What place?' Rebecca One mumbled listlessly.





'I followed some narrow-gauge railway tracks along the bottom of the tunnel,' Rebecca Two replied, flicking her eyes at the water just below their chins. 'I came up in a section that wasn't flooded. It was larger than just another air pock—'

'Let's do it,' Rebecca One cut her short. She took a deep breath and released the overhead cables.

Rebecca Two dragged her sister after her until they reached the place she'd described. As Rebecca One floated on her back, Rebecca Two pulled her along like a lifeguard.

Before long, the water was shallow enough to wade through, although Rebecca Two was forced to support her sister every step of the way. They stumbled and splashed along until they finally came to dry ground.

Rebecca Two noticed the tracks continued in the tunnel up ahead, but much as she wanted to find out where they led, she needed to deal with her sister first. She laid her down, then very gently peeled back her shirt to inspect the wound. There was a small puncture in the side of her midriff, just above her hip. Although the wound didn't appear to be that serious at first glance, an alarming amount of blood was welling out of it and leaving a translucent red film over the girl's wet stomach.

'How's it look?' Rebecca One asked.

'I'm going to roll you over onto your side,' Rebecca Two warned, then carefully lifted her sister to check her back. 'Thought so,' she said under her breath as she found a second wound where the bullet had exited.

'How's it look?' Rebecca One repeated through gritted teeth. 'Just tell me.'

'Could be worse. Bad news is you're losing a lot of blood. The good news is the bullet hit you in the side of your stomach, in the fleshy part—'

'What d'you mean 'fleshy part'? You saying I'm fat?' Rebecca One growled, indignant despite her weakened state.

'You always were the vain one, weren't you? Let me finish,' Rebecca Two said, lowering her sister onto her back again. 'The bullet's passed right through you, so at least I won't have to dig it out. But I've got to stop the bleeding. And you know what that means . . .'

'Yes,' Rebecca One murmured. She suddenly became insanely angry, clenching her slender fingers into fists. 'I can't believe that little runt did this to me. He actually shot me! Will shot me!' she fumed. 'How dare he!'

'Take it easy,' Rebecca Two said, as she took off her own shirt. She gnawed on the hem until she was able tear a strip from it, then tore several more.

Rebecca One was still ranting. 'His biggest mistake was he didn't finish me off. He should've finished the job when he had the chance, because I'm going back for him. And I'm going to make bloody sure he feels pain like this, but a million million times worse.'

'You better believe it,' Rebecca Two agreed, as she knotted two of the strips together, then folded the remaining ones so they formed pads.

'I want to cut and bleed the little pig, but slowly . . . so slowly . . . over days . . . *no* . . . weeks,' Rebecca One seethed in a semi-delirium. '*And* he took the Dominion virus from us. He's got to pay f—'

'We'll get the Dominion back. Now can you just shut up, please. You need to save your strength,' Rebecca Two said. 'I'm going to put patches on your wounds, then bind them really tight.'

Rebecca One tensed as her sister placed the pads of





material over both bullet holes. Then, as Rebecca Two passed the strip around her waist and pulled hard, the Styx girl's terrible screams of agony echoed down the darkened tunnel.

'Do hurry it up, love,' Martha pressed Chester as he tried to decide what he wanted to take with him. He didn't reply, but inwardly he was ready to explode.

*Oh, leave me alone, will you?*

She really was like some annoying busybody of an aunt, always fussing over him and watching him with those doe eyes. And she'd been sweating profusely since they hauled the launch out of the water, and Chester was sure he could smell a sour odour emanating from her.

'No point dilly-dallying round here, dearie,' she said in a sickly voice.

That was it. He couldn't take any more of her hovering behind him. She was always just that little bit too close, and it made him very uncomfortable. He snatched up a few items at random and stuffed them on top of the sleeping bag in his rucksack, which he then did up.

'Ready,' he announced, intentionally swinging the rucksack onto his shoulder so that it forced Martha to take a step back to avoid being bashed by it. Then he marched rapidly down the quay and away from her.

But within seconds she was behind him again, like some stray dog.

'Where is it then?' Martha demanded sharply, as Chester tried to recall Will's directions. He could hear her breathing was becoming laboured, as if she was annoyed with him, or the situation she now found herself in.