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Liar Liar

Written by M. J. Arlidge

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Liar Liar

M. J. ARLIDGE



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I

Luke scrambled through the open window and on to the narrow ledge outside. Grasping the plastic guttering above his head, he pulled himself upright. The guttering creaked ominously, threatening to give way at any moment, but Luke couldn't risk letting go. He was dizzy, breathless and very, very scared.

A blast of icy wind roared over him, flapping his thin cotton pyjamas like a manic kite. He was already losing the feeling in his feet – the chill from the rough stone creeping up his body – and the sixteen-year-old knew he would have to act quickly, if he was to save his life.

Slowly he inched his way forward, peering over the lip of the ledge. The cars, the people below seemed so small – the hard, unforgiving road so far away. He'd always had a thing about heights and, looking down from this third-floor vantage point, his first instinct was to recoil. To turn back into the house. But he stood firm. He couldn't believe what he was contemplating, but he didn't have a choice, so releasing his grip, he hung his toes over the edge and prepared to jump. He counted down in his head. Three, two, one . . .

Suddenly he lost his nerve, dragging himself back from the brink. His spine connected sharply with the iron window frame and for a moment he rested there, clamping his eyes shut to block out the panic now assailing him. If

he jumped, he would die. Surely there had to be another way? Something else he could do? Luke turned back towards the window and looked once more at the horror within.

His attic bedroom was ablaze. It had all happened so quickly that he still couldn't process the sequence of events. He'd gone to bed as usual, but had been wakened shortly afterwards by a chorus of smoke alarms. He'd stumbled out of bed, groggy and confused, waving his arms back and forth in a vain attempt to disperse the thick smoke that filled the room. He'd managed to scramble to the door, but even before he got there, he saw that he was too late. The narrow staircase that led up to his bedroom was consumed by fire, huge flames dancing in through the open doorway.

The shivering teenager now watched as his whole life went up in smoke. His school books, his football kit, his artwork, his beloved Southampton FC posters – all eaten by the flames. With each passing second, the temperature rose still further, the hot smoke and gas gathering in an ominous cloud below the ceiling.

Luke slammed the window shut and for a second the temperature dropped again. But he knew his respite would be brief. When the temperature inside grew too great, the windows would blow out, taking him with them. There *was* no choice. He *had* to be bold, so turning again, he took a step forward and calling out his mother's name, leapt off the ledge.

It was almost midnight and the cemetery was deserted, save for a lonely figure picking her way through the grave-stones. Simple crosses sat cheek by jowl with ornate family tombs, many of which were decorated with statues and carvings. The weatherworn cherubs and angels of mercy looked lifeless and sinister in the moonlight and Helen Grace hurried past them, pulling her scarf tight around her. The scarf had been a Christmas present from her colleague Charlie Brooks and was a godsend on a night like this, when darkness clung to the hilltop cemetery and the temperature plunged ever lower.

The frost was slowly spreading and Helen's feet crunched quietly on the grass as she left the main path, darting left towards the far corner of the cemetery. Before long she was standing in front of a plain headstone, which bore neither name nor dates, just a simple message: 'Forever in my thoughts'. The rest of the headstone was blank – with no clue as to the deceased's identity, age or even sex. This was how Helen liked it – it was how it had to be – as this was the last resting place of her sister, Marianne.

Many criminals go unclaimed on their death. Others are quickly cremated, their ashes scattered to the winds in an attempt to blot out the very fact of their existence. Others still are buried in faceless HMP cemeteries for

the undesirable, but Helen was never going to allow that to happen to her sister. She felt responsible for Marianne's death and was determined not to abandon her.

As she looked down at the simple grave, Helen felt a sharp stab of guilt. The anonymous nature of Marianne's epitaph always got to her – she could feel her sister pointing her finger at her accusingly, chiding Helen for being ashamed of her own flesh and blood. This wasn't true – despite everything Helen still loved Marianne – but such was the notoriety of her sister's crimes that she'd had to be buried without ceremony, to avoid the prurient interest of journalists or the justifiable ire of her victims' relatives. Safety lay in anonymity – there was no telling what some people might do if they found out where this multiple murderer had finally come to rest.

Helen was the only person present at her sister's committal and would be her sole mourner. Marianne's son was still missing and, as nobody else knew of the grave's existence, it fell to Helen to battle the weeds and honour her memory as best she could. She came here once or twice a week – whenever her shift patterns and hectic work schedule allowed – but always in the dead of night, when there was no chance of being followed or surprised. This was a private, painful duty and Helen had no need of an audience.

Replacing the flowers in the urn, she leant forward and kissed Marianne's headstone. Straightening up, she offered a few words of love, then turned and hurried on her way. She had wanted to come here – she never ducked her duty – but the winds were arctic tonight and if she stayed here much longer she would suffer for it. Helen

loathed illness – her life never seemed to allow for it anyway – and the thought of being tucked up at home in her flat suddenly seemed very attractive indeed. Hurrying back down the path, she vaulted the locked iron gates and made her way back to the car park, now cheerless and deserted save for Helen's Kawasaki.

Reaching her bike, Helen paused to take in the view. You could see the whole of Southampton from the top of Abbey Hill and this vista always cheered her, especially at night when the lights of the city below twinkled and glistened, full of promise and intrigue.

But not tonight. As Helen looked down at the city that had been her home for so long, she caught her breath. From this high up, she could see not one, not two, but three major fires gripping the city, fierce orange tongues of flame reaching up towards the heavens.

Southampton was ablaze.

Thomas Simms slammed the car horn and swore violently. Despite the late hour, the traffic near the airport had been murder, thanks to a lorry shedding its load. Having *eventually* escaped that snarl-up, Thomas had seemed set fair for the short drive back to his home in Millbrook – only to run straight into another jam. It was gone midnight now – where the hell was all this traffic coming from?

He flicked through the local radio stations searching for a traffic bulletin, but, finding nothing save for late-night phone-ins, impatiently switched the radio off. What should he do? There was a shortcut coming up but it would mean diverting through the Empress Road industrial estate, not something he was keen to do, given the prostitutes who'd be there at this time of night. The sight of them, half naked and shivering, always depressed him and he never felt comfortable sitting at the slow-changing traffic lights, eyed up by pimps and working girls alike. Given the choice, he preferred to stick to the main roads, but the sound of approaching sirens made up his mind. A fire engine and an ambulance were trying to bully their way through the traffic. If they were heading in his direction that could only mean that there was trouble ahead.

Slipping into first gear, Thomas mounted the lip of the

pavement and drove for twenty yards before turning sharply left down a dark, one-way street. Suddenly liberated, he drove too fast, speeding past the 30 mph sign as if it didn't exist, before catching himself and lowering his speed to a more sensible level. If he was lucky, he would be home in five minutes – kissing his wife and kids good-night before flopping into bed. There was no point in getting pulled over by the cops now that the end was so nearly in sight.

He worked sixteen-hour days at his import business near the airport, and he missed his family – but he was no fool. So though he was tempted to run the red light on the Empress Road, to escape the unwanted attentions of the scrawny drug addict in hot pants, he waited patiently for the lights to change, distracting himself from the unpleasant sideshow by thinking of the warm, king-size bed that awaited him at home.

He drove through the city centre, then picked up the West Quay Road, before finally hitting the home straight. Millbrook wasn't a fancy neighbourhood, but the housing was solid Victorian, the neighbours were decent and best of all it was quiet. Or at least normally it was. Tonight there seemed to be a lot of people about, the majority of them making their way to Hillside Crescent – his road.

Thomas muttered to himself. Please God there wasn't some kind of party going on. A couple of the more expensive houses had been occupied by squatters recently and local residents had been kept awake as a result. But things had been quiet of late and, besides, the people hurrying towards Hillside Crescent were not ravers, they were

ordinary mums and dads, some of whom he recognized from the morning run.

The expressions on their faces alarmed him, and as he approached the turning into his road he realized why they were looking so concerned. A huge plume of smoke billowed into the night sky, illuminated by the sombre sodium glow of the streetlights. Someone's house was on fire.

No wonder everyone was worried – the housing round here was gentrified Victorian – all scrubbed wooden floorboards and feature staircases. If the fire jumped from one house to the next then who's to say where it would end? Fear gripped him now as he sped down the street, honking his horn aggressively to clear his path of gawpers. What if the fire was close to *his* house? Immediately he clamped down his fear, telling himself not to be stupid. Karen would have called him if she was concerned about anything.

The road was blocked now with ambling pedestrians, so Thomas pulled over to the curb and climbed out. Locking the door, he started to jog down the road. The fire *was* near his house – it had to be given the direction of the smoke and the concentration of people at the far end of the road. His jog now turned into a full-on sprint, as he barged startled onlookers out of his path.

Breaking through the throng, he found himself at the bottom of his drive. The sight that met him took his breath away and he suddenly ground to a halt. His entire house was ablaze, huge flames issuing from every window in the house. It wasn't a fire, it was an inferno.

He found himself moving forward and turned to find

his neighbour gripping one of his arms, guiding him gently towards the house. The expression on her face was hideous – a toxic mixture of horror and pity – and it chilled him to the bone. Why was she looking at him like that?

Then Thomas saw him. His boy – his beloved son Luke – lying on the grass in the front garden. Shaded by the mulberry bush, he lay with his head on the lap of another neighbour, who was talking to him earnestly. It would have been a touching sight, were it not for the crazy angles of Luke's legs, bent nastily back on themselves, and the blood that clung to his face and hands.

'The ambulance is on its way. He's going to be ok.'

Thomas didn't know whether his neighbour was lying or not, but he wanted to believe her. He didn't care what injuries his son had sustained as long as he *lived*.

'It's ok, mate, Dad's here now,' he said as he knelt down next to his son.

The ground around Luke was covered with leaves and branches from the mulberry bush and in an instant Thomas realized that his son must have jumped. He must have leapt from the house and landed in the bush. It probably broke his fall – may even have saved his life – but why was he jumping at all? Why hadn't he just run out the front door?

'Where's Mum? And Alice? Luke, where are they, mate?'

For a moment, Luke said nothing, the agony racking his body seeming to rob him of the ability to speak.

'Has anyone seen them?' Thomas cried out, panic rendering his voice high and harsh. 'Where the hell are they?'

He looked back at his son, who seemed to be trying to raise himself, in spite of his injuries.

‘What is it, Luke?’

Thomas knelt in closer, his ear brushing his son’s mouth. Luke struggled for breath, then through gritted teeth finally managed to whisper:

‘They’re still inside.’