

Joint Winner of the Third Prize in the Schools Section

Take the Bullet?

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'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' he muttered to himself as he closed the door.

It was the middle of June and 6 am. John Jones pulled on his black jacket, straightened his tie and put on his sunglasses. The birds were in song, the trees' leaves rustled in the breeze and the sun was already baking the earth. It looked like it was going to be another beautiful day in Washington D.C. but John Jones knew otherwise. He stepped into his black BMW, put in an earpiece and opened the glove compartment to reveal a pistol. He strapped on his holster and then put his ID card in his top left pocket. It stated he had complete access to the White House and that he worked for the FBI. John spoke into a microphone in his sleeve and confirmed his arrival at the White House to be at 6.30. He adjusted the rear-view mirror and reversed out of the driveway of his small cottage. His wife was standing at the window waving him off and his two children were still asleep. He managed a fake smile and wave to his wife but deep down he feared the worst.

The roads were empty and John felt lonely as he weaved in and out of lanes. He switched on the radio news and was confronted with the main headline, the end of terror is here and President Taylor will be parading the streets of Washington meeting troops, thanking them and celebrating the withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan and the victory over terrorism. This was not news to John as he is the President's main bodyguard and is leading the operation to keep Taylor safe. The reminder of his duty and overwhelming responsibility sent a shiver down his spine and flooded his mind with thoughts. Thousands of threats to kill President Taylor have been received as usual but John has a bad feeling.

John's eyes were a wide abyss full of fear and doubt, his mouth was dry, his palms were sweaty, he felt sick and his mind was suffocated by his thoughts and fears. Three questions constantly strangled and twisted his mind: will he take the bullet for his President and country? What if he doesn't? And will he ever see his family again?

The torture he was putting his mind through came to an end as he arrived at the White House. He went through the usual security checks and then went to a conference where he met his team of agents and went through the routine. His next job was to brief the President. He walked to the President's office; every step echoed in the deafening silence, everything seemed to be in slow motion and he had to force a brave, calm face. He knocked and entered, Taylor was sat at his desk going through a speech that he will read to the people. After a quick briefing John asked if the President was ready, he received a nod and then spoke into the mic in his sleeve, 'The eagle is leaving the nest, all systems are go.' He led the President down the stairs and through a secret passageway to the back of the White House where a car was waiting. It was an open-top car with flags of the United States of America fluttering at the front. The President was sat in the middle back seat next to John

and another agent. John spoke into his sleeve again: 'The eagle is ready to fly, is everyone in position?' Everyone was in position and the car started, police cars and motorbikes surrounded the car and a helicopter flew above.

Everything was going smoothly; crowds cheered and clapped as the President drove past and the police were in complete control. John was in a complete trance though; he constantly scanned the crowds looking for suspicious people, everything was silent to him. He kept imagining seeing a gun pointing at the President and whether he would take the bullet or not. He thought about his kids, his wife, but then he thought about his country, President and his duty. He remembered one of the threats; it stated that someone will run straight in front of the President's car with a gun and shoot the President straight in the head.

His trance was broken when his earpiece crackled and someone spoke into it.

'You look scared, I guess you're worried someone is just gonna run in front of the car and shoot your President.'

'Who is this? How are you speaking to me?'

'You know I'm not gonna tell you that, I will let you know that I am going to kill President Taylor though. You are the only one that can stop me; will you take the bullet and sacrifice your life?'

John's mind was blank, his mouth was dry and he didn't know what to do. The responsibility, the fear and the doubt in his mind were closing in on him. He felt he was surrounded and isolated. The voice came back.

'What about your family, John, how could they live without you? But then what would happen to their country if the President died?'

'How do you know all this?' John said failing to hide the fear in his voice.

'You seem scared, John, don't be, this has got nothing to do with you, all I want to do is put a bullet through the President's skull. You could go home to your family and live your life. That is if you're willing to live with the guilt and willing to watch your country suffer the consequences.'

'Stop it, stop messing with me. Who are you, where are you, how are you going to kill the President?'

'I'm just gonna run in front of the car and shoot him, I'll be waiting around the corner.' The voice disappeared.

John went to speak into his mic to warn the police around the corner but a high-pitched noise pierced his ear as well as the bodyguard next to him and all the officers and agents on the operation. Everyone's communications were down. John didn't know what to do. He didn't know if the threat was real or not, he frantically searched the crowd looking for an

obvious suspect. He couldn't stop the car as he could not inform anyone of the situation. He just had to hope as the car rounded the corner.

The President waved at the cheering crowd when suddenly a shot was fired, John reacted quickly and threw himself in front of the President, his life flashed before his eyes, he saw his wife and kids stood at the doorway of his lovely cottage, the flowers were in full blossom and the sun was shining.

Surprisingly he felt no pain, there was no agonising pain, no blood and he breathed easily. He opened his eyes to see the President laughing. 'It was just a balloon popping,' he chuckled. 'But I admire your actions, if that was a gunshot you would have saved my life.'

John sighed a sigh of relief and managed a smile but this soon went as his earpiece crackled back to life and the man was back.

'I underestimated you, John; you really are willing to make that sacrifice. But will you do it again, I bet that was a horrible feeling, you really thought you just took a bullet for your President, didn't you. You thought you were never gonna see your family again, didn't you. You're sweating, John.'

All the relief had gone and John was scared and surrounded once more. John sloped into his seat, he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him. A tear welled in his eye, he felt like giving up and surrendering to this cruel cold world.

A man ran into the road, the police yelled and the crowd screamed as he pulled out a gun. John did not react, he wanted to see his family again and live his life; he had given. But then a mother and two children in the crowd caught his eye. They were like his own wife and children. He saw the despair in their eyes, the two children each held a flag of the USA. He realised his family was not his main priority; if he saved the President he would save all the families in America including his own. He now only had one option. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he remembered his duty. He dived and crashed into the President, shielding him with his own body. The man took his aim and fired. The shot echoed around the street, the bullet spiralled and penetrated his back. He collapsed fighting for every breath.

Three days later John woke up in hospital. The bullet did not go through his bullet-proof jacket. His wife, children and the President were at his bedside. The sun was shining through the window; the birds were in song, the trees' leaves rustled in the breeze and John smiled as he thought that this is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long life!