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Dead Scared

Written by S. J. Bolton

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Dead Scared

S. J. Bolton



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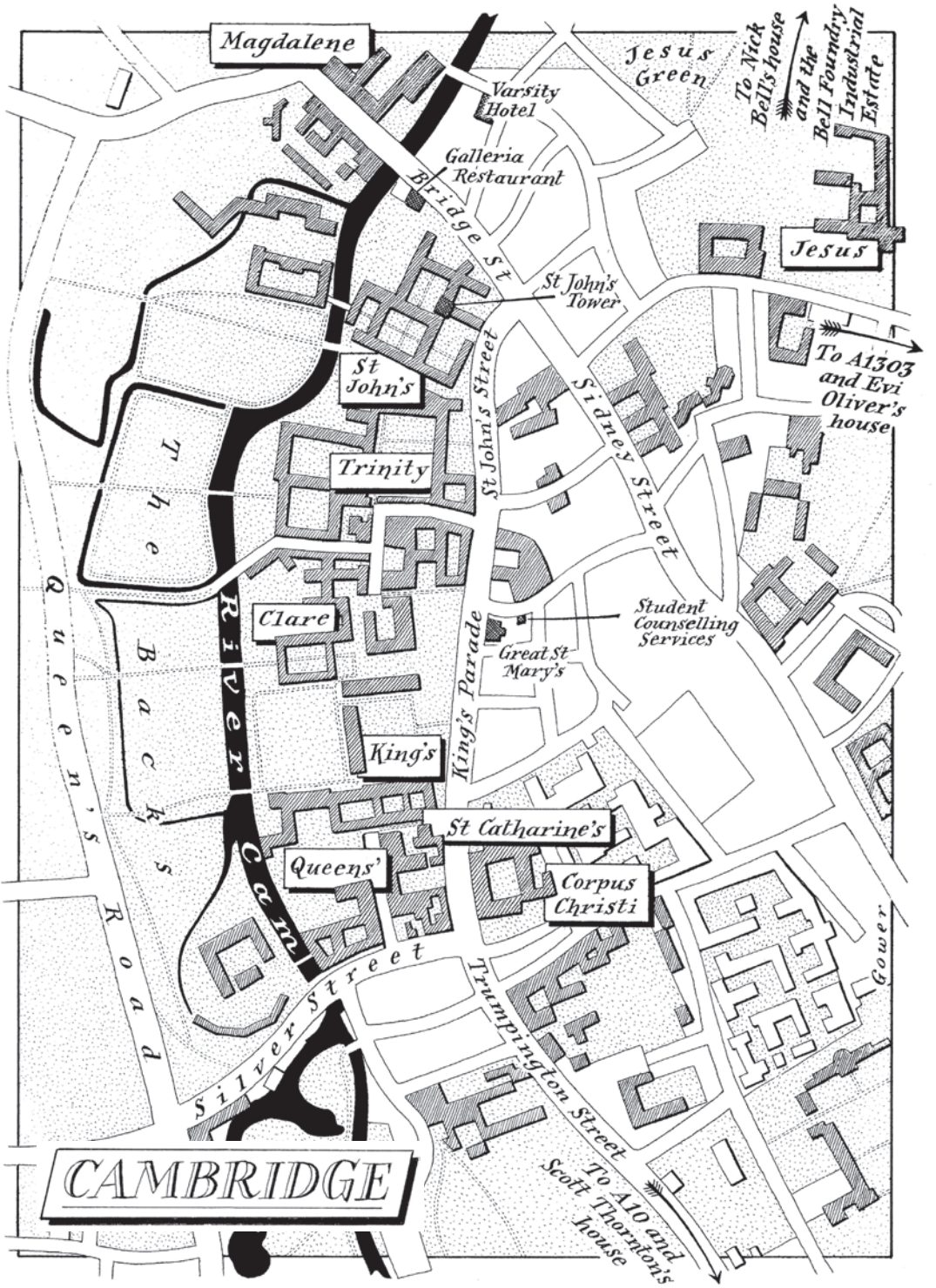
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In memory of Peter Inglis Smith:
kind neighbour, great writer, good friend.

What are fears but voices airy?
Whispering harm where harm is not,
And deluding the unwary
Till the fatal bolt is shot!

William Wordsworth


Magdalene
Varsity Hotel
Galleria Restaurant
Bridge St
Jesus Green
To Nick Bell's house and the Bell Foundry Industrial Estate
Jesus
St John's Tower
St John's
St John's Street
Sidney Street
To A1303 and Evi Oliver's house
Trinity
The Backs
River Cam
Clare
Student Counselling Services
Great St Mary's
King's Parade
King's
St Catharine's
Queens'
Corpus Christi
Queen's Road
Silver Street
Trumpington Street
Gower
To A10 and Scott Thornton's house
CAMBRIDGE

Prologue

Tuesday 22 January (a few minutes before midnight)

WHEN A LARGE OBJECT FALLS FROM A GREAT HEIGHT, the speed at which it travels accelerates until the upward force of air resistance becomes equal to the downward propulsion of gravity. At that point, whatever is falling reaches what is known as terminal velocity, a constant speed that will be maintained until it encounters a more powerful force, most commonly the ground.

Terminal velocity of the average human body is thought to be around 120 miles per hour. Typically this speed is reached fifteen or sixteen seconds into the fall, after a distance of between five hundred and six hundred metres.

A commonly held misconception is that people falling from considerable heights die before impact. Only rarely is this true. Whilst the shock of the experience could cause a fatal heart attack, most falls simply don't last long enough for this to happen. Also, in theory, a body could freeze in sub-zero temperatures, or become unconscious due to oxygen deprivation, but both these scenarios rely upon the faller's leaping from a plane at significant altitude and, other than the more intrepid skydivers, people rarely do that.

Most people who fall or jump from great heights die upon impact when their bones shatter and cause extensive damage to the

surrounding tissue. Death is instantaneous. Usually.

The woman on the edge of one of the tallest towers in Cambridge probably doesn't have to worry too much about when she might achieve terminal velocity. The tower is not quite two hundred feet tall and her body will continue to accelerate as she falls its full length. She should, on the other hand, be thinking very seriously about impact. Because when that occurs, the flint cobbles around the base of the tower will shatter her young bones like fine crystal. Right now, though, she doesn't seem concerned about anything. She stands like a sightseer, taking in the view.

Cambridge, just before midnight, is a city of black shadows and gold light. The almost-full moon shines down like a spotlight on the wedding-cake elegance of the surrounding buildings, on the pillars pointing like stone fingers to the cloudless sky, and on the few people still out and about, who slip like phantoms in and out of pools of light.

She sways on the spot and, as if something has caught her attention, her head tilts down.

At the base of the tower the air is still. A torn page of yesterday's *Daily Mail* lies undisturbed on the pavement. Up at the top, there is wind. Enough to blow the woman's hair around her head like a flag. The woman is young, maybe a year or two either side of thirty, and would be beautiful if her face weren't empty of all expression. If her eyes had any light behind them. This is the face of someone who believes she is already dead.

The man racing across the First Court of St John's College, on the other hand, is very much alive, because in the human animal nothing affirms life quite like terror. Detective Inspector Mark Joesbury, of the branch of the Metropolitan Police that sends its officers into the most dangerous situations, has never been quite this scared in his life before.

Up on the tower, it's cold. The January chill comes drifting over the Fens and wraps itself across the city like a paedophile's hand round that of a small, unresisting child. The woman isn't dressed for winter but seems to be unaware of the cold. She blinks and suddenly those dead eyes have tears in them.

DI Joesbury has reached the door to the chapel tower and finds

it unlocked. It slams back against the stone wall and his left shoulder, which will always be the weaker of the two, registers the shock of pain. At the first corner, Joesbury spots a shoe, a narrow, low-heeled blue leather shoe, with a pointed toe and a high polish. He almost stops to pick it up and then realizes he can't bear to. Once before he held a woman's shoe in his hand and thought he'd lost her. He carries on, up the steps, counting them as he goes. Not because he has the faintest idea how many there are, but because he needs to be marking progress in his head. When he reaches the second flight, he hears footsteps behind him. Someone is following him up.

He feels the cold air just as he sees the door at the top. He's out on the roof before he has any idea what he's going to do if he's too late and she's already jumped. Or what the hell he'll do if she hasn't.

'Lacey,' he yells. 'No!'

1

Friday 11 January (eleven days earlier)

All Bar One near Waterloo Station was busy, with nearly a hundred people shouting to make themselves heard above the music. Smoking has been banned in the UK's public places for years but something seemed to be hovering around these folk, thickening the air, turning the scene around me into an out-of-focus photograph taken on a cheap camera.

I knew instinctively he wasn't there.

No need to look at my watch to know I was sixteen minutes late. I'd timed it to the second. Too late would look rude, or as if I were trying to make a point; too close to the agreed time would seem eager. Calm and professional, that's what I was going to be. A little distant. Being a bit late was part of that. Except now he was the one who was late.

At the bar, I ordered my usual drink-for-difficult-occasions and stretched up on to a vacant bar stool. Sipping the colourless liquid, I could see my reflection in the mirrors behind the bar. I'd come straight from work. Somehow, I'd resisted the temptation to leave early and spend the better part of two hours showering, blow-drying my hair, putting on make-up and choosing clothes. I'd been determined not to look nice for Mark Joesbury.

I fished my laptop out of my bag and put it down on the bar –

not actually planning to work, just to make it look that way – and opened a presentation on the UK's laws on pornography that I was due to give the following week to a group of new recruits at Hendon. I opened a slide at random – the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act. The recruits would be surprised to learn, because most people were, that possession of all non-child pornography was perfectly legal in the UK until the 2008 Act outlawed extreme pornographic images. Naturally, they'd want to know what qualified as extreme. Hence the main content of the slide I was looking at.

An extreme pornographic image depicts a sexual act that:

- threatens, or appears to threaten, a person's life.
- results in serous injury to sexual organs.
- involves a human corpse.
- involves an animal

I changed a spelling mistake in the second bullet point and added a full stop to the fourth.

Joesbury hadn't arrived. Not that I'd looked round. I would know the minute he walked through the door.

Twenty-four hours earlier I'd had a five-minute briefing with my DI at Southwark Police Station. SCD10, still colloquially known by everyone as SO10, the special crimes directorate of the Metropolitan Police that deals with covert operations, had requested my help with a case. Not just any young female detective constable but me specifically, and the lead officer on the case, DI Mark Joesbury, would meet me the following evening. 'What case?' I'd asked. DI Joesbury would fill me in, I was told. My DI had been tight-lipped and grumpy, probably on account of having his staff filched without being told why.

I checked my watch again. He was twenty-three minutes late, my drink was disappearing too quickly and at half past I was going home.

I couldn't even remember what he looked like, I realized. Oh, I had a vague idea of height, build and colouring, and I remembered those turquoise eyes, but I couldn't conjure up a picture of his face. Which was odd, really, given that he was never out of my head for a second.

'Lacey Flint, as I live and breathe,' said a voice directly behind me.

I took a deep breath and turned round slowly, to see Mark Joesbury, maybe just a fraction over six feet tall, strongly built, suntanned skin even in January, bright turquoise eyes. Wearing a thick, untidy, ginger wig.

'I'm undercover,' he said. And then he winked at me.