

BODYGUARD

Book 3: Hijack

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PROLOGUE

The girl felt the cold hard barrel of a gun thrust against the back of her head.

“Kneel,” ordered the man, his voice as dry and cruel as the desert wind.

With no choice but to obey, the girl blindly sought the floor. The dusty rag around her eyes let in only glimpses of light, its fraying cloth reeking of stale sweat. She winced as the dirt floor grazed her bare knees and drew blood. Then, hearing the ominous *click* of a round entering the gun’s chamber, her body instinctively stiffened.

Her captor leaned in close. His breath, a bitter mix of coffee and nicotine, was warm and familiar in her ear. “Farewell, my little sparrow.”

So this is it, she thought with a numbness born out of exhaustion. After weeks of uncertainty and too many sleepless nights to count, she was beyond caring. Beyond even fear. In truth, her heart almost welcomed the end to her ordeal.

But, as she waited for the inevitable bullet, a small voice of fury rose within her.

Why have I been abandoned like this? Why hasn't the ransom been paid? What's gone wrong?

Despite all the promises and hopes she'd clung to, she was going to die. A bullet through the head. Her body dumped in the desert.

"Get it over with," she muttered, willing her executioner to pull the trigger and end her suffering.

Silence.

No click. No bang. Not even a reply. Only the buzz of flies circling in the stifling heat.

What's taking him so long? Is this another one of his mind games?

A bead of sweat rolled from beneath her blindfold and down her grime-covered cheek.

"Lost your nerve, have you?" she croaked, her voice quivering as her impatience turned to frustrated anger. Still no answer.

With a trembling hand, she removed the rag. Blinking away the dust, she discovered she was *alone* . . . abandoned in the center of a single-room mud-brick building. A makeshift wooden door barred the only entrance through which beams of sunlight speared the darkness.

Should I try to escape? But she had no idea what lay beyond

the doorway. Her captor? The barrel of a gun? Most likely miles of unbroken desert—

Suddenly the door burst open and she was dazzled by the glaring African sun. A shadow passed across her face as a huge man filled the doorway. Dressed in khaki army fatigues and his finger primed on the trigger of an assault rifle, he swiftly scanned the room for threats before his gaze targeted her.

“Emily Sterling?” the soldier grunted.

Her throat too dry to reply, Emily managed a weak nod.

The soldier thumbed his radio mic. “Yankee Four to X-ray, hostage found alive, I repeat, *alive*.”

Scooping Emily up in his arms like a fragile doll, the soldier carried her to the door.

As the realization of her rescue hit her, Emily began to sob uncontrollably.

“It’s over,” promised the soldier. “You’re safe now.”

No, thought Emily as her tears dripped onto the man’s shirt. *I’ll never be safe again.*



“Keep your head down!” Connor shouted as a barrage of bullets raked the brick wall.

His Principal had gone into shock and kept trying to bolt from their hiding place. But that was the worst possible reaction the boy could have. A casual stroll down the street had turned into a bodyguard’s nightmare, and now they were pinned down in a well-planned ambush.

Connor knew his next move would be crucial. In his head, he ran through the A-C-E procedure . . .

Assess the threat. Two shooters. One in an alley. Another behind a tree. Intention to kill, not capture.

Counter the danger. His first priority was to find cover and secure the Principal. But the low brick wall they had hidden behind provided only temporary protection. As soon as the shooters repositioned themselves, he and his Principal would be exposed again.

Escape the kill zone. Easier said than done!

Connor tapped his mic. "Alpha One to Control. Request emergency EVAC."

His earpiece burst into life and he heard Charley, Alpha team's operations leader, respond, "*Alpha One, this is Control. Backup on its way. Three minutes out.*"

Three minutes? thought Connor. They'd be dead meat in that time. And, without any firepower of their own, they were defenseless. Connor needed an exit strategy . . . and fast.

Covering the Principal with his body, Connor peeked over the wall and scanned the immediate area. A clump of bushes off to their right gave some visual cover for an escape but no physical protection from gunfire. A car parked farther down the street provided little hope; he was too young to know how to drive, let alone how to hot-wire a car! He looked at the building behind them—a small warehouse with offices attached. The back entrance was only thirty feet away, but it was across open ground. Checking on the enemy's progress, Connor saw that the shooter behind the tree was advancing to get a clear shot. He had no choice but to risk it.

"Move!" he growled, seizing his Principal by the arm and sprinting toward the warehouse.

Keeping his body close, Connor shielded the boy as the enemy opened fire. Bullets whizzed past. One almost clipped his ear. Their feet pounded across the pavement, and whether through speed or pure luck, they made it to the entrance unharmed.

Connor yanked on the handle.

"NO!" he cried, tugging furiously at the locked doors.

He spun around. They were now sitting ducks. Connor shoved his Principal into the shelter of a large wheeled Dumpster. The boy tried to run on, crying, "I don't want to die!"

"Stay down," Connor ordered, pushing him to the ground. Then through clenched teeth he added, "Amir, you're not making this any easier for me."

"Sorry," replied his friend, offering a flash of a grin from behind his safety goggles. "But I'm supposed to be a panicking Principal."

"Well, panic *less*," Connor pleaded as several bullets thudded into the metal bin.

Amir flinched and covered his head with his arms. "A bit difficult under the circumstances, don't you think?"

Richie, who was playing the part of the first shooter in the training scenario, had left his position in the alley and was unleashing a hail of paintballs from his assault rifle. So was Ling, the other shooter, who by now had reached the far end of the low wall. If either of them managed to hit Amir with even a single paintball, Connor would instantly fail the exercise.

Ever since his successful assignment protecting the American president's daughter the month before, the rest of Alpha team had been impressed but also a little envious

of his newly acquired status. The only other person on the team to have earned a gold Guardian badge was Charley—and she truly deserved it, whereas he was just a first-time rookie.

That's why certain fellow guardians had made it their mission to test him to the limit—in Ling's words, "to make sure Connor doesn't get too big for his britches." Although Connor had no problem with a bit of good-natured teasing, deep down he questioned whether his first assignment had just been beginner's luck. It was true his father had been in the Special Air Service, a unit of the British Special Forces, and been one of the best bodyguards on the circuit. But that didn't mean Connor was made of the same stuff. For his own peace of mind, he needed to prove himself . . . beyond a doubt.

Connor clicked his mic again. "Alpha One to Control. Where's my pickup?"

"Alpha One. Thirty seconds out. Maintain position."

As more paintballs thudded into the bin and splattered the pavement at their feet, Connor wondered, *Do I have any other choice?*

Richie closed in, setting his sights on Amir. Connor pressed Amir farther down behind the Dumpster. Paintballs rattled off it like hailstones. A black 4x4 Range Rover roared down the road, its tires screeching as the driver braked hard and spun the armored vehicle to form a shield against

Richie's attack. The paintballs now pinged harmlessly off the bodywork.

But that still left Ling as a threat. With fifteen meters of open ground between them, she *couldn't* miss her target. Connor realized he was in a no-win situation. Whether they ran or stayed put, one or both of them would be shot down.

Then Connor had an idea. Kicking off the Dumpster's brakes, he grabbed Amir and shoved the huge container with his shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing?" cried Amir as the wheeled Dumpster began rolling down the path toward the Range Rover and Connor pushed him ahead to stay covered.

"Getting rid of the garbage," replied Connor with a grin as the Dumpster resounded with the furious impact of Ling's paintballs. The Dumpster was picking up speed now, and Connor and Amir had to sprint alongside it to stay shielded from Ling's assault. Then the Dumpster struck the wall and came to a dead stop. Having lost their only cover, the two of them made a final mad dash for the Range Rover.

Paintballs peppered the hood and windshield as Connor wrenched the back door open and shoved Amir inside. Connor dived in after him, landing on top of him in the footwell.

"GO! GO! GO!" he screamed at the driver.

Flooring the accelerator, the driver sped away from the kill zone.



Connor allowed himself a quiet smile of satisfaction. Against all the odds, he'd done it. He'd saved his Principal. Then Amir turned to him, and the smile was wiped from his face. Planted squarely in the right eye of Amir's goggles was the red *splat* of an exploded paintball.

"How come you got hit?" Connor exclaimed, clambering into the passenger seat and thumping the armrest in frustration. "I had you covered on all sides."

Amir tenderly peeled off his safety goggles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Originally from Delhi, Amir was a slender boy with an angular face, bright eyes and a slick of black hair. "I wish you *had* protected me. That really hurt."

The driver brought the Range Rover to a halt and glanced over her shoulder at them. Jody, a former SO14 royal protection officer, was one of their instructors at the Guardian Training Headquarters in Wales. Kitted out in a black-and-red tracksuit, her dark brown hair bunched in a ponytail,

she looked more like a personal fitness trainer than a body-guard. But that was the point. Few people ever suspected women to be part of a close-protection team, and that gave them an edge.

“Exercise over, Connor—your Principal’s definitely dead,” she said, arching a slim eyebrow in amusement at Amir’s paint-splattered face. Then her expression hardened. “If that had been a soft-nosed sniper bullet, Amir would be headless now.”

“That wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” remarked Charley, who sat in the front passenger seat. “He doesn’t use it much anyway,” she added in her sun-soaked Californian tones, shooting him a wink.

Amir’s mouth fell open in exaggerated offense. “Hey! *You* can be the Principal next time.”

Staring out of the passenger window, Charley sighed to herself. “If only . . .”

As Jody spun the Range Rover around, Connor caught sight of Charley’s reflection in the glass. Her sky-blue eyes had lost their sparkle, and her usual confidence appeared to have faltered for a moment.

“Nothing to keep you from being the shooter next time,” Connor suggested.

In the window, he saw Charley brush aside a loose strand of blond hair as her smile returned.

“That would be unfair,” she replied, her reflected eyes

meeting his and narrowing in challenge. "You wouldn't last ten seconds."

Connor laughed. He didn't doubt it. Despite the difficulties she faced, Charley was a girl of many talents: a former Quiksilver Junior Surfing Champion, she was also a skillful martial artist as well as fluent in Mandarin. For all Connor knew, she was probably an elite markswoman too.

Jody parked in front of the abandoned warehouse and ordered Connor and Amir out as the other members of Alpha team gathered for the training debrief. Marc, a lean boy with bleached-blond hair who'd been filming the training exercise for class assessment, patted Connor sympathetically on the back. "*Quelle malchance!* You were almost home free."

Opening the door for Charley, Connor shrugged at his French friend. "Yep, almost."

"*Almost* is no good for a bodyguard," Ling pointed out, hefting a gun that looked huge against her tiny, sleek figure. Her oval face was framed by a bob of jet-black hair, and a silver piercing glinted on one side of her elfin nose.

"Yeah," Richie agreed in his thick Irish accent. "It's like *almost* jumping out of the way of a train. You still get hit." He fired off a couple of paintballs at the abandoned Dumpster for effect.

"*Cease fire!*" scolded Jody as she took Charley's wheelchair out of the back of the Range Rover. "Not everyone's wearing safety goggles."