

New York Times Bestselling Author

KATHERINE CENTER

An illustration of a man and a woman standing in a field of flowers. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit and a red tie, with his arms crossed and looking to the right. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink dress and red boots, with her arms crossed and looking to the left. The background is a bright yellow field with stylized clouds and a sunburst pattern. The foreground is filled with various colorful flowers, including red, white, blue, and purple blooms.

THE BODYGUARD

A Novel

The Bodyguard

KATHERINE CENTER



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For my grandparents, Herman and Inez Detering

You left us many gifts to carry forward, and I am thankful for all of them—most especially, these days: your hugs, your warmth and kindness, and all my memories of a childhood spent scampering around your Texas ranch.

I miss you both—but in the best, most grateful way.

One

MY MOTHER'S DYING wish was for me to take a vacation.

“Just do it, okay?” she’d said, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “Just book a trip and go. Like normal people do.”

I hadn’t taken a vacation in eight years.

But I’d said, “Okay,” the way you do when your sick mom asks for something. Then I’d added, as if we were negotiating, “I’ll take *one* vacation.”

Of course, I hadn’t realized it was her dying wish at the time. I thought we were just making middle-of-the-night hospital conversation.

But then, suddenly, it was the night after her funeral. I couldn’t sleep, and I kept thrashing around in my bed, and that moment kept coming back to me. The way she’d held my gaze and squeezed my hand to seal the deal—as if taking a vacation could be something that mattered.

Now it was three in the morning. My funeral clothes were draped over a chair. I’d been waiting to fall asleep since midnight.

“Fine. Fine,” I said, out loud in bed, to no one.

Then I belly-crawled across the covers to find my laptop on the floor, and, in the blue light of the screen, eyes half-closed, I did a quick search for “cheapest plane ticket to anywhere,” found a site that had a list of nonstop destinations for seventy-six dollars, scrolled like I was playing roulette, landed randomly on Toledo, Ohio—and clicked “purchase.”

Two tickets to Toledo. Nonrefundable, it would turn out. Some kind of Valentine’s Day lovebirds package.

Done.

Promise fulfilled.

The whole process took less than a minute.

Now all I had to do was force myself to go.



BUT I STILL couldn't sleep.

At five in the morning, just as the sky was starting to lighten, I gave up, dragged all my sheets and blankets off the bed, shuffled to the walk-in closet, curled up on my side in a makeshift nest on the floor, and conked out, at last, in the windowless darkness.

When I woke, it was four in the afternoon.

I jumped up in a panic and stumbled around my room—buttoning my shirt wrong and kicking my shin on the footboard—as if I were late for work.

I wasn't late for work, though.

My boss, Glenn, had told me not to come in. Had *forbidden* me to come in, actually. For a week.

“Don't even think about coming to work,” he'd said. “Just stay home and grieve.”

Stay home? And grieve?

No way was I doing that.

Especially since—now that I'd bought these tickets to Toledo—I needed to find my boyfriend, Robby, and force him to come with me.

Right?

Nobody goes to Toledo alone. Especially not for Valentine's Day.

It all seemed very urgent in the moment.

In another state of mind, I could have simply texted Robby to stop by after work and just pleasantly invited him to come with me. Over dinner and drinks. Like a sane person.

Maybe that would have been a better plan.

Or led to a better result.

But I wasn't a sane person at the moment. I was a person who'd *slept in her closet*.

By the time I made it to the office that afternoon—just as the work day was ending—my hair was half-brushed, my shirt was half tucked in, and my funeral pantsuit still had a program with my mom's high school graduation photo on the cover folded up in the jacket pocket.

I guess it's weird to head in to work the day after your mom's funeral.

I'd researched it, and the most common bereavement leave from work was three days—though Glenn was making me take five. Other things I'd researched

as my sleepless night wore on: “how to sell your parents’ house,” “fun things to do in Toledo” (a surprisingly long list), and “how to beat insomnia.”

All to say: I wasn’t supposed to be here.

That’s why I hesitated at Glenn’s office door. And that’s how I wound up accidentally eavesdropping—and overhearing Robby and Glenn talking about me.

“Hannah’s going to shit an actual brick when you tell her” was the first thing I heard. Robby’s voice.

“Maybe I’ll make you tell her.” That was Glenn.

“Maybe you want to rethink it entirely.”

“There’s nothing to rethink.”

And that was enough. I pushed open the door. “What are you rethinking entirely? Who’s going to tell me what? Why exactly am I going to shit a brick?”

Later, I’d glimpse myself in the mirror and get a specific visual for what the two of them saw in that moment as they turned toward my voice—and let’s just say it involved bloodshot eyes, half my shirt collar crumpled under my jacket lapel, and a significant amount of tear-smearred eye makeup left over from the day before.

Alarming. But Glenn wasn’t easily alarmed. “What are you doing here?” he said. “Get out.”

He also wasn’t a coddler.

I staked my territory in the doorway with a power stance. “I need to talk to Robby.”

“You can do that outside of work.”

He wasn’t wrong. We were practically living together. When we weren’t working, that is. Which was most of the time.

But what was I supposed to do? Go stand in the parking lot?

“Five minutes,” I bargained.

“Nope,” Glenn said. “Go home.”

“I need to get out of my house,” I said. “I need something to do.”

But Glenn didn’t care. “Your mother just died,” he said. “Go be with your family.”

“She *was* my family,” I said, careful to keep my voice steady.

“Exactly,” Glenn said, like I’d made his point for him. “You need to grieve.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I said.

“Nobody does,” Glenn said. “You want a manual?”

I gave him a look. “If you’ve got one.”

“Your manual is: *Get out of here.*”

But I shook my head. “I know you think I need to”—I hesitated for a second, not exactly sure what he thought I needed to do—“sit around and think about my mom, or whatever... But, honestly, I’m fine.” Then I added, and this wasn’t untrue: “We weren’t even that close.”

“You were close enough,” Glenn said. “Scram.”

“Just let me ... file things. Or something.”

“No.”

I wish I could say that Glenn—built like a tank with a bald head freckled like somebody had sprinkled them from a shaker—was one of those bosses who seemed gruff but really had your best interest at heart.

But Glenn mostly had Glenn’s best interest at heart.

And Glenn had clearly decided I wasn’t fit for work right now.

I got it.

It had been a strange time. I’d barely made it home from an assignment in Dubai when I got a call from the ER that my mother had collapsed in a crosswalk.

Suddenly, I was arriving at the hospital to find that she couldn’t stop throwing up, and she didn’t know what year it was or who was president. Then getting a diagnosis from a doctor with lipstick on her teeth that my mom had end-stage cirrhosis—and trying to argue with the doctor, saying, “She doesn’t drink anymore! She *does not* drink anymore!”

Then, that evening, going to her place to get her fuzzy socks and favorite throw blanket and finding her hidden stash of vodka. Frantically pouring every last bottle down the kitchen sink and running the faucet to wash away the smell, thinking all the while that my biggest challenge was going to be getting her to turn her life around.

Again.

Assuming there would be more time.

Like we all just always do.

But she was gone before I even fully realized that losing her was possible.

It was a lot. Even Glenn, who had the emotional intelligence of a jackhammer, understood that.

But the last thing I wanted to do was *stay home and think about it.*

I was going to talk him into letting me come back to work if it killed us both.

And then I was going to talk Robby into coming to Toledo.

And then maybe, just maybe, I could get some sleep.

In a power move that kind of dared either of them to stop me, I walked farther into the office and sat down in the empty chair across from Glenn's desk. "What are you talking about?" I asked, shifting the subject a little. "Are you having a meeting?"

"We're having a conversation," Glenn said, like he knew I'd eavesdropped.

"You don't have conversations, boss," I said. "You only have meetings."

Robby, handsome as ever with black lashes edging his blue eyes, met my gaze like I'd made a good point.

I took a second to appreciate him. My mom had been so impressed the first time I introduced her. "He looks like an astronaut," she'd said—and that was exactly right. He also had a buzz cut, drove a vintage Porsche, and was wildly overconfident. In the best, sexiest, most astronautish way. My mom was impressed with me for dating him. I was impressed with myself, to be honest.

Robby was not just the coolest person I'd ever dated—he was the coolest person I'd ever *met*.

But that wasn't the point. I turned back to Glenn. "What is it, exactly, that you're going to make Robby tell me?"

Glenn sighed, like *I guess we're doing this*. Then he said, "I was going to wait until you had"—he looked me over—"at least taken a shower ... but we're opening a branch in London."

I frowned.

"A branch in London?" I asked. "How is that bad news?"

But Glenn kept going. "And we're going to need somebody to—"

My hand flew up. "I'll take it! I've got it! I'm in!"

"—set up the office there and get it established," Glenn finished. "For two years."

Hello? London? Going to London with a huge project that would require so much workaholicism that nothing else would even matter for two whole years?

Screw the vacation. Sign me up.

Just the thought sent relief breaking over me like waves: *A life-obliterating work project like that could potentially distract me from all my problems forever.*

Yes, please.

But that's when I noticed Robby and Glenn looking at me funny.

"What?" I asked, glancing between them.

“It’s going to be one of the two of you...” Glenn said then, gesturing between Robby and me.

Of course it was. I was the protégée Glenn had been grooming for years, and Robby was the sexy hotshot he’d stolen away from the competition. Who else would even be in the running?

I still didn’t see the problem.

“And that means,” Glenn went on, “that whoever doesn’t go will need to stay here.”

But that’s how much I loved my job: Even the prospect of a two-year separation from my boyfriend didn’t faze me. Like, at all.

That’s also how desperate I was to get back to work.

“I’ll announce the London decision after New Year’s,” Glenn said. “And until then, consider yourselves in competition for the spot.”

There was no competition. I was getting that spot.

“It’s fine,” I said with a shrug, like *What?* “We’ve competed before.” I nodded at Robby. “We like competing. And two years is not that long, no matter who wins. We can make that work, right?”

If I’d been paying better attention, I might have noticed that Robby was less eager about everything than I was. But I was a little too desperate in that moment to think about anyone but myself.

I was afraid to feel the full impact of losing my mother. I was terrified to get stuck at home with nothing to distract me. I was tunnel-visioned on escaping—preferably to a distant country—as soon as possible.

Next week, Robby and I were scheduled for a three-week assignment in Madrid together, but I wasn’t even sure how I’d make it that long.

First, I had to survive my remaining bereavement days.

“From what I just eavesdropped,” I said, gesturing back at the doorway, “I was expecting bad news.”

“That wasn’t the bad news,” Robby said, glancing at Glenn.

I looked over at Glenn, too. “What’s the bad news?”

Glenn refused to hesitate. “The bad news is I’m taking you off Madrid.”

Looking back, me showing up at the office like that—all wild-eyed and bed-heady and desperate—probably wasn’t helping. Maybe I should’ve seen it coming.

But I didn’t.

“Off Madrid?” I asked, thinking I must have heard wrong.

Robby fixed his gaze at the window.

“Off Madrid,” Glenn confirmed. Then he added, “You’re not in the right headspace.”

“But...” I didn’t even know how to protest. How could I say, *That’s the only thing I have to look forward to?*

Glenn shoved his hands into his pockets. Robby stared out the window.

Finally, I asked, “Who are you sending in my place?”

Glenn glanced at Robby. Then he said, “I’m sending Taylor.”

“You’re sending ... Taylor?”

Glenn nodded. “She’s our next best thing,” he said, like that should settle it. It didn’t.

“You’re sending my best friend and my boyfriend away and leaving me alone for three weeks? Just *days* after my mother died?”

“I thought you said you weren’t that close.”

“I thought *you* said we were close enough.”

“Look,” Glenn said. “This is what they call a business decision.”

But I shook my head. This wasn’t going to work. “You can’t just ground me and dismantle my entire support system. That’s my trip. Those are my clients.”

Glenn sighed. “You’ll go next time.”

“I want to go this time.”

Glenn shrugged. “I want to win the lottery. But it’s not going to happen.”

Glenn was the kind of guy who believed adversity only made you stronger.

I took a minute to breathe. Then I said, “If Taylor’s going on my trip, where am I going?”

“Nowhere,” Glenn said.

“*Nowhere?*”

He nodded. “You need to rest. Plus, everywhere’s full.” He scrolled through his laptop. “Jakarta’s taken. Colombia’s taken. Bahrain. Those oil execs in the Philippines. All taken.”

“But ... what am I supposed to do?”

Glenn shrugged. “Help out around the office?”

“I’m serious.”

But Glenn kept going. “Take up knitting? Start a succulent garden? Double down on personal growth?”

Nope, nope, nope.

But Glenn held fast. “You need some time off.”

“I hate time off. I don’t want time off.”

“It’s not about what you want. It’s about what you need.”

What was he—my therapist? “I need to work,” I said. “I do better when I’m working.”

“You can work here.”

But I also needed to escape.

Now I felt a flutter of panic in my throat. “Hey. You know me. You know I need to move. I can’t just sit here and—and ... and *marinate* in all my misery. I need to be in motion. I need to go somewhere. I’m like a shark, you know? I just always have to be moving. I need to get water through my gills.” My hands gestured at my ribcage, as if to show him where my gills were located. “If I stay here,” I finally said, “I’ll die.”

“Bullshit,” Glenn said. “Dying’s a lot harder than you think.”

Glenn hated it when people begged.

I begged anyway.

“Send me somewhere. Anywhere. I need to get out.”

“You can’t spend your entire life running away,” Glenn said.

“Yes, I can. I absolutely can.”

I could tell from his face we’d hit the wall. But I still had some fight left in me.

“What about the thing in Burkina Faso?” I asked.

“I’m sending Doghouse.”

“I’ve got three years on Doghouse!”

“But he speaks French.”

“What about the wedding in Nigeria?”

“I’m sending Amadi.”

“He hasn’t even been here six months!”

“But his family’s from Nigeria. And he speaks—”

“Fine. Forget it.”

“—Yoruba and a little bit of Igbo.”

That was the crux of it. Glenn had a rep to protect. “I’ll send you,” he said like we were done here, “when it’s a good fit. I’ll send you when it’s best for the agency. I’ll never send you over somebody more qualified.”

I narrowed my eyes at Glenn in a way that just dared him to fight me. “There’s nobody more qualified than me,” I said.

Glenn looked me over, using his well-honed powers of observation like a weapon.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said at last. “But you buried your mother yesterday.”

I met his eyes.

He went on. “Your pulse is elevated, your eyes are bloodshot, and your makeup is smeared. Your speech is rapid, and your voice is hoarse. You haven’t brushed your hair, your hands are shaking, and you’re out of breath. You’re a mess. So go home, take a shower, eat some comfort food, grieve the death of your mom, and then figure out some goddamned hobbies—because I guarantee you this: You’re sure as hell not going anywhere until you get your shit together.”

I knew that tone in his voice.

I didn’t argue.

But how, exactly, was I supposed to get back to work if he wouldn’t let me get back to work?