

HOMEcomings.

By Terri Nixon.

“Borstal, for fuck’s sake, leave it!”

Jez watched his companion debate for a moment then drop the wallet back onto the ground with a sigh. He sighed too; being twice the kid’s age didn’t automatically make *him* responsible. Then again, there wasn’t anyone else.

But so what, anyway? Borstal was eighteen, old enough to have got himself into this place, why should Jez now feel it was up to him to get him out?

Because there wasn’t anyone else. Shit. It kept coming back at him, hammering into his brain as if he hadn’t quite got it the first time.

“Come on then,” he said, and the kid slouched over to him, hands thrust into his pockets, the waistband of his jeans near enough skimming the tops of his thighs.

“We’re actually goin’ then?”

Jez nodded. “Yeah, we’re actually going.”

“S’fuckin’ freezin’, man.”

“So walk faster.” Jez set off across the exercise yard, glancing back over his shoulder at the familiar grey building, half expecting (hoping?) to hear the klaxon wail of the siren going off as soon as he stepped through the open gate. But of course, it wouldn’t.

There wasn’t anyone to man the cameras.

“So long, Dartmoor!” Borstal yelled, and let out a whoop as he gave the prison an

enthusiastic single fingered salute with each hand.

“Just shut up and get your arse out here.” Jez looked around, wondering if he’d really expected to feel any different on this side of the barrier - who knew how far this the effects of thing went, maybe it was just inside the prison?

But the world still felt empty. He shivered, and it had nothing to do with the March wind that cut across the moor like a blade. He drew his jacket across his chest, zipped it and, not waiting to see if Borstal was following, he started down the road. Stranded cars were not exactly nose to tail out here, but it didn’t take a lot to make this narrow road impassable. Shanks’s pony would have to do.

“Hey, Jezz?” Borstal said, catching up and falling into step beside him.

“Call me that again, you can find your own way,” Jez said.

“Sorry. Jez. Anyway, this place we’re heading to – ”

“Devonport Dockyard.”

“Yeah. Do you think there’ll be like, you know, people there?”

“That’s why I’m going, genius.”

“Oh, right. Only ... why should there be? I don’t wanna sound stupid, mate, but everyone in the nick just, well, they just died.”

“Not quite everyone,” Jez reminded him. “And I reckon there’s a decent chance the military know when they’re better off keeping out of the sun.”

“So you reckon it was the sun then?” Borstal looked nervously up at the sky. “What if it’s still happening?”

“Then we’ll drop dead like everyone else. But I’m buggered if I’m going to do it in there,” Jez jerked his thumb back over his shoulder.

“S’pose it’s good for me I was badass enough to be kept separate from the rest then,” Borstal said. “How come you didn’t get zapped?”

Jez shrugged. “Solitary. That’s what I get for getting involved in your stupid battles. Must have been in there when it all kicked off.”

“Still, we must have picked up some of it.”

“Probably. But not enough to kill us. Yet. Now shut up and walk.”

They walked in silence for a while, and Jez found his mind dragged unwillingly back to the day the world fell apart. Released from solitary confinement by an officer who’d finally tired of his furious screams, he’d stared around at the empty cells on his familiar wing, feeling hollow and nauseous. It was such a strong sensation that, for a moment, he’d convinced himself he had it too, whatever had struck down his fellow inmates. His friends.

Their bodies had been dragged out and stacked, ready for a coroner’s wagon that never came: Jimbo, Big Clive, Gary the Gob ... all gone. How long since the catastrophe? Two days? And everyone was gone. Except the screw who’d released him, of course.

Oh, and Borstal.

Ben “Borstal” Lewis had been in Dartmoor for only three days before he had got himself noticed for all the wrong reasons, seriously pissing off the kind of guys you really didn’t want to piss off. The encounter that had ensued had been brief and bloody, and at the end of it Borstal had been segregated for his own safety. Turned out it was even safer than anyone had suspected.

The prison officer, a miserable bastard known as Smiler, had also escaped being “zapped,” as Borstal had put it. He’d been sleeping off a hangover in the laundry, a flaunting of regulations that had saved his life. Temporarily, at least.

Discovering Jez and Borstal had clearly delighted him. Living out some sick fantasy, no doubt, where he was the lawmaker in some shitsplat little town in the

American mid-west.

He'd pushed Jez into his old cell and slammed the door – he'd never have been able to do that if Jez hadn't been so disorientated and confused. The mouthy kid, Borstal was in a cell down the block, Jez could hear him cursing and kicking his door at night. Seemed they were the only ones though.

Food came and was eaten, recycled and slopped out. Smiler allowed his two prisoners out, one at a time, to walk the corridors with him by way of exercise and seemed to think he was doing everyone a massive favour.

“When they come back, they'll thank me,” he said. “I've looked after you boys, and don't you forget it.”

“Screw you, Smiler. Why not just let us go?” Jez said. He ached all over, his skin itched, and he was bloody hungry. “You can just say you never found us. No-one'll give you a hard time over it.”

“Because you don't. Fucking. Deserve it.” Smiler leaned into Jez's face like some kind of drill sergeant. Jez felt the anger heating his blood and had forced himself to keep his fist down: if he struck out at the screw he'd suffer, one way or another. And anyway, pretty soon the cavalry would arrive and Smiler would collect his medal and retire on the money he got from selling his story to the press.

But of course no-one had come. Smiler grew more and more mental each day, and Jez and Borstal bore the bruises to prove it. The officer's nightstick would flash without warning, and one of them would get a lump behind the ear, or an aching rib.

Then Smiler's luck had run out.

A few days ago, maybe a week, who the hell knew? He had pushed Borstal into Jez's cell, mumbling something about keeping tabs on them more easily, and not having to listen to them yelling to each other down the block. Not that they had, since

Jez had lost his temper and yelled at Borstal to shut the hell up, it wasn't getting them anywhere.

The two of them didn't get on, but Jez found it strangely comforting to have someone else in there with him, even someone like Borstal.

This evening Smiler had come into the cell, jangling his infernal bunch of keys, and gestured for Borstal to take his walk down the corridor. Borstal had hesitated, trying to put his shoe on straight, for once nothing more rebellious than that. The nightstick shot out, clipping him on the shoulder, and before Jez knew what had happened his own doubled fist had struck Smiler on the back of his pudgy neck, and the screw was falling.

He'd landed badly. About as badly as it can get, in fact: his eye hit the corner of the bunk, exploding in a gush of jelly and watery blood, and Jez felt his stomach do a slow, sickening roll as Smiler's body flipped onto its back and the ruined face stared upwards.

"Fuck me, Trueman," Borstal breathed. "They was right about you, innit. I thought you was all mouth, but you really –"

"That's enough," Jez said, keeping his voice normal with an effort. He tore his gaze away from the grisly sight, and struggled to keep his meagre evening meal down. "Just grab a coat and whatever else you need. We're getting out of here."

And so, here they were, leaving Princetown behind and heading for Plymouth. Night was painting heavy purple curtains across the moors, and ahead, where the city should have spread its cloak of pinpoint lights, all was darkness. Some part of Jez felt the disappointment like a weight, despite telling himself to expect it from the outset.

They walked down through Yelverton, the huge rock that had been swarming with

brightly dressed kids the last time he'd seen it, now reverted from natural playground to plain old geography. He'd been one of those kids, twenty years ago. And he'd always thought it would be the one thing that endured throughout his lifetime: Yelverton Rock, a place to scare the crap out of your parents by perching right on the top, knowing you were safer than you looked. Well the rock was still here of course, but the kids – well who knew if they'd ever return?

It was here that he started to get the feeling. It wasn't quite words, he wasn't ready for 'voices' yet, thank god, but ... there was something. Pulling at him. He stopped, the sensation scaring him more than he wanted to show.

Borstal stopped too. “ 'sup?”

“Dunno.” Jez shook his head, partly in answer, but mostly to try and dislodge the unsettling sense that he was not alone in his thoughts. He looked ahead, down the long road that led across the moor to the edge of the city.

In the almost full darkness it undulated away into nothing after a short distance, yet he knew it as well as he knew the cell he'd occupied since he'd been old enough to transfer to prison. Borstal's age, in fact.

“We have to hurry,” he said suddenly. “He's going back down.”

“Huh? Who is? Going back down where?”

Jez blinked. “I ... don't know.”

“You've lost the plot,” Borstal muttered, but didn't question as Jez started down the road again.

There was an urgency driving Jez now, and he mentally calculated how long it would take to walk from Yelverton to the dockyard on the other side of town.

Whenever he came up with a number, his mind automatically took an hour off it. His watch told him he should reach his destination by around 10pm, but his mind insisted

on 9 o'clock. Well, he was walking quickly, but still only managing an average of four miles per hour, so there was no way he'd make Devonport before ...

9 o'clock! his brain clamoured.

"Ten!" he said aloud, almost angrily. Borstal gave him an odd look, but Jez ignored it and picked up his pace.

As the moors fell away behind them, the need to hurry grew stronger. He felt the pressure in his head again, weighing his thoughts down with information he could not account for.

The old man would be getting ready to hide again, and if he did that Jez would never persuade him to join them. And he had to do that or ... or what? What the hell *was* this?

They passed the huge park and ride station, the buses just hulking blue corpses now, and Jez's feet carried him on down to the roundabout. Derriford. He went to cross the grass, heading for the city centre, but as his foot left the pavement he stopped. The pull was coming at him from his left.

"The airport?" he muttered. "What's there that could help?"

"Yeah, the airport!" Borstal said, excitement in his voice. "Maybe there's something we could use to get away from here, find other people?"

"Get a grip," Jez said, trying not to sound too brusque, "can you fly a plane?" He shook his head. "No, I think there's someone there, calling me somehow."

"And you're telling *me* to get a grip?"

"I'm serious. I've had this ... oh, it doesn't matter. Come or don't come, makes no odds to me."

"I'll come," Borstal said at once.

Halfway up the short slope, Jez realised the pull wasn't coming from the airport at all; they crested the hill and Derriford hospital sprawled out in front of them.

"He's in there," Jez said. "It's not him that's calling me, not exactly, but he's there and I have to get him."

"Plot, lost it," Borstal reiterated, but followed him without demur.

Jez felt the urgency easing off and certainty setting in. It sat easier in his mind, despite being equally inexplicable, and he quickened his step as he followed the pathway around the building. He looked at his watch: five past nine. And yes, this was the destination, not the dockyard, at least, not yet. His subconscious was in control now, and doing a better job.

The lower levels he sought were accessed from outside, so there was no need to peek inside the main doors, but he knew what he'd have seen if he had: pile upon pile of mouldering bodies, people who had been desperately seeking medical help but who had found only more confusion, panicked stampeding, and finally death.

His stomach clenched and he swallowed hard. "He's on level 2," he said. "There's an easy accessway to the underground levels from there, and that's where he's going back to. We have to stop him."

"Who?" Borstal said, sounding irritated now.

Jez shook his head. "I still don't know," he admitted. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the pull work on his mind.

"Look! There!" Borstal said, snapping his concentration. He was pointing at the single-storey building tacked on to the side of the hospital. "There's a fuckin' torch flashing around. Someone's there, innit!" He caught at Jez's arm. "How'd you *know*, man?"

Jez pulled his arm away. "You coming or what?"

The old man swept the torch from side to side as he crossed the room. In his other hand he gripped a metal elbow crutch – he didn't know what he expected to come at him out of the dark, but he was ready for it – and over his torch arm, the bag of dried and processed food thumped uncomfortably against his hip.

He felt the familiar, biting sense of loss and sour memory. This room, where he had waited so often with his wife, this damned room had seemed to swallow up his entire life in the months before the catastrophe had struck. And it had literally swallowed up Ginny's.

She had sat here beside him, filling out her green forms week after week, the pen crawling tiredly across the page in her shaking hand: have you had any of the following since your last chemotherapy treatment: headaches, (mild or severe) hair loss, (mild or severe) constipation (mild or severe) diarrhoea (mild or severe) ... yes, yes, yes and yes, and still the list went on.

On the day Hell had visited the world and stolen its heart, Ginny's own heart had given up. She had collapsed in the doorway, the back of her hand still bleeding where the cannula had ripped free as she fled the treatment room, but her face, when it had turned to him in death, had reflected only relief.

So now he lived here, there was nothing else left for him. He had seen patients and nursing staff alike crawling across the body of his poor, stricken wife in the doorway, desperate to reach their cars, their loved ones, their homes ... but Ginny was here, and so here he stayed.

He had headed for the lower levels of the hospital building, the only place out of the reach of daylight. No windows here, just a long passageway with enough corners to

effectively diffuse any light that might have come through, and finally a doorway.

The doorway had saved his life. No, *knowing about* the doorway had saved his life. All his years of obsessing over World War Two, and the Plymouth blitz in particular, had told him all he needed to know, and he'd found the place easily once he'd oriented himself to the layout as it had been in the 1940s.

The air raid shelter was pitch black and dank, but the smell was bearable. He had huddled in the corner with his hands over his head, finally letting himself acknowledge the grief, and the terror, sobbing until he fell into an exhausted sleep.

It had probably been two days after everything had fallen silent, when he realised he would have to leave, if only to get food. So he had acquainted himself with the hospital kitchens, moving through the annex as fast as he could on each journey, loading up with as much as he could carry before heading back down, through the oncology unit, to the shelter. Every day since his first trip, he had waited to be struck down, but aside from some cramping from eating soured food he was as healthy as he'd ever been.

He paused halfway across the waiting room. There had been a noise, for the first time in months, and it took a moment to recognise it for what it was, and what it meant. A sound so familiar he would never even have acknowledged it. Before. Now he held his breath and listened as the footsteps came closer. Boots, it sounded like, on the concrete path outside.

He flicked off the torch, unsure for a moment why he was doing it; wasn't this what he wanted? But something in his chest went tight at the sound of those boots, and he gripped the metal crutch harder.

He heard a scuffle of feet in the congested doorway. And then a voice called out, "Hey! We're not here to hurt you. Please, put the torch back on, okay?" Male, adult.

Hard to put an age on it. Local though.

The second voice was also male, clearly younger, and rich with street slang. “Come on, man. Like Jez said; no-one’s gonna hurt ya, innit.”

The old man hesitated. He thought he’d wanted to be left alone, but had he really fought for his life all this time only to turn away salvation when it arrived?

“Come on, Jez,” the younger voice said, irritated. “No point pissing about here.”

The first voice spoke again. “Look, we don’t want to force you but at least let us know you’re okay?”

The old man found his fingers were suddenly working of their own volition, fumbling the torch back on. Immediately, he focused it in the direction of the voices and saw two sets of hands flash up to protect their eyes. The elder of the two dropped his hands first. The other one looked no more than about fifteen, and lowered his with more reluctance.

“My name’s Jez Trueman,” the elder said. “This is Bor ... Ben Lewis.”

“Borstal,” the lad said quickly.

“Bernard,” the old man offered, and his voice didn’t sound like his own. It had been so long since he’d used it for anything other than a low, lonely mutter, that to project it the short distance across the waiting room felt like a major effort. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Bernard Stonehouse.”

“Bernard,” Trueman repeated. He seemed to be considering the name very carefully, frowning a little as he tasted the syllables. Then he smiled, and Bernard realised he was quite pleasant looking, though untidy, and visibly exhausted. “Yeah, Bernard. That’s right.”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s right’?” Borstal demanded. “He might be ancient but he’d know his own name better than you would.”

What are you doing down here, anyway?” Bernard said, hearing an unfamiliar belligerence in his own voice. He fought an instinct to back off as Borstal took a step forwards.

“I need you to come with me. With us,” Trueman said, reaching out to still his companion. “I can’t explain why, I don’t *know* why.”

Bernard frowned and looked to where the lad, Borstal – and what a story that nickname told – was peering into the corners of the room, an expression of nervous distaste on his face. “What’s your problem, boy?”

“Piss off, I’m eighteen,” Borstal spat back. “What’re you lurkin’ around here for anyway? Hoping some doctor will magically appear out of nowhere and make it all better?”

Bernard ignored him and looked back at Trueman, who seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Something about him drew Bernard’s fascination; where Borstal struck a jangling discord in his nerves, Trueman’s quiet calm seemed to ease them.

“You need me but you don’t know why?” Bernard said, his voice quieter, encouraging a reply.

Trueman looked directly at him. “Something pulled me here, to find you,” he said. His expression was unreadable but Bernard didn’t get the feeling he was being played, instead he felt a worm of superstitious curiosity uncurl in his belly. Hadn’t he always known there was some higher purpose for him? That was why he hadn’t given up after Ginny had died, why he had struggled against everything that had seemed to point to peaceful death as being the only option.

“What about ... whatever it was that happened out there?” he asked.

“Well, we’re still alive,” Trueman said, “and we’ve just walked all the way from Princetown.”

Bernard shone his torch down at Trueman's shirt: plain blue cotton, worn with faded jeans and trainers. The teenager was similarly dressed, but his jeans were almost around his knees, and he wore Doc Marten boots.

"Yeah," Trueman said, in answer to the unspoken question. "Look, we think it's over now. The bad stuff. And for whatever reason, we escaped the worst of it and now I think the best place to be is the dockyard. But something ..." he tapped at his head, for the first time sounding frustrated and uncertain. "Something wouldn't let me go past here without coming in to find you."

"You're mental," Borstal muttered, but the look he gave Trueman belied his words: the boy rated his companion highly, it seemed.

"So, are you coming with us?" Trueman wanted to know. He seemed eager to be on his way now, kept glancing back at the doorway. Bernard frowned. They certainly seemed physically healthy, and the fact that they'd come from the prison meant nothing anymore. Life was life, and life was precious.

Trueman just kept looking at him, silent now, but somehow exhorting him to listen to his instincts.

Finally he nodded. "So you have no idea what's going on either?"

"No, I don't," Trueman said, and grinned suddenly, his teeth gleaming white in the torchlight. "It's all a bit of a head fuck, to be honest."

Bernard was surprised into a laugh, but it turned into a cough, and he didn't object when Trueman patted him firmly on the back. "Okay, boy," he said, when his eyes had stopped watering. "Lead the way."

Before they left they stocked up on emergency equipment, and some of the food Bernard had brought back from the hospital kitchens. Jez found a huge torch that had been hanging from the wall in one of the utility rooms, Borstal seemed miffed he

hadn't found it first, but sulkily accepted the one Bernard gave him.

Within ten minutes they had crossed the roundabout and were heading towards town on the main road.

"So, how'd you find that shelter?" Trueman asked.

"What shelter?"

"The shelter you were about to scuttle back down to, when we found you."

Bernard started. "But I never told you ..." he broke off. There were things going on here, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know just yet, it was enough that he was out of that stale darkness and into the fresh air again. "I've studied," he said at last. "I'm ... I *was*, a lecturer in history at the university."

"Piss boring," Borstal said. "Who'd want to stick around at school if they don't have to? Buncha saddos."

"Not that they'd have you anyway, since you put that pensioner in hospital," Trueman pointed out grimly.

"How did you end up in a place like Dartmoor?" Bernard said, reminding himself that, as personable as this young man appeared, Dartmoor was not a place you were sent for unpaid parking fines.

"He killed a bloke, din't you, Jez?" Borstal said, and Bernard detected a note of awe in his voice. He winced.

"It's a long story, and a long time ago," Trueman said.

Bernard shrugged. "We've got time."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I'll tell him what I heard," Borstal offered, and before Trueman could speak, he went on; "Jez is fifteen, right, and this teacher takes a pop at this girl he's seeing. She goes round to Jez's place all covered in blood and crying, refuses to go to the police

or her parents, so Jez waits for the teacher down a dark alley next night. Bam.

Teacher's head mashed in, Jez gets sent down for a twenty five stretch."

Bernard tried not to let his shock show. "Is that true?"

"I started the sentence in juvenile detention, but yeah, that's the gist." Trueman said, his voice quiet.

"But surely ... twenty five years?"

"The bloke died, Bernard."

"Mitigating circumstances? Your girlfriend?"

"She never testified," Borstal said. "And Jez never appealed."

Trueman glared. "I didn't deserve an appeal. Drop it, okay?"

He moved on ahead, walking faster, too fast for Bernard to keep up. Bernard plodded on, his mind sifting over what Borstal had told him, trying to work out how it meshed with the instinctive trust he'd felt towards Jez Trueman.

He was pondering so intently, he almost walked into the man in question. Trueman had stopped dead and was staring down to his left.

"Bus station. So?" Borstal said, coming up beside them.

Trueman ignored him "Bernard, does this place mean anything to you?" He sounded a little distant, distracted.

"No, not ... hey, are you alright?"

Trueman shook his head. "I don't know. I feel ... weird."

Bernard swept his torch up to shine it in Trueman's face – there was a sheen of sweat across his brow and his eyes were closed, but not squeezed tight, as they would have been if they'd been shut against the sudden light of the torch.

He seemed to be controlling his breathing with an effort, and his hand crept to his temple, massaging there, his frown deepening. "We have to go down there," he said at

last. He still sounded a little weak, but more positive now.

“Down where?” Bernard asked.

“There’s a place. You know it. A place that’s locked away,” Trueman opened his eyes but they remained unfocused. “You know it,” he repeated. Then he stumbled away and leaned against the railing, doubled over and retching.

Bernard and Borstal watched as Trueman heaved up the contents of his stomach and then remained hunched over, dragging in deep breaths.

“Has he got it? Whatever it was that killed everyone?” Borstal said at last. For the first time his voice had lost its tough edge and he actually sounded scared.

Bernard shook his head. “No, this didn’t happen to the others. There’s something else. Something at work in him, bringing him, us, to this place. It’s so strong just here it’s sending him into shock, I think.”

Trueman eventually straightened up and turned to them. Bernard silently handed him a flask of water and he took a swig to wash his mouth out, and spat into the gutter.

“Thanks,” he said. He sounded closer to normal now, but his face was still drawn and pale. “Okay, I’ve got a handle on it now. It’s . . . dunno, backed off, maybe? Letting me think.”

“This is fucked up,” Borstal said in a thin, angry voice. He turned to Bernard. “We was fine ’til you stuck your oar in.” He took a step forwards and Bernard backed away, uneasy at the look on the boy’s face.

“Oi!” Trueman snapped. “Lay off, you little sod. None of this is his fault.”

Borstal looked torn for a moment, then backed down, but not before shooting a scowl at Bernard. He kicked at the railing, his steel-toed boots making a harsh, ringing sound.

Trueman looked back at Bernard. “There’s a place here that you know about,” he said again. “We have to find it.”

“A place I ...” Bernard paused, then looked around him, realising. “Bretonside! Yes, there’s a shelter here, I’ve read about it.”

“An air raid shelter? Like the one at Derriford?”

“Similar, but a lot bigger. Not secret, although certainly disused since the war. But I don’t know whereabouts it is. It may even be built on now.”

“Well what good is that to us?” Borstal said in disgust. But Trueman held up his hand, and nodded for Bernard to continue. He looked better now, Bernard was glad to see, surprised at the degree of his relief; he hadn’t realised he’d taken to the young man quite so quickly, and still didn’t know why.

He turned to Borstal. “Back in April 1941, Plymouth was ...” Borstal’s expression remained sullen, and Bernard sighed. “Look, never mind, we don’t have time for a history lesson,” he said. “We need to find this place before whatever it is that’s working through Mr Trueman has another go at communicating with him.”

“Yeah, please, that’d be good,” Trueman said, and took another deep breath. “Right, shut up, you two, let me focus.”

Jez closed his eyes. On drawing level with the flyover that ran past Bretonside Bus Station, he had felt a sudden pressure in his skull, then a wave of information had crashed in on him, in fragmented images he couldn’t decipher. The pressure had passed now, but his stomach muscles still trembled with the violence of the nausea it had induced.

He searched out a pattern, some way the images and knowledge could be used to find a direction, and as he fought for order through the chaos he began to realise that

this was the price of his survival.

As a child he'd had what his grandmother had called a "glimmer." Not a true sixth sense, not clairvoyance, not even a real, quantifiable ability, just a flicker of ... something. But whatever had been flung on them out of the sun, whatever particles had pierced his clothing and skin in those few minutes he had been exposed to daylight, had fed this glimmer. It had grown from something he had barely been aware of into this awful, painful and frightening thing, and whatever had found him through it would not let him go until it was ready.

"Hitler, has only got one ball ..."

The song, sung in a hesitant, somewhat self-conscious voice, cut through Jez's concentration and he opened his eyes. He looked at Bernard and raised one eyebrow.

"Sorry," Bernard said. "I was just telling young Borstal here about the shelter. There are several pictures on the walls apparently, one of them being The Führer and his famous bollock deficiency –"

"Okay," Jez interrupted, and amazingly he felt a smile on his lips. "I think it's this way, come on."

They started across the deserted bus station. "What else do you know about the pictures?" Jez said to Bernard. "And what about other stuff that got left behind? It might help me to – Christ!" Pain ripped through Jez's head without warning, his knees buckled with the force of it and he felt Bernard's hands at his elbow.

Then he was borne upright from both sides as Borstal grabbed his other arm. They stood silent for a moment, Jez's head hanging down, pain rippling down his neck and into his shoulders. He felt strong waves of nausea again, but there was nothing left to bring up.

He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths. "Holy shit," he muttered, when he

could speak again. "I think that means we're going the wrong way."

"Well then I suggest, before you strike out in another direction, you are at least ninety nine per cent certain it's the right one," Bernard said. "I'm sure you don't want to go through that again." The words were light, flippant almost, but Jez heard a note of concern in his voice and was touched.

He nodded. "Okay, give me a minute."

This time they made it all the way across the station, and with each step Jez felt better, stronger, and the muscle-twisting cramps from his futile retching receded. He also knew now, that as long as he kept going the right way his mind would be left unmolested. That was even more of a relief than the dissipation of the physical pain. "Here," Bernard said suddenly, and pointed to a boarded up section in the wall.

Borstal snorted. "What, there's a World War Two air raid shelter in *there*?"

"They're all over the city," Bernard told him. "This shelter would have housed hundreds, but you can bet under almost any part of this city you'll find different kinds of shelters. Some little more than holes in the ground, some with camp beds and all sorts installed. I believe this to be one of the latter kind."

"You know a lot about it," Jez said. "Was this what you taught then?"

"No, personal interest only. Well, I say interest, I suppose obsession is a fairer description, if I'm honest."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I even remember the day it started: seventeenth of June. 1974."

"My birthday," Jez said, and was surprised to feel a new pang of sadness. "I suppose birthdays don't really count for much anymore."

Bernard shrugged. "I don't know what triggered it, I only remember the day because it seemed ironic: I woke up with this sudden, burning need to learn everything I could

about the blitz, and bomb shelters, and learn later that same morning that Parliament has been blown up by the IRA.”

“Can we kick this into touch?” Borstal complained. “Who gives a shit why he’s obsessed with holes in the ground anyway? Let’s just get sorted here, then we can get on to the dockyard. See if anyone useful is left.”

“Hell of a coincidence,” Jez said, ignoring Borstal. The kid needed to learn some manners. And he should have kept his trap shut about the teacher, it had nothing to do with him – the complicated set of circumstances that had led to his conviction, and the feelings he had lived with ever since, could never be explained. Not in a few words, or a few thousand.

“The boy’s right,” Bernard said. “Shouldn’t we make a start on getting these boards off?”

“Yeah.” But something about the way Bernard was looking at him made Jez feel a little uncomfortable; he had the same look about him as Borstal got sometimes: like they were relying on him to make the world go the way it was supposed to. He liked Bernard, liked him a lot, but maybe Borstal *was* right: the sooner they parted company the better. For all of them.

He looked at the boards doubtfully. “These are quite new, they must have been replaced recently.”

“Yes, but the shelter needn’t have been touched. Why would it be? Come on, don’t just stand there, you young ones give an old man a hand!”

Jez smiled at the sudden enthusiasm. Perhaps this was why he’d been compelled to bring this old man out of the death-ridden hospital. Maybe Bernard had been sending out his own signals without knowing it, ready for some kind of life now, the chance to indulge his self-professed obsession. Jez’s newly enhanced mind tricks would easily

pick up on such a strong need.

After half an hour's struggle, Jez finally pulled at the last board and it gave way, sending him tumbling backwards. The three of them shone their torches over the hole they had revealed.

"Don't look much," Borstal said. But Bernard was already stepping through, making sounds of excitement and awe.

Jez and Borstal followed, and they found themselves in a small alleyway that led around the back of the new garages, a space so narrow you wouldn't know it existed from outside. It was like the secret compartment in a magician's box.

The smell of long unused air caught at the back of Jez's throat, and he reflexively opened his mouth and found he could even taste it. He coughed, and spat, then glance apologetically at Bernard, but Bernard was talking happily about the blitz, the war, the known sites of air raid shelters, as compared to the secret ones of which only a handful of privileged people had been aware.

Bernard stopped suddenly, and shone his torch downwards. A cellar door, all stinking, rotted wood and scurrying insects, sat in the corner of the alley.

"That's it?" Borstal said, disgust in his voice. "All that mouthy bullshit, just for that little hole?"

"Yeah, that's it," Jez said before Bernard could reply. "Borstal, you can stay out here if you like, but I have to go in, and I think Bernard will have a fit if he doesn't." To take any sting out of his words, he squeezed the old man's shoulder. Bernard patted his hand and cleared his throat.

"Right then, lads, let's have a look, shall we?"

Inside the shelter, Bernard played his torch over the walls, feeling his heart swell as he saw the inscriptions, the ragged posters, the crude drawings of Nazi leaders defaced with defiant British pride. There was even an air raid timetable, dates and times when Plymouth's people had been forced from their homes, to take refuge down here in the dark.

His foot knocked against something. Instantly, all three torches swung downwards and Bernard's throat tightened as he saw a large glass marble rolling to a stop against the wall. Where was the child to whom that had belonged? Did he survive into adulthood? Did he even make it out of this place alive on that last date scribbled on the wall timetable?

Borstal was moving ahead, already bored. "Look, there's a tunnel here!" he shouted back.

Trueman stepped up beside him and peered into the damp blackness. He turned back to Bernard. "I think I'm supposed to go down here," he said.

Bernard flicked his torch so the light fell on Trueman's face. He looked okay, but then, he was still moving in the right direction. "Don't step back this way then," he said. "Just don't move away from where you are until you know for sure."

Trueman nodded, and took a deep breath. "Okay, he said. I'm going down there but I need to concentrate. Bernard, I know you'll want to sit and soak up some of the history here."

"I do, after a lifetime of study, to finally ..." he broke off and sighed apologetically.

"Yes, Mr Trueman, I would like to remain here."

"Borstal?"

“Yeah?” the boy sounded eager, and was already two steps into the tunnel when Trueman pulled him back.

“I need you to stay here, with Bernard.”

“Yeah? Well who put you in fuckin’ charge?”

“It’s not a question of who’s in charge, mate. This is something in my head, not yours, I can’t go backwards, not until I’ve done this.”

“So?”

“So, if Bernard needs anything, or anyone, I can’t go back and help him. Or you, come to that. You fall and break your ankle I’d have to leave you there.”

Borstal was glaring at Trueman, but Bernard could see he couldn’t find a way past that argument. He was glad, though, for himself: he would have an audience that may be unwilling to begin with, but no-one could help being drawn in by the sheer fascination of being in this place, where so many lives had been changed forever. Maybe he would be able to knock some of the rough edges off the boy, turn him into a more rounded human being. God knows the world needed them now.

Trueman was starting to waver a little – whatever wanted him was growing impatient. His head suddenly jerked around to the tunnel, and when he turned back, his eyes were wide.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“There’s someone in there! Can’t you hear crying?”

Bernard tipped his head to one side, straining, but there was nothing. He shook his head.

Trueman started into the tunnel, then stopped. “There must be another entrance somewhere.” He waved his torch at Borstal. “We need to swap, this one’s bigger but

the light's not so good."

Borstal threw his torch to Trueman, and was obviously delighted he'd finally got his hands on the outsized one that Trueman threw back. He immediately began making 'light sabre' noises and struck a pose. So much for the big man he pretended to be.

Bernard tried again. "But, Mr Trueman, what about —"

"It's fine, I'm going in the right direction. For now." Before Bernard could respond he had vanished into the tunnel.

Borstal looked after him, then back at Bernard. He scowled. "I never wanted to stop and get you anyway. I thought we was goin' the dockyard."

"Thank you, I appreciate you too," Bernard said. But Borstal's eyes did not reflect the forced humour. Bernard started to feel uncomfortable, and even a little scared. His heart beat a tiny bit faster and he half hoped to hear Trueman coming back, declaring the tunnel a dead end. Then he shook himself mentally. That was stupid. And counter-productive.

He sat down and leaned back against the wall. "This place is a true wonder, you know. A miracle of preserved history."

"Fuck off, I'm not interested."

"Mr Trueman is doing the only thing he can do," Bernard said gently. "I think he's a good man, despite what he did."

"He's cool as. And not *despite* what he did neither, *because* of it." Borstal examined the torch, his voice taking on a faraway tone. "Can you imagine what it's like, to do something like that and not even feel bad about it?" Then he turned to Bernard, his eyes gleaming suddenly. "And he killed the screw who was keeping us locked up."

"He ... he killed a prison officer?"

"Too right. Gouged his eye out, left him in a right mess."

Bernard felt sick. He tried to match the image of a cold blooded killer to the young man who had clasped his shoulder just a short time ago, the man who had refused to compromise his integrity to escape a jail sentence he likely deserved, but could have avoided.

“Surely he was provoked?” he managed at last.

Borstal shook his head. “He just waited til the screw was looking the other way, then stepped up behind him and – whack! No twenty five stretch this time neither. Just the opposite, as it goes.”

“But your lives were at risk, the man was keeping you locked up!”

“He was feedin’ us,” Borstal shrugged. “We weren’t in no danger. Jez just flipped, innit. Can’t trust a man like that; he’d smile in your face, and rip your guts out while you was smilin’ back at him. ’Course, me and him are like that,” he crossed his fingers in front of Bernard’s face. “He’d never do nothin’ to one of his own. Remember though: that bloke’s been in juvy and jail for twenty years, but he ain’t no Nelson Mandela.”

Bernard looked away. Surely the boy was lying? He’d said nothing about this while Trueman was here to defend himself ... but then Trueman himself had agreed that Borstal’s account of the teacher’s death was pretty much on the money.

Bernard clamped down on the thought, but he couldn’t keep it at bay completely and suddenly it was too much. He’d invested in Trueman all that remained of his faith in human nature, and now that too was gone. There truly was nothing left, nothing but this place.

Empty of heart, and surrounded by memories that were not his own, he adopted them, desperate to fill the aching hollowness. He reached out and touched the walls, absorbing the spirit of Plymouth as it had been during its darkest hour, and of the

strength and pride of the people who'd sheltered here. And having taken the stories and made them his own, he felt the age old urge to pass them on, to keep them alive.

So he began to talk. He talked faster and faster: facts, figures, the human cost of the Nazi bombings, the re-growth of a city torn apart ... and blessedly he felt his pain and grief ease in the telling.

He barely heard Borstal, in some dim, distant place, telling him to shut up, shut up, shut up ...

Jez let the voices fall away behind him, his mind already reaching ahead to find the source of the pitiful weeping sound. The tunnel seemed to stretch ahead for miles but it was the twists and turns that gave the impression of distance. The crying sounded like an woman's low, exhausted sobs rather than a frightened child, and Jez knew, without question, that this was the person he had been pulled in here to help.

With or without her knowledge, she had reached out in her distress and tapped into this newly enhanced glimmer, and Jez acknowledged the sense of rightness it gave him with relief: since the age of fifteen he had been sure he could only bring destruction to whatever he touched, but that desolate certainty was fading now.

That the initial pull had turned into a compulsion too intense to ignore was not the issue, he had been prepared to help anyway, re-discovering a long forgotten and deeply buried instinct for good. He felt lighter inside now that he had the chance, if not to put it all right, at least to atone for it in some way. He was not a bringer of death after all.

Borstal's raised voice cut through his thoughts and he froze and looked back towards the main shelter, torn between the need to continue, and a niggling concern for his companions; Borstal sounded furious to the point of tears and Jez had never

heard him like that, not even when they'd been alone in the prison with only Smiler for company.

Worried, he took a half-step back towards the shelter and abruptly his glimmer became a white-hot beacon, scorching his brain with its silent demands. Nausea twisted in him again at the intensity of the pain, and he groaned, sagging against the wall.

Then he heard Bernard's low murmur, indecipherable but constant, and he relaxed; the old man had clearly talked calm into whatever situation was going on back there. Jez took a deep, shaky breath and levered himself off the wall to move on down the tunnel.

He found her a couple of minutes later. His torchlight fell only a short way ahead of him as he rounded the corner, and it wasn't until he was nearly upon the woman that he saw her - little more than a girl really - rise to her feet. She stayed huddled against the wall, her shoulder bag scraping against it as she shrank back from the torchlight that played across her face.

"Hey," he said, keeping his voice gentle despite the startled hammering of his heart. She looked sick, and had possibly been homeless before the disaster, dressed in ill-fitting, drab looking clothes of a colour he couldn't determine in the thin light.

"What's your name?"

"Martha," the woman said. "Please, my baby, my little boy ... I can't find him."

"Shit. Okay, don't panic," Jez said, trying to hide his own concern. "How old is he?"

"He's three. Someone was looking after him for me, they took him up that way," she pointed up the tunnel towards the shelter. "I haven't seen him since."

If someone had taken the child out it would have been months ago, before the fresh

boards went up – he was more than likely dead by now. Jez felt hollowed out by sorrow, the magnitude of all that had been destroyed pressed on him harder than ever in the face of this fresh tragedy.

“How long have you been down here?” he asked

“We all came down together, when it started,” Martha said, her voice a little stronger now. “I was unwell, stayed away from everyone else so they wouldn’t catch it too, but a very kind lady said she would look after my boy. I slept a lot. When I woke up everyone had left.” She seemed to have calmed a lot now, her voice was stronger and she fixed large, trusting eyes on Jez.

He looked away, unable to bear the burden of that trust. “Come on,” he said. “We’ll see if we can find ... someone to help.”

He laid a hand against Martha’s back to guide her in front of him, and a shock rippled through his entire body, a chill so profound his breath stopped and his gut tightened to the point of pain.

His hand did not so much pass through the young woman’s body as become part of it, and crystals of ice formed on his skin, glistening in the shaking torchlight.

His heart frantically tried to regain its natural beat as he ripped his hand away and wiped it reflexively on his jeans, breathing hard. “Oh my Christ, oh my fucking Christ ...”

“You have to help me!” Martha said, her eyes brimming with tears. Jez looked at her again, at the clothes she wore, the too-big skirt, the short socks ... and he looked more closely at what he had thought was a shoulder bag. It was actually a square cardboard box, and even he knew what that meant.

Pity clutched at him as he looked at the helpless spirit, endlessly searching for a son she would never see again. ‘Unwell’ she had said. Obviously someone had seen the

truth and taken the boy away, sparing him any more pain than was necessary.

Martha adjusted her gas mask box more firmly over her shoulder and looked back at him, impatient now. “Come on,” she said, “he’s here, I know he is.”

He nodded and took a calming breath. No matter how long she had been here, Martha’s loss was still real, and the pressure and pain in his head hadn’t resurfaced; he was still doing the right thing. He couldn’t find her child, but had to find a way to give her the peace she craved. He let her go ahead of him and lit the way for them both.

Almost back at the shelter he tilted his head; he’d heard footsteps ahead. Martha stopped at the sound, turning to Jez with a strange look on her face.

“It’s alright,” Jez said. “I left some friends up in the shelter, it’ll be one of them.”

“No, it’s my boy,” Martha said.

Jez’s heart sank a little further. “Martha, I think –”

“It’s him,” she insisted.

Jez wanted to point out that the footsteps were clearly adult, but closed his lips on the words. Why distress her further? She’d soon see.

He shone his torch along the passage, and nodded. Bernard was hurrying towards them, obviously dying to tell him of some marvellous new find. But he was not looking at Jez, he was looking at Martha. Jez opened his mouth to warn him, to spare him the horror, and the heart-stopping shock he himself had experienced, but it was too late.

“Bernie,” Martha said, and stepped forwards into the old man’s embrace. They clung together, weeping, and as he watched them Jez felt his blood freeze: there could only be one explanation...

He turned away, fresh grief tearing at his heart. As he absorbed the reality of

Bernard's loss he felt his mind turn in on itself, all the information he had been unable to piece together, now lit from behind in a blinding revelation.

Bernard. Three years old in 1941, an obsession with air raid shelters that had no clear reason but a definite beginning – the day Jez himself was born: the man who would bring him here, to this moment, to his long lost and forgotten mother.

And to his death.

Jez dropped to his knees and pressed the heels of his hands against his tightly closed eyes, trying to erase the knowledge. He couldn't. He'd been right: he brought only destruction to everything that crossed his path. His whole life had been geared towards this moment, he'd been nothing but a facilitator in the death of this innocent man. And, he realised with new pain, he had even provided the instrument with which Bernard's life would be taken.

Leaving Bernard and Martha locked at last in their icy embrace, he made his way back to the shelter. As he stepped into the room he saw Borstal sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the old man's body, Jez's large torch in his hand, the splintered glass flecked with glistening red.

Borstal looked up. "He wouldn't shut up," he said. "I told him to stop, I warned him, but he just wouldn't." Then he smiled, a suddenly shy, childlike smile. "I'm just like you now in't I, Jezzzer?"