

# BOMBPROOF

by

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## A Very Bad Day

Some days are diamonds. Some days are stones. John Denver used to sing that before he crashed a plane into Monterey Bay. It wasn't a diamond day for him.

Sami Macbeth's day has been nothing but stones. Emerging from Oxford Circus Underground, he blinks into the sunlight and coughs so hard it feels as if his sphincter is coming up through his lungs. His clothes are torn and bloody. His face streaked with sweat. His skin coated in dust.

Moving slowly past onlookers, Sami ducks beneath a makeshift barricade of crime scene tape strung between plastic bollards. People step aside and stare at him like he's some sort of ghost.

Six and a half pounds of TATP – the Mother of Satan - just blew a gaping hole in a packed carriage on the Central Line, peeling off the roof like a giant opening a big can of peaches.

It was horrible down there. Mayhem. One moment Sami was standing near the train doors and the next he was laying on his back, flapping his arms and legs like an upturned beetle. Papers were blown through the air, glass showered down on him and the train shuddered to a halt. Everything went quiet for a moment and completely dark. Then the screaming started.

People were hurt. Dying. God knows how many. Who was sitting in the other carriage next to Dessie? A guy in a Jesus T-shirt with his eyes closed, doing the nodding dog. Next to him was a suit with a briefcase. There was also a girl standing near the doors, wearing a short jacket. She had white earbuds trailing from under her long hair.

Sami looks up and down Oxford Street. Traffic is at a standstill. Buses, vans, cars and cabs - nothing is moving. Someone hands him a bottle of water. He pours it over his head. Soot runs into his mouth and grit crunches between his teeth.

Crossing the road between two trucks, he forgets to lift his feet and trips over the gutter. A driver calls out. Sami doesn't answer. He turns down Argyle Street and crosses Great Marlborough, stepping round pedestrians. Moving quickly.

People are staring at each other. Shocked. Clueless. Sami hears snippets of their conversation: '...terrorists...' '...a bomb...' ...underground...'

They're frightened. Sami is frightened. Dessie just blew himself to Kingdom fucking Come. He'll need a very short coffin – Y-shaped to fit his legs and his bollocks.

The rucksack slaps against Sami's back. He should ditch it and run. Take his chances. But what would Murphy do to Nadia?

It's like the platform announcer said: 'Please keep your bags with you at all times and report any unattended items or suspicious behaviour to a member of staff.'

Sami should call Murphy. Explain. What would he say? He doesn't have a mobile. A guy ahead of him is trying to send a text message. He's unshaven, wearing Levis, slung low, showing his butt-crack.

'Can I borrow your phone?' Sami asks.

The guy stares at him. 'You look like shit.'

'I need to make a call.'

'Were you down there?'

Sami doesn't answer. He takes the phone and punches in a number. Nothing happens.

'Network's down,' says the butt-crack guy. 'Too many people trying to make calls.'

Sami hands him back the mobile and keeps walking, crossing at the next intersection. He notices a black cab. Opens the door. Slips onto the back seat. Dumps the rucksack on the floor between his knees.

'You're joking, aren't you, mate?' says the driver. He motions to the road ahead. 'I haven't moved in forty frigging minutes.'

Sami catches sight of himself in the rear mirror. His face is caked in black soot except for two streaks of white, one on the tip of his nose and the other a line of perspiration running over his cheekbone and jaw to his neck. It could be war paint. He's been into battle.

The driver is listening to the radio.

'What's happened?' asks Sami.

'Bomb went off,' says the driver. 'There could be more of them.'

'More what?'

'Suicide bombers.' The driver looks at him. 'You must have been down there. You look like Al fucking Jolsen.'

'Who's he?'

'You never heard of Al fucking Jolsen?'

'No.'

'He was a white guy used to black up his face and sing like a nigger.'

'Why?'

'Fuck knows.'

The driver has his door propped open. He lights a cigarette and the roll of smoke seems to evaporate on the breeze.

'You got a phone?' he asks the cab driver.

'Yeah.'

'Can I borrow it?'

'Won't do you any good. They must have shut down the network, or the whole thing has crashed. Every man and his dog is trying to call home.'

'Why would they shut down the network?'

'Stop them setting off any more bombs. That's how the ragheads do it - use mobile phones as detonators. Call the number and boom. Makes no sense to me. Live and let live, I say. We should make a deal with the terrorists - we won't invade their fucked up countries if they stop blowing us up.'

'Maybe it wasn't terrorists,' suggests Sami.

‘Of course it was frigging terrorists,’ replies the driver. ‘You’re not bleeding are you? I don’t want frigging blood on the seats.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You covered in that black shit. Maybe you should just get out.’

‘Couldn’t I just sit here?’

‘Do this cab look like a frigging backpackers?’

Sami gets out. Swings the rucksack over one shoulder. Drops his head and keeps moving.

Turning out of Rupert Street into Shaftesbury Avenue, he almost runs into a big black cozzier standing on the corner, directing traffic. Really big, two-fifty pounds at least, made even larger by his vest, which is bristling with Old Bill gadgets.

Sami apologises. The cozzier tells him to slow down and watch where he’s going. Then he clocks Sami’s clothes and the rucksack.

‘What you carrying, lad?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Looks pretty heavy to be nothing.’

‘Dirty laundry.’

‘Show me.’

‘It’s locked.’

‘You always lock up your dirty laundry?’

‘There’s loads of perverts about,’ says Sami.

The cozzier is already reaching for the radio on his arm. ‘Put the rucksack down slowly. Step back.’

Sami’s insides are betraying him now. His hair is full of broken glass. He looks past the cozzier, down the street. A camera shutter blinks in his mind and he’s looking at a dozen years in prison. The shutter blinks again and he sees his sister Nadia lying on a bed, her dress plastered to her body, a crack whore for Tony Murphy.

The black constable grabs hold of Sami’s arm. Instinct kicks in. Sami drops his head into the cozzier’s stomach, hearing the wind whistle out of his mouth and nose. He’s running now, dodging pedestrians, leaping

over a dog on a lead. Bursting through a queue, knocking over a man carrying a sandwich board.

The Underground is closed. The steps deserted. There are station guards at the stairs. Across the street, between ambulances, fire engines.

People have gathered to watch. Knocking over tables. Ignoring traffic, which is backed up, going nowhere. The bag over one shoulder. Slapping against his back as he runs.

He should stop and tighten the straps, clip the belt around his waist. But he's too scared to stop. He keeps moving. His throat is dry. He's heading away from the commotion, the chaos.

Run. That's what every sense tells him to do. Just run. Get away. Find somewhere quiet. Hide the rucksack. Steal a moment to think.

He stops, leans his back against a wall. The rucksack props him up. He listens. Sirens. They're stuck in traffic. Trying to outrun them on foot is a loser's game. They'll corner him and wait for reinforcements.

Sami is in a race now. His heart is hammering and he's gasping for breath. The silent alarm in his head is sounding. All those push-ups and somersaults didn't help his fitness.

He has to go off the radar. Disappear. He has money now – the stash from the safe. But first he has to get out of the West End...out of London.

There's a church across the square. He can hide inside. Stash the rucksack in a dark corner. Change out of the overalls. Say a prayer. It's a good plan.

He comes out of the alley and finds three policemen in front of him. One of them has a gun and is crouching, holding it in two hands, like he knows how to use it.

'Don't move,' he yells at Sami. 'Put the bag down.'

Sami looks behind him...looks ahead. Holds his mobile in the air.

'I got a fucking bomb,' he yells, not recognising his own voice. 'Get back or I'll blow the fucker.'

The cozzers melt away. Sami runs past them. The cozzier with the gun is lying on the ground, on his elbows, trying to get a shot. Sami keeps moving, stepping from side to side.

A bomb. He told them he had a bomb. What a prize fuck-up. What a joke! Sami isn't just unlucky; he's a walking jinx, a Jonah, a one-man wrecking crew. He's trouble with a capital 'T' and that rhymes with 'D' and that stands for dead.

Three days ago he walked out of prison and swore he'd never go back. Twenty-four hours ago he was shagging Kate Tierney the woman of his wet dreams in a suite at the Savoy thinking life was looking up. Now he's carrying a rucksack through the West End of London that could send him to prison for twenty years and he's turned himself into the most wanted man in Britain.

This is how it happened...