

The Brink by Jack Messenger Free Excerpt

THE BRINK

Jack Messenger

All Rights Reserved © Jack Messenger 2008

PROLOGUE

WEDNESDAY 2 OCTOBER 1940

He felt safe in the dark. Even when the bombs dropped.

Like the night before, when he'd taken the lorry.

He could feel the beating of his heart, pounding in his chest it was. His skin tingled against his clothes. He felt ready for anything.

It was easy. There wasn't much petrol in the tank, but he knew how to get that. Besides, he wouldn't need it for long.

He'd waited in the car park behind the flicks. The air was damp around him. He'd huddled close to the warm bonnet of a red Buick parked by some old geezer. He hadn't dressed for the cold. He kept his best gear at the dump. Never wore anything good on a job.

It was a Friday night and the place was packed. The film was a comedy. He could hear them laughing. Like the kids on Saturday mornings, when he used to sneak in to watch the serials.

He knew the owner of the lorry. He'd gone with the boss when he put the pressure on. He always did. He kept his eyes open, watched how the boss operated. The boss trusted him.

The keys were kept on the shelf above the bench at the back of the lock-up. He noticed things like that. You never knew when they'd be useful. The boss would have been impressed. The boss liked initiative.

As soon as it was dark enough and the last of them had run into the cinema, he'd clambered over the brick wall at the back. The

lock-up was just down the lane, in one of the arches. He'd cut through the stupid little padlock, laughing to himself. No one seemed to bother these days. It was a doddle.

He'd paused inside the doors. When he'd edged around to the front of the lorry he risked turning on his flashlight. The keys shone for him. They felt cold and sharp.

He'd had trouble starting it up. The starter handle was a bastard. When the engine finally caught, he'd jumped at the noise. Once he was on the road, he felt better. Who needed a driver? He could have done the whole job alone if there hadn't been so much of it. He hated sharing. Especially with these blokes. They didn't know nothing.

You had to have brains and confidence. He knew he had them. It made him different from the others. Pretty soon, it would always be like this. They'd be tipping their hats to him and minding their words, like he'd seen them do with the boss. He knew it like the boss knew it. He'd watched. He'd listened. He'd put up with things. Afterwards, when it was all over, no one would ever stick it to him again.

Everything was easy if you knew how. He could do anything he liked. He earned good cash. It was always cash. He'd got his suit from the same bloke as the boss. Pretty soon, he'd move out of the dump he rented and be in something proper. After tonight, he'd be on his way.

He nursed the fear inside him. It made him feel warm. He wanted to get going. The others didn't care. He knew what they called

him behind his back. It didn't matter. He knew more than them. He was in charge. He'd set things up. It was his do.

Now, here he was, sitting with them in the lorry, watching the fight, waiting for the main event. The four of them cramped together in the front. He could feel their bodies pressing up against him. They smelled. They didn't know how to dress. They didn't have the money. No brains.

He looked at the watch he'd stolen. Three minutes to one. The night felt heavy with the waiting.

The raid was four hours old. He could hear the rumble of the bombers 15,000 feet overhead and the thud of anti-aircraft. Searchlights swung through the night. Incendiary bombs exploded. The sky lit up in flashes of orange and yellow. The fires raged.

"Someone's copping a packet."

The kid jumped, despite himself. The big'un looked at him and smiled stupidly.

"It's the works again." The littl'un pulled on his fag, his mouth twitching.

"As long as they don't come too close."

The kid sneered at the driver. "Scared?"

The driver looked at him, his hat jammed down tight. "No. Just careful."

"I told you. It's a doddle."

"Nothing's ever a doddle."

"This is. I know."

They had time to finish their fags. The lorry was hot and fugged. The windows were open a crack, to let the smoke escape. The street was dark and silent.

“No one comes here at night. Not even the coppers.”

“Not when there’s a raid on they don’t!”

“Keep your voice down!”

“What for? There’s no one can hear.”

“He’s right. Keep it down.”

“You blokes kill me.”

The littl’un coughed and squirmed, like he had nits or something. He tried to pull away from him, but there was no room. If he caught anything from him he’d give him what for.

He hated it when they made him feel small. It reminded him of things. Like the bastards at the camp. And the boss. There’d be no more of that, not after tonight. He thought of other things. He was good at that. He knew how to think and what not to think. Attack and defence. He’d had years of practice.

If he could have done it alone, he would have. He closed his eyes and imagined what it would be like. Alone in the dark, waiting. There was no pain in the dark. It was the light that brought the pain. And the pictures.

He swore at himself. Forget that. Forget them all. Think of something else.

He thought of his girl. He wondered what she was doing. Thinking of him, probably. Unless ... He put it out of his mind. Tonight. That’s what counts.

They watched the fires spread across the river. Smoke spiralled upward in billows. Windows and roofs spurted flame.

“Front row seats here.”

“Like at the pictures?”

“It’s all going up.”

“Breaks your heart when you think of all that stuff going to waste.”

“We’ll get some of it tonight.”

“And the kids will get what’s left tomorrow.”

He knew what that was like. Scrabbling through the debris before the clean-up squads arrived and the coppers chased you off. Looking for ration books and cash. Taking rings off dead fingers. Once, a bloody great necklace round some old dame covered in blood and still breathing. Then off to some small timer with the pickings, to get robbed blind.

He’d grown up quick. Pretty soon he’d learned to let the smaller kids take the risk, then scare them into giving him the best of what they’d found. Then, one day, when he’d gone to the fence, the boss was there, smiling, smoking a cigar, not saying much because he didn’t have to. He’d grown up quick, all right.

“Kid’s stuff!”

He’d had enough of being a kid.

“They do all right.”

The big’un stretched and yawned. “What’s the time?”

“Time we started.”

“Right. Let’s get going.”

The engine turned over dryly, then stalled. The others looked at him.

“I thought you was a driver!” The words came out too loud. He couldn’t help it.

“You found the lorry. I told you I should have done it.”

“Stop bleating and get on with it, can’t you?”

The engine coughed, then caught.

“Blimey! Sounds loud.”

“Not as loud as that lot over there.”

They looked to where the driver was pointing. The sky was livid above the works.

“It’s getting close.”

“Then we’d better get a move on, for God’s sake. And stop this yacking.”

The driver put the lorry in first and pulled it out into the road.

“Shove it into neutral. It’s all down hill.”

They bounced and swayed together as the empty lorry drifted toward the river. Their thighs and shoulders rubbed against him. He felt sick with it all. He’d have to have a bath when it was over. Keeping clean was important. It helped him forget.

“Bloody cobbles.”

“Mind out. Here’s the tracks.”

“I know. I got eyes, ain’t I?”

“The gates are there.”

“Pull over and keep the engine on.”

“Proper little Hitler, ain’t he?”

The kid opened the door and three of them went to the gate with the cutters.

“I’ve got the key.”

“We’ve got to cut it, you idiot!”

“We’ll do that afterwards.”

“We’ll do it now.”

“What if a copper sees?”

“What copper? Besides, we’ll make it look good.”

“Why not do it when we’ve finished? Then there’s no worry.”

“We’ll do it now or not at all.”

He felt his fear turn to rage. He was in charge. They didn’t know nothing. His fists clenched. He took a step forward. The big’un raised the heavy cutters and looked at him, waiting.

The driver was drumming on the steering wheel with his thumbs. He leaned out the window. “What the bloody hell you doing?”

The kid watched as the cutters closed on the padlock. The big’un gasped and strained, but he couldn’t make it. His arms dropped to his side, the cutters clattering against the gates.

“I’m whacked. You have a go.”

“I’ve got the bloody key here!”

“Shut up!” The litt’un’s face was twitching ceaselessly, his eyes darting between the distant fires and the padlocked gate. He jerked his head at the big’un. “Try again. You can do it.”

The big’un tried again, grunting with the effort. The padlock broke with a loud snap.

They pushed the gates open and the lorry drove through. They closed the gates and put the padlock into position. The raid grew louder and there was a sudden explosion on their side of the river. They got back into the lorry.

“Here! I don’t like this.” The big’un sounded scared.

“Shut up! It’s perfect.”

“It’ll be crawling with firemen here soon!”

“They’ll have enough to do without worrying about us.”

The lorry followed the narrow lane along the side of the warehouse until they reached the loading bay. The driver turned it outwards till it faced the perimeter wall.

“What the bloody hell you doing? It’s over there!”

“Don’t you know nothing? We’ve got to load up, ain’t we?”

The driver reversed the lorry into position, letting it bump against the loading bay. Then he cut the engine. He left the keys in. The four of them jumped out, leaving the lorry doors open. They could hear the raid getting closer, the clang of the tenders as they crossed the river.

The kid led the way up the concrete steps. “This is the door. And this time we’re using the key. I’m not wasting any more time with bloody cutters.”

“Me neither. There’s no padlock on this door.”

One of them laughed.

“Shut up! You know what I mean. We’ll break the lock afterwards.”

He took out the keys and tried to find the lock. “Shine the bloody torch, can’t you?”

The flashlight came on and found the lock. They gathered round the door, to cover the light. The key turned and they pushed through into the warehouse.

“Here, give me the torch.”

“Keep it on the floor! You’re shaking it about like a bloody searchlight.”

He led the way through the dark. One of them tripped behind him. Thick bastard. Then he saw the sign.

“Here it is. Piper.”

“Who’s he?”

“The bloody owner, who’d you think?”

“Very obliging of him to give you the keys.”

“Didn’t have much choice, did he?”

He felt proud. Suddenly, he had their respect. He could feel it in the silence, in the way they looked at him in the glow of the torchlight. He knew things they didn’t. He could think for himself.

He led the way. He played the flashlight around a small storeroom. Iron pillars. In between, wooden crates, stacked in rows across the back wall.

They looked at them. No one moved. He could hear one of them breathing quickly.

“Let’s get going.”

They worked steadily for an hour, their eyes adjusting to the dark. The kid picked up the crates and handed them over at the first door. The big’un took them to the main door. Then they were taken to the lorry, where the driver packed them away. In between times he kept an eye on the gate at the end of the lane.

They rested a while.

“Bloody heavy work this.”

Somewhere close a bomb exploded. They could see the glow of fires through the barred windows.

“Told you this would be easy.”

He felt good, vindicated. It was the future. He was on his way.

“We’re not finished yet.”

“If that fire gets any closer we’d better clear out.”

“We’re not clearing out till we get the lot. Come on.”

They started again.

He was in charge. It was his do. They took the orders.

“These crates keep getting heavier. I’m sweating like a pig.”

“It’s that bloody fire and all. I can hardly breathe. There’s no air.”

“Here!”

They looked at the driver. He stood in the main door, a grey silhouette, his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. “The wind’s blowing our way”, he said. “Know what that means?”

“The fire’s heading our way and all?” The littl’un sounded scared. His shoes made a dry scraping sound as he edged toward the door. His fag end glowed between his fingers.

“Right. Someone should go out and see what’s happening.”

The kid handed over his crate to the big’un. “I’ll go.”

“No you won’t”, said the driver. “I’ll go.”

“Why you?”

“I’m the driver, that’s why.”

They followed him out and watched him jump off the loading bay and run down the lane. Soon he was out of sight, lost in the giant shadow of the warehouse.

The kid swore. "I'll do him when this is over."

"No you won't."

"Who says so?"

"We do."

The fire had spread rapidly, leaping across the narrow alleys. Flames were shooting in bursts from the roofs of warehouses a few streets away. They could see the water from the fire hoses and felt the ash and the heat on their faces. The rumble and roar of the fire was punctuated with the explosion of incendiaries and the crashing and splintering of walls and windows.

The kid licked his lips. "He's taking his bloody time. Where is he?"

"He'll be back."

They waited. They heard another tender arrive, somewhere close. The heat increased. Still no driver.

The kid shouted at them. "I bet he's done a bunk! I knew he'd got the wind up! He's bloody well done a bunk!"

The big'un looked at the littl'un. The littl'un shrugged and edged toward the lorry.

The driver emerged from the darkness, running.

"Well?"

The driver bent over to get his breath back.

"Come on, out with it!"

"It's bloody close! We've done it just in time."

“Told you.”

The driver nodded toward the crates piled by the lorry. “How many we get?”

“Dunno yet.”

The driver stood up and looked at him. The kid could see the flames in his eyes. Orange and yellow, streaked with blue.

“Didn’t you bloody well check? I thought you was supposed to be in charge!”

“I am in charge! And don’t you forget it!”

“But you don’t know how much we got! Well it just so happens I do know how much we got. I know what I’m doing, see? I bothered to count.”

“So?”

The driver looked at the crates they’d dumped by the tailgate. “That’s another seven. That makes a hundred. On the nose.”

“Like I said.”

“Like you supposed. Now, we know.”

The littl’un swore. “Stop wasting time and let’s get out of here. The whole bloody lot could go up soon.”

They loaded the last seven crates and closed the tailgate.

“You get the tarp.”

The littl’un climbed up and pulled the tarpaulins over the back of the lorry, tying them together and knotting them to the tailgate.

“All set.”

“Let’s go.”

The engine turned and stalled. The driver tried again, then swore. He looked at the kid. "You. Get out and use the handle."

The kid got out, went to the front of the lorry. He realized his mistake as soon as he saw their faces, talking in whispers, smiles on their twisted lips. With each downward shove he felt the rage mount within him. He'd let himself be ordered about. It was his night, his job. It wasn't his fault the lorry was rubbish. These blokes knew nothing. He'd deal with them all after it was over. Then they'd know.

His arm was aching and his face prickled with sweat. Sodding lorry. Know-all bloody driver. The big'un, with his broken knuckles and broken brain. The littl'un, with his twitch and his shifty look. He'd get them. He'd get the owner, too. Next time he visited the garage with the boss to put the screws on.

Someone shoved him out the way. "This is how you bloody well do it."

He watched the big'un turn the handle. Like some animal, in his thick black coat, bending over, grunting with the effort. The kid backed away, and stood inside the open door of the lorry. The littl'un looked down at him while the driver watched the fire.

The engine started. They got back into the cab. The lorry pulled away slowly, its gears grating.

"Lucky this bit's downhill. We're really loaded."

"Here, did you do the doors like we said?"

The bloody driver again. Always thinking of something, asking questions like he had the right.

"No."

"Why the bloody hell not?"

“It don’t matter, that’s why not.”

“You bloody little twat!”

“It don’t matter I tell you! There’s no risk.”

“There’s always risk! You’ll learn that when you’re older.”

“If he lives that long.”

“You shut up! Get a move on. We’re crawling.”

“I can’t go no faster. We’re loaded down.”

“There’s a bloody fire, in case you didn’t notice.”

“You don’t say!”

“Here, who’s that?”

“Where?”

“It’s a copper!”

“No it ain’t. Must be a fireman.”

“It’s a copper I tell you!”

“Bloody hell, he’s right!”

“Keep going.”

“I got to stop for the gates!”

“Sod the gates! Drive through them.”

“I can’t do that!”

“You bloody well have to!”

“Yes, we can. Look! They’re open!”

The kid laughed. “Very obliging of him. We’ll be all right.”

“Stupid copper. He thinks we’re going to stop.”

The policeman stood in front of the gates, signalling for them to halt. He held a truncheon in his right hand.

The kid laughed again. “Wave, boys! Wave at the nice policeman!”

He reached across the driver and put his hand out the window. He'd done it now. He'd really done it. Out the gates and into the big time. He grinned and gave a V-sign to the copper, laughing. Everything was all right. Everything.

“Stop it! I can't see!”

The policeman stepped forward, ready to jump out the way.

“He knows we ain't going to stop.”

“Blow the horn!”

“Are you nuts?”

“It don't matter about the noise now.”

Suddenly, the windscreen shattered and fragments of glass showered in on them. The driver shouted and put his hands to his eyes, while the kid leaned over and grabbed the wheel of the swaying lorry. There was a dull thump and the lorry lurched upward. A rumbling sound came up from the floor by the rear wheel.

The driver wrenched the wheel from the kid and braked. He wrapped his fist in his sleeve and punched through the shards of windscreen.

They were just in front of the gates.

They sat in silence, looking at the cobbled road outside. The engine ticked over. The fire growled. The big'un breathed quickly, painfully, like he was taking big gulps of air.

The driver wiped the blood from his face with the back of his sleeve. “We hit him.”

“No we didn't.”

“We hit him all right.”

“What the bloody hell can we do about it now? Let’s get going. Before we’re cooked.”

“If he’s dead, we’re cooked already.”

“Let’s take a look.”

“No! Drive!”

The driver switched off and took the keys. “Come on.”

They got out and looked back at the warehouse.

The policeman was lying behind the lorry, about thirty yards back and off to the left. His helmet lay on the ground near his feet. The fire illuminated his back and shone off his hair. They walked over to him, slowly. The driver bent down and looked at his face. He took hold of a wrist and waited.

“He’s not dead, is he?” The big’un backed away, like he was going into his corner.

“As good as.”

“Come on then. Let’s scarper.”

“Shut up. We have to think about this. I don’t want to get involved in no murder.”

“He’s alive ain’t he?”

“Not for long, I shouldn’t wonder. And you’ll have killed him.”

“Me? What did I do?”

The driver ignored the kid and looked at the others. “He’s dead or dying. What do you want to do?”

The big’un was edging further away from the body. “I knew I never should have come tonight.”

“Me too”, said the littl’un. He looked at the kid. “I had a feeling.”

“It’s too bloody late to think of that now!” shouted the driver. “We got to do something.”

Their faces glowed red in the light of the fire. They stared at the body. It was difficult to breathe. The hot air filled with cordite. Somewhere close a wall collapsed with a sudden roar and an uprush of debris.

The driver stood up. “We got to make up our minds and get out before it’s too late.”

The kid was impatient. “Who bloody well cares? Let’s go.”

They ignored him. The three of them looked at one another, freezing him out.

“I’m the bloody boss here!” he shouted, his fists clenched inside his pockets.

They didn’t hear him. Something exploded with a dull crump.

The driver glanced anxiously over his shoulder, then back at them.

“I’ll tell you what”, he said.