

# BOYNOBODY

A NOVEL BY  
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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
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## DOWN.

Into darkness. Damp concrete stairs and flickering light from below. Two men and the Presence on the street above.

I hit the platform of the local station, and I'm relieved to find it relatively crowded.

People coming from the Amsterdam bars and an event at the museum. More people heading toward late dinner in Midtown.

The rumble in the ground becomes a wind in the tunnel followed by the oncoming rush of a southbound local train.

I slide into the crowd without anybody noticing.

Not quite true. One person notices.

"Are you following me?" Erica says.

She sways on the platform, eyes heavy.

*Shit. I do not need this.*

"Where did you come from?" I say.

"I was partying with some friends."

I glance at my watch. "The party ended early," I say.

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I study her. Red-cheeked, disheveled.

Is this a setup? Is she a part of a trap?

“The party ended early because I took off,” she says. “One of the guys got all date-rapey with me.”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, please,” she says. “I can handle myself. The son of a bitch is going to be icing his lowboys for a few days.”

“Good for you,” I say.

Her story sounds right. The location is right, as is her appearance.

It’s not a setup. It’s a coincidence.

The train pulls in. I sense motion behind me on the platform. The Presence and his two men coming down the staircase. I can’t see them, but I feel them closing in.

“Will you take me home, Ben? I have a killer headache.”

She leans into me.

Choices.

I could leave her here, but will she be safe?

If I shrug her off fast, the people following me might read it as contact with a drunk stranger. A second longer and they’ll think I ran into an acquaintance. Longer still and she’ll appear to be someone who matters, someone they can use to get to me.

“Benji, Ben-ben,” she says, and kisses my neck.

She just made the choice for us both.

I can’t let her go now.

The train doors open and people move toward it, the platform emptying quickly.

Movement in my peripheral vision. The pursuers making their move.

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The train chimes, warning of its departure.

“Stand clear of the closing doors,” a voice barks.

I wait.

I need the pursuers closer. I need them to wonder which way I will go.

I move like I don't know they're here, like I think I lost them with my dodge into the subway. I hesitate, my body swaying between options. I want them confused about me and my skill level. I might be good enough to know they're here, but not good enough to know what to do about it.

That is what I make my body tell them.

“We're going to miss the train,” Erica whines.

“We won't miss it,” I say. “I guarantee.”

At the last second, I put an arm around her and pull her into the train car, and the doors close behind us.

A second later a man's face hits the glass, his fingers caught between the closed doors.

Speakers blare. The train attendant shouts at the guy.

His fingers stay there.

I watch him over Erica's shoulder. I log details.

Olive skin. Unshaven. The collar of his wind jacket askew.

I think of the man speaking Arabic yesterday. The new clothes he was wearing. This man is similar, but he's not the Presence.

The conductor doesn't want to open the door for this guy. It happens from time to time. Stubborn rider. More stubborn conductor. Standoff.

Usually the rider gives. It's not like he wants to lose his arm.

But it's not like they can drag him down the tunnel, either.

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The battle goes for ten seconds, long enough for passengers to start to groan.

I'm trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. Windbreaker is in public with witnesses all around, but he continues to push toward me, not caring.

The conductor finally relents. The bell chimes, and the doors open.

"Tell me something," Erica says.

"Anything," I say.

Windbreaker steps into our subway car. The doors close behind him.

"If you had to choose between me and Sam, who would you choose?"

"What am I choosing you for?" I say.

"You know," she says.

Windbreaker turns toward me.

I pull Erica with me to the rear of the car.

"Where are we going? I want to sit down, already," she whines.

"We will."

Windbreaker advances. But he moves slowly, not at all like someone who wants to catch up to us.

Interesting.

If he's not trying to catch us, what is he doing?

Herdling.

I recognize it now. Three men moving in tandem. This is a tactic, a variation of the pincer movement. It's an attack from the front obscuring a flanking maneuver.

A military tactic.

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This means the real danger is not in front but behind. In the car attached to ours.

As Windbreaker comes forward, the natural response is to retreat and transfer to another car to get away. You think you are escaping danger, but you are walking into it.

What is the unnatural response?

Go toward him.

“I see a seat down at the other end,” I say.

I take Erica with me toward Windbreaker. His eyes narrow. I am not following his plan.

The train accelerates away from the station, rocking side to side.

I head directly for Windbreaker, one arm around Erica.

Windbreaker reaches into his pocket.

Maximum danger in five seconds.

“Jerry!” I shout at him. The first name that comes into my head.

I lunge forward, Erica held tightly at my side. I reach for Windbreaker like I’m reaching to hug a friend. I grasp him before he can react, a crushing hug that pins his arms hard against his side and keeps his hand from leaving his pocket.

As the train lurches and the brakes squeal, I slam his head hard into the metal pole at the same time. The *crack* is lost in the sound of the brakes. I follow through with the motion, swinging him around and dropping him into the open seat.

Then I turn and slide open the door between subway cars, hanging on to Erica the whole time.

A brief scream of brakes and wind as we step out onto the exposed

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metal platforms swinging between cars, navigate across the gap, and slam open the door, passing through to the safety of the next car.

“What was that?” she says. “Did you know that guy?”

“I thought I did. I was wrong.”

I notice an empty seat by the door.

“You want to sit now?” I say.

“If you’re done dragging me around, mister.”

“Done. I promise.”

“I’m so wasted,” she says. “I have to cut down on my partying.”

She flops down, head in hands.

I sense movement in the car we were just in. Windbreaker is out of commission, so man number two is coming forward. He’s wearing a light spring jacket and bright white, perfectly clean sneakers. Too clean.

“Are you okay for a second?” I say to Erica.

The train rocks. This conductor is a real cowboy. He’s helping me without knowing it.

“Where are you going?” she says, starting to nod out.

“I forgot something,” I say.

“You never answered the question about me and Sam,” she says.

“I have to think about it,” I say.

“You shouldn’t have to think about a question like that.”

I watch Sneakers coming forward. He reaches for the subway door in the car next to ours. Left hand on the door handle, right hand going into his jacket pocket.

I wait for him to open the door to his car, then I open mine.

We meet in the middle.

Roaring wind. Darkness.

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A flurry of blows. Most of them glance off my side. He's good. He's fast.

I am faster.

Four blows rising from waist to head.

The train screams around a bend. Centrifugal force pulls him back and me forward. I use the inertia to straight-arm him in the chest. He reels back on the tiny landing. The guard chain snaps, and he swings out into the darkness.

Brakes squeal.

I reach for him.

He teeters on one leg, reaching back toward me, trying to stop his fall. I grasp the corner of his jacket, trying to pull him back. It slips between my fingers, and I grasp tighter.

There is no need for this man to die now. I need him disabled. I need to ask him some questions.

The noise in the tunnel doubles. On the other track, a train roars forward.

Timing.

A single hard yank to get him back. It should work.

It does not.

The jacket slips, his eyes widen in fear, his fingers claw at my face—  
And then he's gone, his body bouncing like a limp doll from train to train before being sucked beneath the rushing metal on the opposite track.

I stand alone in the space between cars with his jacket in my hands. There are no shouts from inside the car, no emergency brake pulled.

Nothing at all.

It happened too quickly.