

BODYGUARD



Book 4: Ransom

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The raging ball of fire, smoke and shrapnel flashed like a comet in the dawn sky. The explosion like an earsplitting clap of thunder.

For a brief moment, Connor thought the captain and everyone on the bridge had perished. Then Captain Locke's voice burst onto the radio.

"The pirates missed!" His relief was evident.

"They meant to," replied Brad, the ship's security officer. "But they won't next time."

There was a pause as the captain weighed the threat of a second RPG against the risks of ramming the skiff.

"Prepare for collision course."

Connor and Brad braced themselves. The *Orchid* sheered off to starboard just as one of the five pirate skiffs was closing in. The boat's pilot, totally unprepared for such an aggressive maneuver, tried to veer away. But it was too late. The two vessels collided at high speed. The skiff's bow crunched

against the yacht's side, shattering on impact. There was a horrible screeching as the skiff scored a line down the *Orchid's* hull. Then, like flotsam in a storm, the skiff was flipped over by the churn from the *Orchid's* propellers, and the pirates and their weaponry were dumped into the sea.

"That'll make 'em think twice," said Brad as they watched the capsized skiff recede into the distance.

But, like stirring up a hornets' nest, the ramming only seemed to enrage the pirates more. Powering past their stranded companions who clung to the wreckage, the four surviving skiffs swarmed toward the *Orchid*.

"Why don't they give up?" asked the deckhand Jordan.

Brad gripped the rail. "They must be desperate. Nothing to lose."

The radio on his hip crackled into life.

"*We have a problem,*" the captain announced. "*Our speed has dropped. One of the screws must have been damaged in the ramming.*"

Brad turned to the crew. "Everyone. Prepare to repel boarders." He handed the empty flare gun to Connor. "Hold the fort. I'll be back in a minute."

Before Connor could question him, Brad disappeared inside the salon.

Connor peered over the gunwale. The skiffs were closing in on all sides as the *Orchid* lost headway. A ferocious burst

of gunfire assaulted the upper deck. A window imploded, and he heard a scream from one of the two stewardesses stationed in the sky lounge as lookouts. Praying neither had been hurt, Connor reloaded the flare gun, at the same time wondering what the point was. A flare was a feeble match for an AK-47.

But it was all he had.

As soon as the gunfire ceased, he knelt up by the rail and took aim at the nearest skiff. The lurching of the deck made it virtually impossible to fix his target. A tall, jug-eared pirate trained his AK-47 on him. But Connor squeezed his trigger first. The flare *whooshed* from the barrel. A bright red ball of flame shot across the waves . . . and fell short.

Connor briefly saw the flare extinguish itself in the waves, before he dove to the deck as a hail of bullets peppered the stern gunwale.

So much for my attempt at fending off the pirates.

Brad reappeared by his side, now in possession of a stainless-steel 12-gauge pump-action shotgun. "Time to fight fire with fire!"

Connor stared in disbelief at the fearsome weapon. "I thought you said guns were illegal."

Brad checked the chamber, then clicked off the safety catch. "Only in port," he replied with a grim smile, and he took aim over the gunwale.

The blast of the shotgun was deafening. Connor held his hands over his ears as Brad fired again and again. Then he dropped back down beside him.

"Did you hit anyone?" asked Connor as another strafing of bullets cut into the *Orchid*.

Brad shook his head. "I'm trying to knock out their engines," he explained, rapidly reloading.

On the port side, Jordan and another deckhand, Kieran, threw a storage net into the sea to entangle the outboards of an approaching skiff. But as they were launching the net, a clatter of gunfire punctured the air. Jordan was thrown backward. Blood splattered across the salon's glass doors.

Connor rushed to his aid. Jordan slumped to the deck, groaning, blood pouring from the bullet wound in his shoulder. Kieran ripped off his T-shirt and handed it to Connor.

"Apply pressure. I'll get the first-aid kit."

As Kieran ran inside, Connor pressed the balled-up T-shirt against the wound. Jordan cried out.

"You'll be all right," assured Connor, not knowing what else to say. "I promise you, I've had worse."

Even through the haze of pain, Jordan managed a weak smile of disbelief.

Blasts like thunder echoed off the blood-smeared glass as Brad fired his shotgun in angry retaliation. But the pirates showed no sign of retreat. Bullets ripped through the air,

and the roar of their outboard motors buzzed like angry wasps.

“Did the net . . . stop . . . them?” asked Jordan through clenched teeth as Kieran reappeared with the first-aid kit.

Looking to the stern, Connor spotted the net floating away on the *Orchid's* wake.

“No,” he said, shaking his head in dismay.

Without warning, a grappling hook latched itself to the port-side rail. Connor saw the line go taut. The pirates were boarding the *Orchid*.



The buzzing woke Amir. He yawned and glanced at his watch: 03:30.

Why had he set his alarm for so early?

As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the alarm continued its incessant buzzing. He reached over to switch it off and promptly fell to the floor. Dazed, Amir looked around the darkened briefing room and at his upturned chair. Of course, he wasn't in bed. He was on night duty, supposedly monitoring Operation Gemini.

The buzzing grew more urgent, and Amir scrambled up to his desk. On the glowing computer screen a Red Alert icon was flashing. Clicking on the pulsing box, he stared at the few stark lines of text, then grabbed his phone.

"What is it, Amir?" Charley answered drowsily.

"Distress call from the *Orchid*."

There was a moment's silence as the words sank in. Then she replied, "I'll be right down," her voice sharp and alert.

A short while later, Charley wheeled herself through the door, wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants.

“What information do we have?”

Amir nodded to his computer screen. “The *Orchid* sent out a DSC distress signal at 0625 hours, Seychelles local time. It gave her position as two hundred and forty nautical miles east-northeast of Mahé.”

“Do we know the actual problem?”

Amir swallowed anxiously. “Pirates.”

Charley looked at him. “Seems like you’ve lost your bet with Ling,” she said, her tone bereft of humor. “Any communication from Connor?”

Amir shook his head. “The distress signal was picked up by the Seychelles Maritime Rescue Coordination Center. Since the *Orchid’s* out of range for VHF radio and cell phones, a satellite call is the only possible option. But there’s no mention of it in this report.”

Charley picked up the phone. “I’ll contact the Seychelles coast guard for an update. In the meantime, wake Colonel Black, then see if you can get through to Connor via your SOS app.”



Connor shouted a warning to Brad, but the repeated blasts of the shotgun had temporarily deafened him. Leaving Kieran to tend to Jordan, Connor ran to the rail. Inside his polo-shirt pocket his phone buzzed with a message. He ignored it. A pirate was attempting to scale the knotted rope, the bucking skiff making his progress slow but certain.

Connor pulled the flare gun from his hip pocket. He took aim, then realized it was unloaded. He fumbled for another flare from the clip, but in his hurry he dropped them, and they scattered across the deck. He frantically retrieved one. Snapping open the breach, he pushed the flare home, then clicked it shut. Just as he went to take aim again, the chef rushed onto the deck, wielding a flaming bottle of spirits.

“My own special pirate cocktail!” he shouted as he launched it at the skiff below.

The bottle shattered across the bow, spreading a sea of flame along the wooden skiff. The pirates screamed and

scrambled away from the blaze. In his panic the pilot veered sharply, jerking on the grappling rope and catapulting his comrade into the ocean.

Then a wave broke over the skiff, dousing the fire. The pirates, quickly recovering from the shock attack, made another approach. They powered toward the *Orchid*, leaving their fellow pirate to drown.

But the chef had plenty more bottles where that one had come from and reappeared moments later with two more Molotov cocktails.

On the starboard side, Brad fired his shotgun again. This time he hit his mark. The outboard engines of the targeted skiff sputtered and choked, smoke spewing from their exhausts. But the pilot had also been caught in the hail of buckshot. He slumped over the tiller of his outboard and sent the boat swerving off course.

"Two down!" said Brad grimly as he sheltered behind the gunwale.

Despite their losses, the pirates refused to give up. Two of the skiffs now made simultaneous attacks on the *Orchid's* bow. The crew up front called for help, and Brad and Chef rushed to their aid. But, with everyone committed to the port and starboard attacks, no one noticed the stern assault by the third skiff.

Only Connor heard the clang of a grappling hook on the rail. He spun around to see a colossal pirate, an assault rifle

strapped across his back, standing on the skiff's bow like a figurehead. The ease with which he rode the turbulent waves was unnerving. Beckoning to his pilot to move closer to the *Orchid's* stern, the pirate was preparing to make his leap.

Connor had only one shot. He couldn't afford to miss this time.

The flare rocketed the short distance and struck home. Just as he had planned, it landed beside the fuel canister for the outboard. The pilot shouted in terror and jumped over the side as a spark ignited the diesel. Showered in flaming fuel, the other pirates leaped for their lives. The skiff then exploded in a massive fireball, a plume of black smoke rising into the air like a mushroom cloud. Connor shielded his eyes from the blast. And when he looked again, the skiff was sinking rapidly beneath the waves.

But the pirate who'd leaped from the bow still clung on to the rope. Like some monster of the deep, he hauled himself up through the rushing water toward the *Orchid's* stern. Connor couldn't believe the man's strength, or his crazed determination.

The hook was pulled tight against the rail, and Connor had no hope of wrenching it free. He raced through the salon to the galley. There, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and snatched a carving knife from the chef's block. By the time he'd sprinted back, the pirate had reached the stern and was clambering up the tender garage's huge bay door.

Pulling the safety pin from the extinguisher, Connor let loose a jet of white foam, turning the bay door slick and oily. The pirate scrambled to gain purchase with his feet and thumped hard into the fiberglass hull. Foam glistened off his rippling torso, and rivulets of water ran down his smooth bullet-shaped head.

Yet still he held on.

Discarding the empty extinguisher, Connor took up the knife. The pirate snarled like a wild beast when he saw Connor furiously sawing at his rope. With grim determination, the pirate climbed hand over hand. The rope started to fray, but Connor knew he'd never cut through in time. The pirate was already halfway up. Then the *Orchid* struck the swell hard, and the pirate lost his grip and slipped down to the waterline. Only his Herculean strength prevented him from losing all hold on the rope.

The pirate heaved himself back up as Connor continued to slice frantically at the fraying fibers. The pirate's fingers reached for the deck. The rope finally parted . . . and Connor watched the man tumble back into the foaming sea.