

# **BODYGUARD**



**Book 2: Hostage**

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Connor felt a sharp stab of pain in his ribs as the blade hit its mark . . .

But the adrenaline blocked the rest of the damage.

Battling for his own survival as well as Alicia's, Connor fought with the fury of a tiger. He palm-struck Crew Cut in the face, stunning and weakening his opponent. Then, grabbing the gang member's hand that held the knife, he spun himself under Crew Cut's arm. The whole series of joints from wrist to shoulder twisted against themselves. The effect was instantly crippling. Crew Cut's elbow hyperextended until it snapped out of joint with a sickening pop. Crew Cut bawled in agony and dropped the switchblade. Kicking the knife away, Connor then finished off the gang member with a strike to a pressure point at the back of his skull. Crew Cut ceased screaming and crumpled to the ground.

After ensuring there were no other immediate threats, Connor pulled Alicia to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Me?" gasped Alicia, panting from the shock of the attack. "I should be asking *you*."

"I'm fine."

"But I could have sworn he stabbed you."

Lifting his black T-shirt, Connor inspected his ribs. There was a small round bruise forming, but the knife hadn't penetrated his skin. He thanked his lucky stars for the stab-proof T-shirt Jody had given him.

"Just missed me," he said, quickly lowering his shirt so she didn't question his miraculous survival.

They turned their attention to the two gang members who lay unconscious on the road.

"I can't believe it," said Alicia, studying Connor in a new light. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"I've trained a bit in kickboxing," he admitted.

Alicia gave an astonished laugh. "A bit? You're more deadly than the Secret Service!"

"Look, we have to get out of here," replied Connor. "There may be others."

Hurriedly gathering the contents of Alicia's bag, including his phone, he noticed the panic alarm was already clasped in her hand. So *that* was why she'd been so determined to retrieve her belongings.

As they turned to go, Connor noticed a huge bearded man heading toward them, then three black limos screeched to a

halt at the end of the alley. In a matter of seconds Secret Service agents had piled out, guns at the ready. Taking one look at the agents bristling with weapons, the bearded man fled. They cordoned off the area, three of them immediately surrounding Alicia. Two others began inspecting the comatose gang members and handcuffing them.

"What happened?" demanded Kyle, his eyes sweeping the alley for further danger.

"We were mugged," explained Connor.

"I can see that. I mean . . . back at the clothing store." He glared at Connor, clearly wanting to say more. But he held his tongue, realizing he couldn't blow Connor's cover.

"It's my fault, Kyle," said Alicia boldly. "I wanted a little adventure. On my own."

"Well, you certainly got it," he replied, struggling to maintain his professional composure. "You could have been *seriously* hurt."

Alicia shook her head. "Not with my knight in shining armor by my side," she replied.

Smiling, she took Connor's arm and strode off toward the waiting limo.



“What were you trying to prove?” Dirk demanded, his steel-blue eyes boring into Connor. “That you’re some sort of hero?”

“I was just doing my job,” replied Connor, sitting on the opposite side of the conference table in the Roosevelt Room. As soon as they’d returned to the White House, he’d been summoned to the West Wing by the director of the Secret Service for a crisis meeting. Kyle had already been grilled by the director, and now it was his turn.

“Your ‘job’ is to inform the Secret Service *immediately* of her intentions.”

“I’d have broken Alicia’s trust if I’d done that.”

Dirk gave a hollow laugh. “Trust is the last thing you should be concerned about. Your very presence is a deception.”

“That wasn’t my choice,” replied Connor, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “But, if Alicia’s going to run away, isn’t it better if I’m with her?”

"Not if you introduce her to city gangs!" he snapped, hammering the mahogany table with his fist. "You put Alicia's life at great risk, boy. As you well know, your appointment was against my better judgment. And I've been proved right. You're a tragedy waiting to happen, Connor Reeves."

Before Connor had a chance to defend himself, there was a knock at the door and the president's secretary popped her head around.

"Dirk, the president will see you now."

The director of the Secret Service shot Connor a withering look. "I hope you've got a thick skin, because you're about to be flayed alive."

Connor swallowed nervously. He thought he'd done the right thing. And he *had* protected Alicia when it mattered most. But now he questioned his judgment. Even he realized that they could have avoided trouble if he'd just warned Kyle. But it was too late to change that. He had to live with his decisions. Bracing himself to be sent home in shame, Connor followed the director and Kyle into the Oval Office. President Mendez was standing by the window, his back to them. The White House chief of staff, George Taylor, was also present. He greeted them with a strained smile.

"So what happened?" asked President Mendez, his expression grave as he faced them.

Dirk stepped forward and gave his report. "First and foremost, your daughter is safe and unharmed," he began, before

proceeding to deliver an account that was more or less accurate, although Connor's actions were not presented in a favorable light. "So you see, Connor's lack of communication and disregard for protocol resulted in your daughter being placed unnecessarily in harm's way. Fortunately, as soon as the panic alarm was triggered, my Secret Service team secured her safety," Dirk concluded.

"Why couldn't you just track Alicia's position like the last time?" asked George.

"She switched off her cell phone," explained Kyle. "Alicia's gotten wise to our tricks."

"Short of implanting a GPS tracker, there's not much we can do about that," Dirk said. "The panic alarm pinpoints her position, but only when *she* triggers it."

President Mendez frowned and sighed. "I see your point. And she certainly won't accept any further invasion of her privacy. Once again I must apologize for my daughter's wayward nature. Like her mother, she needs her freedom. But there's one matter I need to have clarified. Who actually tackled the two gang members?"

Dirk was slow to answer, clearly reluctant to give Connor any credit. But Kyle spoke up.

"The two threats were eliminated *before* our arrival, Mr. President," he replied. "By Connor, in fact."

Connor looked over at Kyle in surprise. He hadn't expected the agent to back him up, especially with his boss present.

Nor apparently had Dirk, whose jaw fell open in disbelief.

President Mendez gave a satisfied nod, as if he'd almost expected that answer. Striding over to Connor, he laid a hand on his shoulder. "Well, Connor, you've certainly lived up to my expectations. I knew I could trust a Reeves bodyguard. Keep up the good work."

"Aren't we all missing the point here?" interjected Dirk. "We were lucky this time, but we can't risk this happening again. *Ever.*"

"Perhaps the shock of the mugging will convince Alicia of the necessity for the Secret Service," suggested George. "Maybe she won't be so eager to fly the nest now."

"I sincerely hope so," Dirk replied. "But we can't guarantee it. And we can't have *anyone* on the team going along with her escapades."

The director stared at Connor, making it known that he blamed him for the fiasco.

"But, Dirk, this is precisely the reason we hired Connor in the first place. He should be congratulated, not criticized," said President Mendez. He held up his hand to prevent any further protests from the director. "Let me have *another* word with Alicia. And ideally this will be the end of it."

With a weary shake of his head, he walked back to the window and gazed out at the Rose Garden. "Sometimes, I think bringing up a teenage daughter is harder than governing the country."



Ensuring he was alone in the rear kitchen, Malik switched on the untraceable cell phone he'd acquired from his contact. Then he dialed the number he'd committed to memory. It was answered on the fourth ring, and there was a burst of high-pitched squealing and electronic chatter as the scrambled signals synchronized with one another.

A digitally enhanced robotic voice spoke. *"Answer?"*

*"All war is deception,"* replied Malik, quoting the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu, as dictated by his contact instructions.

*"Proceed with your update."*

Malik had no idea of the identity of the person on the other end. Nor did he ever want to know. Anonymity was critical for the isolation of each cell—and even more so for the central cell. *They* had contacted him first. *They* had proposed the plan. And *they* had given him the means to carry it out. But *he* would be the one to receive all the glory.

He would be seen as the leading light. And the rest of the Brotherhood need never know of their existence or the part the central cell had played. That had been the deal.

"Eagle Chick unexpectedly flew the nest," Malik reported. "We almost had her in our net. But the sparrows flocked before we could grab her."

*"What about your plan to clip Eagle Chick's wings while on the move?"*

Malik had put a great deal of time, effort and resources into snatching the president's daughter on her school run. But the severely restricted time window, the presence of so many armed agents and the rush-hour traffic had presented too high a casualty risk for his men and hampered their chances of making a clean escape.

"I have a better, bolder plan," he replied.

*"When will this new plan be ready to execute?"* The contact's voice sounded irritated.

"The egg is about to be laid in the nest. It'll be ready to hatch in a couple of days," Malik replied confidently. "All units are set to go."

There was a pause on the end of the line.

*"Has the operation been compromised in any way?"* asked the robotic voice.

"No," said Malik with absolute certainty. "The sleeper has not awakened."

*"Then execute operation without delay."*

Malik's hand holding the phone began to tremble in anticipation. The time had come to make history.

"One question," he said, sensing the receiver about to hang up. "My final payment?"

Another pause. *"When the operation succeeds, you'll be justly rewarded."*

Malik grinned at the thought.

*"Is that all?"* said the voice, a trace of impatience detectable in its manipulated tone.

"Yes."

*"Then this will be our last communication."*



That evening Connor pounded the punching bag in the White House gym. Now that the adrenaline rush from the attack had faded, the harsh reality of what had happened hit home. Only in hindsight did he realize how close he'd come to serious injury and even death. He may well have dealt with both gangsters and protected Alicia, but he'd still been stabbed in the process. And he found himself agreeing with the director of the Secret Service—next time he might not be so lucky or be wearing his stab-proof shirt.

That thought made him train harder. He pummeled the bag. *Jab, cross, jab, hook!* His hands began to tremble under the effort. But he had to ensure his combat skills were up to scratch. From now on, he vowed to do extra martial arts training every morning. Not just for his own safety, but for Alicia's too.

His phone rang. Pulling off his gloves, he picked it up and saw the Guardian logo flashing for a video call. He pressed