

Would you  
take one life  
to save  
hundreds?

# The CHOICE



S.J. FORD



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*To my mum*

## PROLOGUE

Let me ask you a question – do you believe in moral absolutes?

What I mean is... do you believe there are some things that, regardless of circumstances, you must never do?

If your answer is 'yes', then you won't like me very much.

I did it, you see. All those things they're saying about me are true. I *killed* him.

It fills my mind: How could I have done this?

But deep down I know: How could I not?

I saw him outside our houses, he was walking towards his wheelie bin to bring it back in. He was furtive. I was driving home. It had been a bad day. I had a floaty skirt on, the kind that swished and caressed my legs as I moved. It had got trapped in the door as I shut it that morning – ruined, dirt streaking through the grey – such was my distress. I'd just rounded the corner onto Wesley Street. His hand was closing around the wheelie bin handle. I pointed my car at him and slammed down the accelerator as hard as I could. I crushed him between the car and the wall. He was a mangled mess.

Some people are calling me a murderer; others, a hero. I don't know what I am.

I suppose they're both correct.

You see, I saved the children.

# PART 1

# ONE

NEIL

The first I know of the drama is when I pull into my street after work on 16th January. There are blue lights outside our house – flashing methodically, silently. Two chequered, fluorescent cars form a V across the pavement outside our neighbour's house. The cars have POLICE emblazoned across them. They're blocking the view of my driveway, but I can see uniformed men and women swarming around, the peaks of their hats sharp. I know it's grave when I see the yellow tape streaming in the breeze.

Police line – do not cross.

My home. I never imagined. It's like a photo from a news article. There are *so many* police officers amongst our pansies and inside our slightly crooked garden gate. Whilst they are all slightly different – a whole spectrum of skin tones, varying heights and numerous builds – they are all the same in their dark uniforms and it's *too much black*. Panic grips me.

I ram my car over the curb and judder to a halt behind one of the police cars. That's the moment I see my wife, Jane. Flanked by two police officers, held beside one of the vehicles, she looks so small. Scared. Small lacerations newly splitting her face and glassy eyed with shock; the eye of this veritable tornado. I notice a glinting from her wrists, flashes alerting me. She is wringing her hands – Lady Macbeth... out damned spot. The moment I see those handcuffs around my wife's wrists, I feel it form. It is a sickening ball of knowing before I actually understand. You must know what I mean?

I try to make eye contact with Jane, but she is unseeing. Then I'm surrounded, guided around the police cars to within the arms of the V. He is an unrecognisable shape on the ground beneath a coarse sheet, but I have no doubt about who he is.

'Where are my children?' I ask desperately, my voice strangled and deformed by panic.

'Are you Mr Bell?' a firm voice asks. I can't really make out the policeman's features – the peak of his hat shadows his face. I nod.

'Neil,' I manage, my voice full of cracks that have never been found there before.

'You'll need to come with me, sir. Your children are safe, with a friend called...' He pauses, checking a worn looking notepad. 'Rachel.'

My panic melts away, and I glance down at the shrouded mound on the pavement again.

I feel a flash of pride for my wife, for what she's done to protect us all, but it is eaten by the horror of the act almost immediately.

A hand grasps my shoulder and I'm too stunned to shrug it off. It pushes me down into the back seat of one of the chequered cars, grille in front of me, doors locked. I am caged.

I stare once more at the lump under the sheet on the ground, at my wife, trembling uncontrollably, and at the army of identical officials. They are all cloaked by the ominous blue flashing.

Jane and I have been through hell with our neighbour, but it's been Jane who has shouldered the burden – she had the encounter, found out what he was planning, fought to get help and was rejected time after time. I know we're a tough neighbourhood, but still. All these task forces, yet they couldn't find their way past the protocols to catch the monster living right next to us. Someone had to do something. That someone shouldn't have had to be my wife.

It wasn't hard to believe Jane when she told me about him – she's nothing if not honest and down-to-earth. Fiercely protective of our children, absolutely, but that's not what this was. This was a terrorist; on the loose; just a wall away from us. This was desperation, love, parenthood.

I should have known. It should have been me behind the wheel.