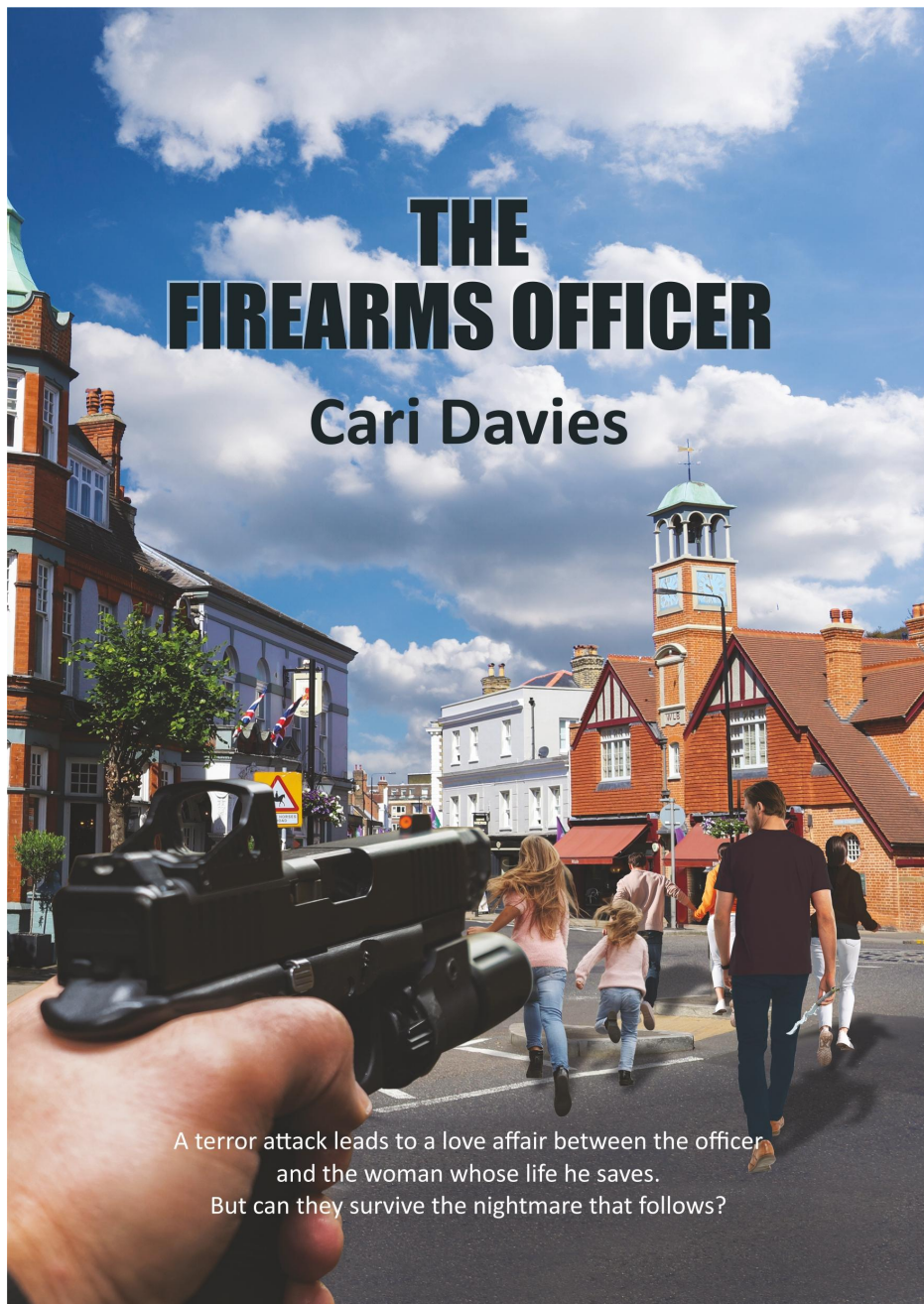


THE FIREARMS OFFICER

Cari Davies

A terror attack leads to a love affair between the officer
and the woman whose life he saves.
But can they survive the nightmare that follows?





Cari Davies has had a varied career as an actress, a teacher, a psychotherapist, and a writer. She published her first novel, 'On The Border' in 2021. A coming of age love story. It was inspired by her growing up on a Welsh farm. Her latest novel, 'The Firearms Officer,' is an action romance.

'The truth shall set you free, they said. But this rang hollow, now that she knew the price was so high. That the man she loved was also the man who'd saved her. The man she owed her life to...'



THE FIREARMS OFFICER

By

Cari Davies

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Print ISBN 978-1-7384231-5-6

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Published by
Llyfrau Cambria Books, Wales, United Kingdom.
*Cambria Books and Cambria Stories are imprints of
Cambria Publishing.*
Discover our other books at: www.cambriabooks.co.uk

'There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.' Thornton Wilder.

For Robin – The real hero.

Cover design by Carolyn Michel

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PART ONE

1

London - (August - 2021)

We forget that on the best of days the worst can happen. That when the sun is at its zenith dark clouds can gather and eclipse the light.

In the leafy London suburb of Wimbledon, Samantha Elliot was relishing the freedom to meander along the high street in the warmth of the midday sun. Her daughter was at preschool, and Sam felt relieved of any responsibility. Free to browse in a shop window and admire those Taylor jeans, rip at each knee, a white tank top to complete the outfit. Free to imagine going on a date again. Free to embrace a whole new beginning in life...

Until a scream splintered the air.

It sliced through the rumble of traffic and hushed the chatter of people. Sam spun around and saw, only a short distance away, a bearded youth, his face contorted, his eyes frenzied, a bloodied knife wielded above his head. A woman lay on the pavement beneath him, her white shirt crimson stained, as poised to strike again, he yelled, *'Allahu Akbar!'*

Bystanders tried to stop him, but he stabbed them also. A man reeled back clutching his stomach. A youth had his leg slashed. A girl was cut on her cheek. Traffic screeched to a halt as people fled in all directions, desperate to escape.

All except Sam, who couldn't flee anywhere. She couldn't believe what was happening in one of the safest suburbs in London. The reason she'd moved here. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, as blood trickled along the pavement...

The attacker spied her stillness. He fixed his hate filled eyes on her, and everything went into slow motion. She seemed to leave her body to hover in the chilling space between this world and the next, as he careered towards her, yelling, *'Almawt lilkaafirin!'* Death to the infidels!

Around the corner, Jules Caron and Ted Rowlands, two members of the anti-terrorist unit, waited in an unmarked car, its engine running. A pair of undercover officers, they'd been operating surveillance on a low risk subject and hadn't been too worried when Ahmed had sneaked into an alleyway. They had expected him to reappear. Hearing screams coming from the high street they turned to one another in dread.

'Merde! We'd better hope that's not him,' said Jules.

Half English, half French, he was the younger of the two. Not long in the unit, he'd been concerned that the youth had been showing increased signs of fervour of late. But his partner had dismissed Ahmed's attendance at a mosque with an extremist preacher, as mere student curiosity.

'Better your foot down!' A now equally worried Ted urged.

Not needing to be asked twice, Jules pressed hard on the accelerator and raced them to the scene.

He skidded to a halt at the near end of the high street, and they leapt out. Both wore denim jeans, dark body-armour vests, trainers for speed of movement, and balaclavas, which they pulled on at the last minute. They snatched their Glock 17 pistols from their leg holsters and ran towards the commotion.

'Mon Dieu,' Jules was stunned to see that people were already injured, as a berserk Ahmed struck at random.

Ted barked into his mobile, 'Code red. Terrorist attack on Wimbledon high street. We need the emergency response team, the bomb disposal unit, ambulances and paramedics.' He listened for a second, then switched off. He turned to Jules. 'We follow Protocol - Confront, Contain, and Negotiate. If that fails – shoot the bastard.' He checked that his Bodycam was working, and they moved forward in stealth.

Jules had been a soldier before he joined the anti-terrorist unit. A sniper hiding on rickety town roofs in Afghanistan. It was easy for him to dodge around people and take the forward position. Hidden beside a parked car, he watched as Ahmed picked his next victim. The young woman, her back turned, stood, as if frozen, as the youth careered towards her bellowing, *'Almawt lilkaafirin!'*

Jules wanted to shout, 'Run, Cheri!' but knew it was better he stayed unseen. It was ice he needed in his veins not emotion. He aimed his gun.

Pity, that in his haste to join him Ted stumbled into the side of the vehicle. The clang caused Ahmed to spot them both.

'Alkhanaziru!' the youth screamed.

'Yeah, *pigs!*' echoed a feckless teenager, who'd slyly leaned out of a café doorway and raised his phone to record the scene.

'Get out of here!' commanded Ted. But the teenager carried on as if he were making a movie.

For Sam it was all too real. She had a brief glimpse of the two masked men kneeling beside a car. She could only pray they were police officers, before she was grabbed, yanked around, strands of her hair pulled out by the roots, her cries ignored, as the attacker crushed her against his chest like a human shield.

'Merde!' Jules swore under his breath. It was hard not to be transfixed by her wide terrified eyes, her tumble of blonde hair, and fragile features. What if he shot her by mistake? He always felt a rush of anger seeing an imbalance of power between a man and a woman, a residue of feeling from his own abusive childhood, as she was held in a vice like grip.

'Tashabuk alsalama!' Ahmed growled.

Jules knew the words - *Peace be with you* - used in this context, meant exactly the opposite.

With murderous intent, Ahmed placed the knife across her throat, and began chanting, *'Allahu Akbar!'* in a rising crescendo.

Jules clicked off the gun's safety catch.

No time for negotiation. Ted went straight to the warnings. 'Drop the knife! Drop it! Drop it! Or, we'll shoot!' he hollered.

Ahmed merely tightened his grip and chanted louder.

For a second Jules hesitated. The task was all the harder because over the past weeks he'd learned about Ahmed. Knew for instance that the youth liked two spoons of sugar in his coffee. Knew he liked to sneak into the cinema to watch a movie of an afternoon, just as he did. Knew he was a student with a promising future in engineering. Knew

what his death would mean for his family and the wider community...

Sam did not want her life to end either, and not like this. An image of Milly swam before her. How could she leave her daughter alone? She saw the officer with his gun aimed, his eyes two slits behind a balaclava, her life in his hands, as she waited for him to save her...

Jules saw her despair, but needed her to shift a fraction so he could hit Ahmed between the eyes, the two black holes now filled with hate. With a flicker from his own eyes he willed her to – *move!*

The blade cut into her skin. She jerked her head aside. The shot rang out. The knife clattered onto the pavement. Ahmed slumped down. So, did she.

Silence.

Sam lay uncertain whether she was dead or alive. She opened her eyes and saw the sky had darkened. Then turned her head to find the attacker sprawled out beside her, and knew, with a rush of relief, that it was he who'd left this earth, not she, a last look of incredulity on his youthful face.

At that moment a pigeon swooped down to stand with its head cocked and stare, just as she was doing, at the blood seeping from the hole between the eyes, before it flew off as if in fright.

Sam glanced up the street and saw other people were injured. She hauled herself up as bedlam broke out, people shouting that the danger was not over.

The officer who'd saved her, his gun put away, ran up and warned of a *suicide belt*, his words muffled behind his balaclava as he hustled her away.

The sly teenager stopped filming and scarpered, as, sirens blaring, vans full of police arrived. They were followed by bomb disposal experts, dressed like Martians, who went to check the attacker's body for explosives.

Sam, though at a safe distance, couldn't stop trembling as she watched them. The fear one might detonate and blow them to smithereens felt eerily familiar, the destruction too horrible to contemplate. 'Please God, no...' she whispered.

Jules placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her. It was the least he could do.

The gesture helped humanize the unidentifiable stranger who she was standing so close to. Close enough to smell his aftershave, a spicy aroma. She only hoped it overcame the metallic scent of the blood now oozing from the cut in her neck.

Jules pulled out his hanky, white pressed and clean, and handed it to her. It was the least he could do.

She held it to stench the flow, but blood seeped through, a crimson stain spreading, warm and sticky on her fingers. She felt a rush to her head, and with a defeated moan, she passed out.

Jules caught her before she hit the ground. He held her limp body until the, 'All Clear!' was called, and the explosive belt declared a fake. When the paramedics arrived and took her over, his job fulfilled, as discreetly as he'd arrived, he slipped away.

Sam came around inside an ambulance, still holding his now bloodied handkerchief. The only link she had to the man who'd saved her, a man she hadn't even thanked.

But she was alive, and for the moment it was all that mattered. Relief took over as she was driven from the street she'd been so happy in only a short while ago, now turned into a place of misery and carnage.

Jules drove away slowly, not wanting to draw attention to himself and his partner. When he reached a quiet street, he parked under a shady tree.

Ted ripped off his balaclava. 'Good job we had these on so neither of us can be identified.' He threw it onto the back seat.

Jules peeled off his own and reached for his hanky to wipe the sweat from his face. Then remembered he'd handed it to the woman to staunch the flow of blood. He shuddered, and used his balaclava instead, before chucking it next to Ted's.

His gun-holding hand started shaking. It wasn't the first time he'd killed someone. But he hadn't expected it to happen like this, so soon into his new job. In Helmand no one had ever used the word - *kill*.

Words like engaging, dropping, bagging, were intended to distance a soldier from the actual act, and as a sniper Jules had always used a long-range rifle. But today, using a handgun, it had felt personal. The woman's terror, the whiplash of the bullet through the air, the image of Ahmed slumping down, brought a rush of anguish.

Ted, angry that the youth had turned into such a monster, had no such qualms. 'You dispatched him like a true terminator. *Boom!*'

Jules winced at a word straight out of a movie. He rubbed his fingers across his now dry mouth and recalled the sly teenager who'd leaned out of a café doorway to film as if he was witnessing one. 'How could he do that?' he asked Ted.

'Callous, he was.' His partner rolled down his window and spat out of it. Then tapped his Bodycam 'Good job I have the official version recorded. It will see us through the enquiry.'

Jules felt his stomach lurch. 'There has to be one?'

'It's mandatory.'

'Mon Dieu.'

At that moment Ted's phone pinged. He relayed the message to Jules. 'We have to go to Wimbledon Police Station for the debriefing. The Commander's already on his way. We're to use the back entrance to avoid meeting any of the local officers.'

Jules knew of the rivalry between different forces, and could only hope he'd be backed by his own unit.

Sam arrived at the hospital to find other victims there ahead of her. Trolleys were being wheeled about, one man was screaming.

A woman, wearing a black gown and Hijab, lay with blood dripping to the floor. The attacker had struck out indiscriminately, hurting even his own.

Inside a curtained cubicle, the bloodied hanky shoved inside her pocket, a doctor tended her neck. He seemed young and inexperienced. A covid mask half covered his face. He told her an artery had only just been missed. And that because the knife had been serrated, the suturing of the wound would be more difficult.

He took his time doing it. Sam tried to think of other things to

distract herself, like being home in time to fetch Milly from school.

‘Will it leave a scar?’ she asked, when he’d finished.

‘Depends how well it heals.’

She felt like a marked woman anyway, the damage to her psyche of more concern.

He sprayed on anesthetic and set to work. He told her that the stiches were dissolvable and should disappear in a few weeks. That she should keep the wound warm and clean. He put an adhesive dressing on, and gave her a couple to take away. Told her the skin around the cut might go red and inflamed, but that was a sign it was healing.

‘How will I know if it’s not?’

‘The bleeding will start again. The wound will reopen and pus will ooze out, a sign it’s infected. Come back and see me if you’re at all concerned.’

He shone lights into her eyes, and asked questions. Did she feel dizzy? Was she nauseous? Had she a headache?

She had all of these, but wanted to go home and be alone. She begged to be released, but she had to wait a good while before he granted permission.

She walked a little unsteadily along the corridor. At the hospital entrance a policewoman took charge. ‘We’ll give you a ride as we need to take your details.’

Sam sat in the back of the car, gave her name, age, how she’d celebrated turning twenty-four only last week, and finished with her address.

‘How many others were injured?’ she asked as they drove her away.

‘Eight, including you. But at least no one died. Except the perpetrator of course.’ The policewoman gave Sam a steady gaze. ‘It was fortunate those officers were on hand.’

‘Do you know the one who saved me?’

‘No, I don’t. And even if I did, I couldn’t say. He must remain anonymous for his own safety. There’ll be an enquiry about today and his actions will undergo scrutiny.’

‘But he saved my life. He’s a hero.’

‘You can give a statement to corroborate that, when you feel able.’

Sam nodded. She'd do whatever she could to help him.

It was a relief to be taken home by way of the back route, avoiding the high street.

'Traffic has to be diverted as forensic teams are at work,' the policewoman told her. 'It'll be chaos for a while.'

Sam wondered if Wimbledon would ever be the same.

At least in her own street there was no sign of disruption. The Victorian red brick, semi-detached house, was a welcome sight. It was not large but suited just her and Milly.

'Is there someone waiting for you?' asked the policewoman.

Sam shook her head, and didn't elaborate. She didn't want to mention her divorce, or that she was a single parent, it was private.

'I'll get a squad car to drive by and check everything's okay.'

Sam thought of little Milly. 'Do you think it might not be?'

'Better to be on the safe side.' A card was produced. 'This might help, too.'

Sam looked down at the words - Victim Support. She hated being labelled one. She doubted she'd use it. She'd find her own way through this, if she could.

She went inside her home, slid down onto the cool of the hall floor, and howled. Her body racked by angry sobs.

It was a good hour before she could stop.

2

Jules and Ted arrived at Wimbledon Station and entered by the back entrance.

Their Unit Commander was waiting in the basement, in a room set aside from the usual police business. Jules handed his gun over. It was bagged for a thorough examination.

Evans was a solid muscular Welshman, and the man who had recruited Jules when he headed up the interview at Scotland Yard. There were those at Main Command who had felt Jules wasn't ready for the complexity of undercover work. That his French accent might be a hindrance. But Evans had waved their doubts away, declaring the unit could only benefit from someone with grit, determination, and ace shooting skills. That the police training would deal with anything else he needed to know. Jules could only hope that this belief in him still held, as his commander narrowed his eyes.

'How are you feeling, lad?'

Jules's leg started jiggling. He had to clamp his foot down on the floor to hold it still. 'I'm shaken, sir.'

'I'm sure you are. It was a close call. You do know that counselling's available any time you want it.' Evans gave a nod of sympathy. 'Talking through things can help.'

Jules didn't answer. Last thing he wanted was someone stirring up his emotions. It was best he kept a stiff upper lip. He'd admired this about the British when he first came to live here, and so far, it had served him well.

Evans gave up and moved on. 'Let's get the formalities over with.' He switched on the recording machine placed at the end of the table and asked them to say how long they'd been part of the unit.

Ted had been there for years. Jules, but a few months.

For anonymity, they were to use pseudo names. Jules, was to be Officer Y. Ted, Officer Z.

Jules tried to recall every detail leading to the final shot. He spoke hesitantly as his memory felt spooked. When he reached the end, the

relief was palpable. Even his leg calmed down.

Ted gave his version next and backed him up to the hilt.

Evans switched off the machine and nodded appreciatively at them both. 'Good job you were near and could race to the scene, however pissed the local response team are that you arrived before them.' He nodded at Jules. 'You're a hero in my book, lad.'

Jules wished he felt like one, and not like a cold-blooded killer.

'It's a pity that the police have received such bad press recently,' said Evans. 'Accusations of misogyny, racism, homophobia, you name it.'

Jules had seen for himself how some officers in the unit were indeed guilty of racism and misogyny. Insults were bandied about at anyone who looked remotely foreign, he'd copped a few himself. As for the pornographic pictures on the inside of locker doors, they spoke realms.

'You could come under fire for this incident,' Evans warned. 'The Independent Office for Police Conduct will be interviewing you both. They'll want proof you followed protocol.' He looked at Ted. 'Give me your Bodycam. It should give all the cover you'll need.'

Ted removed the camcorder from off his jacket, and handed it over.

Evans checked it out. He lifted his head, and looked at Ted. 'Something's not right. You did switch it on, didn't you?'

'Of course, I did.' Ted swallowed. 'Unless it got dislodged when I...' he looked at Jules, 'stumbled.'

'*Stumbled?*' Evans pressed the recorder button, but again nothing happened.

Jules felt a tremor of fear as Evans handed it back to Ted. 'I hope this isn't a cock up,' said the commander.

Jules couldn't help feeling a spark of anger. The recording would have vindicated him by showing exactly what happened.

'You did give clear warnings?'

'Of course, sir.' Ted was on the defensive.

'Did anybody else hear them?' Evans's tone was irritated now.

'The victim must have,' said Ted. 'Though Ahmed was shouting.'

‘She’s probably too traumatized to be of any use,’ damned Evans. ‘We’d do better to check the street cameras. Pity most need replacing and can’t be relied on thanks to budget cuts.’

Jules told him of the sly teenager who’d filmed. ‘His camera was working, sir.’

‘Pity he scarpered with it,’ said Ted.

Evans rubbed his lips with his fingers, his mood no longer friendly. ‘Well, let’s hope he comes forward. I’ll get the Police Commissioner, in his TV update, to ask anyone who has any footage to hand it in.’ He sat back and studied his two officers. ‘Tell me, what did you miss about Ahmed’s behavior prior to this morning. He must have been showing some agitation.’

Jules knew he hadn’t missed anything. That he’d informed Ted about his fears. But as a member of the Church of England, his partner was keen on showing tolerance. Now, under the steely gaze from his Commander, Ted had more doubts. ‘Jules had concerns, sir. I should have listened to him. I couldn’t believe Ahmed would turn into a monster. He was just a youth.’

There was a withering sigh.

Evans leaned forwards and lowered his voice. ‘Well, what’s done is done. You must say you had no proof anything was being planned, or you’ll look negligent.’ He leaned back and became business like. ‘They want to interview you first thing tomorrow morning. You at eight, Jules. Ted at nine. Separately.’ He gave them a stern look. ‘Loyalty between partners is everything at times like this. See you stick to the same story.’

His voice had a tone of regret as he added they’d have to be suspended from the unit, pending the enquiry. He offered an olive branch saying it would be paid leave. He told them to leave London until press interest had died down. To take a holiday and recover.

Jules’s first thought was that he could return to France. Maybe go hiking in the alps. He hadn’t been back since he’d left.

Pity Evans read his mind.

‘You can’t leave the country, lad. Not when you’re under investigation. You must hand your passport in.’ He stood up. ‘Briefing

terminated.’ And he left the room.

Jules was damned if he’d hand in his passport. It would be like an admission of guilt.

‘What happened to the presumption of innocence?’ agreed Ted.

They sat in silence for a moment, the image of the dead Ahmed like a ghost between them.

‘I’m not sure we can pin our hopes on the teenager who took the phone footage,’ said Ted. ‘He called us *pigs* if you remember.’

Jules shook his head not wanting to remember any such thing

They went outside. Ted drove off to his home in lower Wimbledon. Back to the bosom of the family he referred to as the most important part of his life. Jules drove in the other direction, to the neighbouring suburb of Putney, where he lived alone.

The apartment was on the top floor of a converted warehouse. It had spectacular views of the Thames. Barges and ferries meandered along, pushing aside stray logs, bottles, cans, and all kinds of litter carelessly thrown in. Murky secrets lurked in the deep, even bodies sometimes surfaced, which made it fascinating on any other day. But now his own life felt murky, Jules had no desire to even look.

He couldn’t take his usual pride in his pad either. Bought with money his mother had left him, the apartment was open-plan and spacious, with few possessions to clutter it. He’d designed it himself, a bit of a man cave, he supposed, one he could bunker down in.

He needed a drink. He poured out a whisky, flopped down on the sofa, and switched on his audio streaming. Music could always change his mood, and he listened to Litvinovsky’s – ‘The Grand Cahier, La Foret et Riviere,’ until a calm descended.

He took a long shower, the sweat and gore of the day, washed away, at least, momentarily.

He returned to the sitting room, a towel wrapped around his still wet skin, and switched on the television, only to find that the event on the high street was being relived. It was hard to listen as passersby gave accounts of what had taken place. His part in the ordeal was recounted by strangers. Some called him a hero, some felt he’d acted too hastily. ‘He wore a balaclava and behaved more like a robot than a human

being,' said a woman.

'Merci pour rien!' Jules shook his head, and sat down.

It was a relief when a clip was shown of the local Police Superintendent, uniformed and braided, a microphone set up outside Wimbledon station, where he announced that but for the actions taken by the two brave officers today more people would have been hurt, or could have died.

Then a journalist asked who these officers were, and Jules froze. Even though the superintendent said their identities were protected, more questions were asked. - *Why were they nearby? Was it because they were already conducting a surveillance on the youth? Were they undercover?*

The Superintendent said he couldn't comment, but that everything would be examined by the IOPC. It would be a fully independent enquiry. He asked for anyone who'd taken phone footage to hand it in as potential evidence, and closed the update down.

Jules took another swig of whisky as the news went onto to name the victims. He felt sorry for them as their identities were exposed somewhat recklessly. He peered closer at photograph of the woman whose life he'd saved. She looked younger, only a teenager, but had the same tumble of blonde hair, and an inviting smile that drew you in. Jules remembered how terror had made her eyes luminous. How she'd connected with his and had moved just in time. How they'd synchronized.

Samantha Elliot, an actress, recently divorced, has a young daughter...

They seemed more interested in her checkered history, than the fact she was alive and saved from an almost certain death.

Jules switched off, preferring to read an Arch Comic on Architectural Evolution. The way things were built was a passion of his. *Yes, is More*, had sketchy new ideas, and revolutionary designs. He studied a photograph of the *Burj Khalifa* in Dubai, the tallest building in the world. The sheer feat of the engineering took the mind to a different sphere. The image of silver tiers rising ever upwards into the sky filled him with inspiration, and for a brief while, the hideous carnage he'd witnessed today, was eclipsed.

3

Alone in the hall, her tears abated for the time being, Sam pulled herself up from the floor and walked into the kitchen. Every part of her body ached. Any movement felt hard to execute. She may have survived her ordeal but her muscles hadn't registered it, they were weak and limp.

She gulped down a drink of water and looked out of the kitchen window at the garden in full bloom. Hollyhocks towered in the borders, busy lizzies fought for space, nasturtiums spilled onto the lawn in an array of colours she might never have seen again. The thought of dying in such a horrible manner had her touching her neck, doubtful the scar would ever fade. She fingered the dressing, then remembered the bloodied hanky was still in her pocket, and she pulled it out.

Not daring to look in case she fainted again, she went into the small utility room. She filled a bowl with cold water, added some stain removal, and dropped it in. Her eyes still averted, she rinsed until the hanky was returned to its purity.

It made her curious about the officer who'd handed it to her. He'd seemed young like she was, and might also be traumatized. Even if he had taken the shot like he was a machine. She recalled how afterwards he'd placed a hand on her shoulder in what had felt like an act of solidarity, the gesture comforting. That underneath that cold exterior, he was a human being.

She hung the hanky out to dry in the garden, where it fluttered in the breeze like a flag. A reminder of how near she came to not existing, and a warning to be more vigilant in the future. Life no longer felt safe, no longer felt free. Any chance for this had been dashed to smithereens on a bright summer morning, and a sob escaped her.

She went inside to call her mother, concerned she'd learn of the event on the television.

It was a while before Stella Elliot answered. She was probably outside doing the thing she loved most, painting. When her voice finally came on the line, Sam couldn't hold back the tears as she spoke of the horror that had taken place.

‘You must leave London,’ said her shocked mother. ‘Get in the car and drive straight to Dorset. You should be with me. I can’t have you and Milly living in a place where madmen attack innocent people.’

Sam knew her mother was probably right. She promised to think about going there, but didn’t want Wimbledon turned into a place of evil either.

No sooner had she put the phone down than it rang again. This time it was her friend Andrea, who’d only just heard what had happened and wanted to warn Sam. ‘There’s been a terror attack in the high street. A maniac ran amuck, striking people down at random. One poor woman had a knife put to her throat. She could have been beheaded.’

Sam broke in. ‘I know. It was me.’

A stunned silence. ‘Oh my God, Sam. You must be traumatized. I’m coming straight over.’

‘No, please don’t. I can pull myself together better on my own. I have to pick up Milly soon.’

‘For goodness sake, I can fetch her for you. You must stay put. She can have lunch with Polly at my house.’

Sam knew Andrea’s daughter, a year older than Milly, was a kind girl. But she wanted to see Milly for herself, to hold her close. Added to which if she stayed indoors she might never dare go out again. ‘I want things to be as normal as possible,’ she explained. ‘I don’t want Milly to be terrorized. I have to show her that I’ve survived.’

‘Well, if you insist. What a nightmare. Just when we’ve been freed from lockdowns and life was returning to normal.’ Andrea drew breath. ‘And for him to target you of all people, after what you’ve already been through. What with your divorce and your ex legging it to Canada.’

Her new friend didn’t know everything. Sam didn’t want her pity. She couldn’t allow the fear of being helpless in the face of male aggression to return because she’d frozen in fright today. She couldn’t succumb to becoming a victim all over again. ‘It was I who ended the marriage,’ she said defiantly, and ended the call.

She went into the sitting room, with its newly painted umber walls, rustic blue sofa, and oriental carpets. She sank to the floor and took up

a yoga position, stretched out her spine, closed her eyes, and tried to ease the stress away as best she could, hoping she'd feel strong enough to fetch Milly.

She'd wanted her daughter to attend the preschool facility, offered over the long summer holidays, in preparation for primary school in September. So far, Milly had enjoyed the playground games and the walks on the common, but had complained that the children who already lived in Wimbledon had bonded together, and left her out.

Sam understood her daughter's position all too well. Newly arrived in the area, her own status as a single mother had seemed to make other mothers wary of her. As if she was the sore thumb amidst the suburban family bliss lived by everyone else. Andrea was the only real friend Sam had made so far.

A scarf sufficed to hide the dressing on her neck. It would also keep it warm, and make the cut heal more quickly she hoped. She didn't want anyone seeing it and asking awkward questions.

She set off for the school, bravely, but as she reached the gates, fear enveloped her again. A blackness descended, like a bird of prey had swooped her up into the ethos and kept her hovering there. It was a relief to find Andrea waiting at the gate. Her friend gave her such a big hug she came back to earth.

'You need all the support you can get.' Andrea reached into her pocket and pulled out a rape alarm. 'Here, take this.' She handed it over.

'You think someone will attack me again?' Sam feared the word, '*Victim*,' was stamped across her forehead making her fair game for anyone.

'It's just a precaution. It makes an ear-splitting shriek and people will come running to your aid.'

Sam shoved it into her pocket, knowing her friend was doing her best to help. She could see the other mother's glancing over, but they stopped short of coming any closer.

'They know what's happened to you. But they haven't told the children. Milly doesn't have to know until you're ready to tell her. I suggested that they gave you space,' Andrea explained.

'That's all they've ever given me,' said Sam. 'I don't want to be

treated like a leper.'

To her surprise two of them ventured forth.

'What a horrendous thing to happen,' said Nicola, the wife of a banker, who usually ignored Sam. 'It's bold of you to come here to collect Milly,' she said.

'I'm glad he was shot and killed,' said Olivia, a tall willowy model, with a loud voice. She glanced around at a group of Muslim mothers who were huddled together, protectively. 'I hope they didn't hear that, but it's only how I feel.'

Sam could see divisions were forming even though the attacker had struck at random, regardless of people's creed or culture. She was about to say something about this, when Barbara, the psychotherapist arrived, and took her aside.

'You'll need time to process what's happened. I can easily find you a counsellor trained for such needs. Milly could come on a play date with Lucy, while you pay one a visit.'

Sam felt she'd had her fair share of counselling when deciding to leave her marriage. She didn't feel the same need to talk about the attack. She wanted to banish it from her mind and blot out the images. At the same time, she knew playdates were something that Milly had longed for and didn't want to lose the kind offer.

Her daughter came running out. She was real, and tangible, the smell of pencils and rubbers on her skin. Sam held her close. 'It's so good to see you, sweetheart.'

Miss Potts, who was in charge, came up and whispered how shocked she was to hear what had happened. Then explained she'd also kept it from the children. That it was better they heard about such horror in the safety of their own homes, especially Milly.

Sam thanked her, and blinked back her tears, keen to rush her daughter away before someone accidentally blurted anything.

A still concerned Andrea offered beds at her home. Sam knew it was large and had plenty of room, but still declined. She wanted to be in her own house tonight. 'There'll be police officers patrolling outside,' she reassured her friend. 'We'll be fine.'

'Well, if you change your mind, call me.'

Sam fled back to the house, where she fed Milly a lunch of bake beans and fishfingers. She couldn't be bothered to follow good eating rules today. Sensing weakness in her mother, Milly pushed for more rules to be broken and tried to raid the sweet jar. Sam's firm *No*, had her daughter running out into the garden to use the swing. She went even higher than usual, her cheeks aglow, her curly hair awry, and her legs kicking out as she sang, 'Happy As You Know It,' to the skies.

Sam only wished she could be as carefree.

When evening came she sneaked a look into the street and saw a police car idling by. The two officers inside gave her a salute, which reassured her.

She gave Milly a lengthy wallow at bath time. Water was chucked everywhere. There was a lot of clearing up to do before her daughter finally climbed into bed.

Tucked in, Sam read from a favourite book - 'Charlotte's Web.' Milly loved the tale of Wilbur, the little runt of a piglet, destined to be killed, who was saved over and over. Sam too found it comforting on the very day someone else had saved her, even if he was a stranger she'd never know.

Exhausted by the effort to carry on as though everything was normal, she kissed Milly goodnight. She'd wait until morning to explain what had happened, and, at least, her still unaware daughter, went to sleep with a smile on her face.

Jules spent the evening in the quiet pub not far from his apartment, where he downed a glass of burgundy, and picked at his steak and chips. He'd not much appetite. Not helped by a couple sitting nearby who were hell bent on discussing the terrorist attack.

'Who'd have thought that would happen in Wimbledon of all places, 'The Land of The Wombles,' said an elderly man, sipping his evening pint. 'I mean that kid's book was ahead of its time being so eco-friendly. All about furry animals who collected rubbish left lying around, and recycled it underground.' He shook his head. 'Not like nowadays when litter is left everywhere. The police should be tougher, like those officers today, no messing with them, was there?'

‘I’m not so sure,’ said the younger woman. ‘They may have overstepped the mark by killing him, Dad.’

Jules didn’t wait to hear any more. He downed his wine and left.

It had made him more anxious about the meeting in the morning. He knew the independent conduct officers would be thorough, but hoped they’d also be respectful. He tried to reassure himself it was just a procedure.

Back home he ran the event through his mind more calmly, clinically, not leaving anything out up to the final moment, when Sam Elliot, held like a human shield, her death imminent, had waited in desperation for him to save her.

How could he not?