

TERRORISTS
ASSASSINS
KIDNAPPERS
PIRATES . . .

**THE WORLD IS
A DANGEROUS
PLACE**



THE **BULLETPROOF** NEW SERIES FROM
CHRIS BRADFORD

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A chill wind hit Connor as he emerged from the ExCel Centre in the Docklands and headed for the bus stop on Freemasons Road. The grey sky was unforgiving, the tail end of winter refusing to loosen its grip. But not even the dismal weather could dampen Connor's spirits. He was the UK Kickboxing Champion and had the trophy to prove it. He couldn't wait to show his gran – she was his biggest fan, after all.

Pulling up the hood of his sweatshirt, Connor shouldered his kitbag and crossed the bridge spanning the Docklands Light Railway. He dodged the traffic on the opposite side and was passing a row of boarded-up shops when he heard a cry for help.

Halfway down a littered alley, he spotted a smartly dressed Indian boy surrounded by a gang of youths.

It was obvious that a man heading for the train station had also heard the cry. But he hurried past the scene, averting his gaze, not wanting to get involved.

Scared of being knifed, thought Connor. And who'd blame him?

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But Connor couldn't walk away. The strong have a duty to protect the weak, his father had taught him. That was the reason his father had joined the army. And why he'd encouraged Connor to take up martial arts. He never wanted his son to be a victim.

The gang leader shoved the boy against the alley wall and began to rifle through his pockets.

'Leave him alone!' shouted Connor.

Almost as one, the gang turned to face their challenger.

'This ain't got nothing to do with you, mate,' said the leader. 'Leg it!'

Connor ignored the warning and strode towards them. 'He's a friend of mine.'

'This raghead ain't got no friends,' he said, spitting at the boy's feet, clearly not believing Connor's bluff.

Drawing level with the gang, Connor eyeballed the leader. Dressed in baggy jeans and a Dr Dre T-shirt, the lad was a good few inches taller than him and well built. With his broad chest, bulging biceps and fists like hammers, the boy, Connor reckoned, could play front row in the school rugby team. *If he still goes to school, that is.*

The rest of the gang – two boys and a girl – were less intimidating but still dangerous as a pack. One boy in Converse trainers, baggy jeans and a grey hoodie held a skateboard, his face pockmarked with spots. The other wore carbon-copy baggy jeans, a puffer jacket and a red Nike baseball cap, tipped at a 'too cool for you' angle on his bleached blond hair. The girl was Chinese with a jet-black bob and a piercing through her nose. She wore dark

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eyeshadow, emo-style, and Dr. Marten boots. She shot Connor a hard stare.

‘Let’s go,’ said Connor to his new friend, keeping his voice low and even. He didn’t want to show how nervous he really was. He might be trained in kickboxing and jujitsu, but he wasn’t looking for a fight. His jujitsu teacher had drilled into him that violence was the last resort. Especially when outnumbered four to one – that was asking for trouble.

The Indian boy took a hesitant step towards him, but the gang leader planted a hand on his chest. ‘You’re going nowhere.’

Frozen to the spot with fear, the boy looked to Connor in wide-eyed desperation.

A tense stand-off now ensued between Connor and the gang. Connor’s eyes flicked to each gang member, his kitbag at the ready to protect him in case one of them pulled a knife.

‘I said, leave him alone,’ he repeated, edging between the gang and their victim.

‘And I said, mind your own business,’ replied the leader, launching a fist straight at the boy’s face.

As the terrified boy let out a yelp, Connor moved in and deflected the punch with a forearm block. Then he took up a fighting stance, fists raised, defying the gang to come any closer.

Glaring at Connor, the leader broke into a mocking laugh. ‘Watch out, everyone! It’s the Karate Kid!’

Don’t laugh too soon, thought Connor, un-shouldering his bag with the tournament trophy inside.

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The leader sized up Connor. Confident of beating him, he swung a wild right hook at Connor's head. With lightning reflexes, Connor ducked, drove forwards and delivered a powerful punch to the gut in return.

The unexpected strike should have floored the gang leader, but he was much stronger than he looked. Instead of collapsing, he merely grunted and came back at Connor with a combination of jab, cross and upper cut. Connor went on the defensive. As he blocked each attack, it became blindingly obvious the lad was a trained boxer. Having underestimated his opponent, Connor quickly reassessed his tactics. Although Connor was faster, the gang leader had the advantage of power and reach. And, without gloves, this fight had the potential to be deadly – just one of those sledgehammer fists could land him in hospital.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall, thought Connor, recalling in jujitsu how a larger opponent could be defeated by using his strength against himself.

As the gang leader let loose a vicious roundhouse punch to his head, Connor entered inside its arc and spun his body into his attacker. Redirecting the force of the strike, he flung the lad over his hip and body-dropped him to the concrete. The leader hit the ground so hard all the breath was knocked out of him. The gang stared in disbelief at their fallen leader, while the Indian boy could barely suppress a grin of delight at seeing his tormenter squirm in the dirt.

'Get . . . him!' the lad wheezed, unable to rise.

The boy with the Nike baseball cap charged in, executing

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a flying sidekick. Connor leapt to one side before realizing his new friend was right behind him. With no time to spare, Connor shoved him out of the kick's path.

Nike's foot struck the wall instead. Incensed, he turned on Connor and launched a furious succession of spinning kicks. Surprised at the boy's skill, Connor was forced to retreat. As he backed away, only instinct – born from hours of sparring – warned him of a simultaneous attack from behind. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Hoodie step forward and swing the skateboard at his head.

At the last second, Connor ducked. The tail of the deck missed him by a whisker and struck Nike full in the face instead. The boy fell to his knees, semi-concussed.

Hoodie, horrified at his mistake, was now an open target. Connor took advantage and shot out a sidekick. But the boy reacted quicker than Connor expected and held up his deck as a shield. Having broken blocks to pass his black-belt grading, Connor knew the right technique. Gritting his teeth, he drove on through – the board breaking rather than his foot. From there it took Connor a simple palm strike to floor Hoodie.

With all three boys out of action, the girl now advanced on him.

Connor held up his hands in peace. 'Listen, I don't fight girls. Just walk away and we can forget all about this.'

The girl stopped, tilted her head and smiled sweetly at him. 'How gentlemanly of you.'

Then she punched Connor straight in the mouth, splitting his lip. With barely a pause, the girl followed

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through with a kick to the thigh, her heavy Dr Martens giving him a dead leg. He crumpled against the wall.

‘I fight boys, though!’ she said as Connor, stunned and hurting, tried to recover his balance.

The girl went to kick him again, but rather than retreat Connor moved in and caught her leg in mid-swing. Struggling to free herself, she struck for his neck with the edge of her hand. But Connor grabbed hold of her wrist and twisted her arm into a lock, forcing her to submit. The girl squealed in pain.

‘LET THAT GIRL GO!’

Connor glanced back down the alley. Two police officers – a tall black man and a slender white woman – were hurrying towards them. Connor reluctantly released the girl, who promptly kicked him in the shin before running off in the opposite direction. The rest of the gang followed close on her heels.

Connor went to go after them, but the policeman seized him by the scruff of the neck. ‘Not so fast, sonny. You’re coming with us.’

‘But I was trying to save this boy,’ Connor protested.

‘What boy?’ questioned the policewoman.

Connor looked up and down the alley . . . but it was deserted. The boy had gone.

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The officers escorted Connor across Freemasons Road and down a side street to an imposing red-brick building. As they neared the entrance, the traditional blue lamp of the Metropolitan Police came into view. Below this was a sign in bold white lettering declaring: CANNING TOWN POLICE STATION. They climbed the steps, passing a poster warning *Terrorism – if you suspect it, report it*, and entered through a set of heavy wooden doors, its blue paint chipped and worn.

The station's foyer was poorly lit and depressingly drab, the walls bare, apart from a cork noticeboard promoting a local Neighbourhood Watch meeting. The sole pieces of furniture were a bench and a glass reception booth, manned by a single police officer. As the three of them approached, the custody officer looked up and tutted upon seeing Connor's split lip and the splashes of blood dotted across his sweatshirt.

'Name?' the officer asked him.

'Connor Reeves.'

'Age?'

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‘Fourteen.’

He noted this down on a ledger. ‘Address and contact number?’

Connor gave his home in Leytonstone.

‘Family?’

‘Just my mum and gran,’ he replied.

As this was added to the ledger, the policewoman explained the reason for detaining Connor and the custody officer nodded, seemingly satisfied.

‘In there,’ he said, pointing with his pen to a door labelled INTERVIEW ROOM.

Connor was marched across the foyer. The policeman stayed behind to log the contents of his kitbag with the custody officer.

‘After you,’ said the policewoman, ushering him through.

Connor stepped inside, followed by the police officer. In the centre of the room was a large desk with a single lamp and a couple of hard wooden chairs. A single florescent strip buzzed like a mosquito, casting a bleached light over the depressing scene. There was a musty smell in the air and the blinds were drawn across the window, giving an unsettling sense of isolation from the rest of the world.

In spite of his innocence, Connor’s throat went dry with apprehension and his heart began to beat faster.

This just isn’t right! he thought. He’d tried to stop a mugging and *he* was the one being arrested.

And what thanks had he got for stepping in?

None. The Indian boy had disappeared without a trace.

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‘Sit down,’ ordered the policewoman, pointing to the chair in front of the desk.

Connor reluctantly did as he was told.

The policeman rejoined them, closing the door behind him. He handed his colleague a thick folder. The female officer stepped behind the desk, flicked on the lamp and sat opposite Connor. In its glare, Connor watched the policewoman lay the folder on the table and, next to this, place a notepad and pen. To Connor’s growing unease, the folder was stamped STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL.

He started to sweat. He’d never been in trouble with the police before. *What could they possibly have on him?*

The officer carefully undid the folder’s string fastening and began to inspect the file. The policeman took up position next to his colleague and stared unflinchingly at Connor. The tension became almost unbearable.

After what seemed an age, the policewoman declared, ‘If that girl files a charge against you – for assault – it would be a matter for the courts.’

Connor felt the ground beneath him give way. This was turning far more serious than he could have ever imagined.

‘So we need to take a full statement from you,’ she explained.

‘Shouldn’t I call a lawyer or something?’ Connor asked, knowing that’s what was always said in the movies.

‘No, that won’t be necessary,’ replied the officer. ‘Just tell us why you did it?’

Connor shifted uneasily in his seat. ‘Because . . . there was a boy being mugged.’

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The police officer made a note. ‘Did you know this boy?’
‘No,’ replied Connor. ‘And I never will. The ungrateful kid ran away.’

‘So why decide to get involved in the first place?’

‘They were calling him racist names and about to beat him up!’

‘But other people walked on by. Why didn’t you?’

Connor shrugged. ‘It was the right thing to do. He couldn’t stand up for himself. It was four against one.’

‘Four?’ repeated the police officer, jotting down more notes. ‘Yet you took them on alone.’

Connor nodded, conceding, ‘I know a bit of martial arts.’

The officer flicked through the files. ‘It says here you’re a black belt in kickboxing and jujitsu. I don’t call that just “a bit”.’

Connor’s heart missed a beat. *How come the officer had this information to hand? What else did they know?*

‘That’s . . . right,’ he admitted, wondering if this would count against him. His instructors had always warned him to be careful using his skills outside of the dojo.

‘So lets get the story straight,’ said the policewoman, putting down her pen and looking Connor squarely in the eye. ‘You’re saying you put your life at risk for a complete stranger.’

Connor hesitated. *Was he about to plead guilty to an offence?*

‘Well . . . yes,’ he confessed with uncertainty.

A hint of a smile passed across the policewoman’s lips.

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‘That takes guts,’ she said approvingly.

Connor stared in astonishment at the policewoman’s unexpected praise. The officer closed her file then looked up at the policeman and nodded.

He turned to Connor. ‘Well done, you’ve passed.’

Connor’s brow furrowed in bewilderment. ‘Passed *what?*’

‘The Test.’

‘You mean . . . like a school exam or something?’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Real-life combat.’

Connor was now even more confused. ‘Are you saying that gang were a *test* for me?’

The policeman nodded. ‘You displayed natural protection skills.’

‘Of course I did!’ he exclaimed, feeling his frustration rise. ‘The gang attacked me.’

‘That’s not what we mean,’ interrupted the policewoman. ‘You showed instinctive reactions in defending *another* person.’

Connor got up from his seat. ‘What’s going on here? I want to call home.’

‘There’s no need,’ she said, offering a friendly smile. ‘We’ve already informed your mother you may be running a little late.’

Connor’s mouth fell open in disbelief. *What on earth were the police up to?*

‘We’ve had our eye on you for some time,’ revealed the policewoman, rising from her chair and perching on the side of the desk, her manner becoming more relaxed and

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informal. ‘The attack was set up to test your moral code and combat skills. It had to be authentic, which meant we couldn’t warn you. That’s why we used trained operatives for the assignment.’

Trained operatives? thought Connor, nursing his split lip. *No wonder the gang were so skilled at fighting.*

‘But why?’ he demanded.

‘We needed to assess your potential to be a CPO in the real world.’

Connor blinked in surprise, wondering if he’d heard right. ‘A what?’

‘A Close Protection Officer,’ explained the policeman. ‘By placing yourself in harm’s way to protect another, you proved you have the natural instinct of a bodyguard. You can’t teach that. It has to be part of who you are.’

Connor laughed at the idea. ‘But I’m too young to be a bodyguard.’

‘That’s *exactly* the point,’ a voice in a clipped military tone replied.

Connor spun round and was shocked to find a silver-haired man standing right behind him.

‘With training, you’ll make the *perfect* bodyguard.’

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