

3: Kidnapped

I WILL NEVER FORGET the bodyguard's expression. He was one of the younger ones, a teenager with a hard, chiselled face like that of a seasoned lightweight boxer. Until now I hadn't even noticed him, he'd just been another figure in the smother of camouflage uniforms clinging to the back of the pick-up. Now, as we headed across a patch of open scrub, the pick-up had suddenly sped alongside us, and I could see his face pulled into a snarl, his eyes bulging, his teeth bared. For a fleeting moment I thought he might just be arguing with the driver over what route to take, expressing himself with the brusqueness that men with guns routinely do in Somalia. Then, as he and his companions leapt out of the pickup and ran to either side of our car, I realised we were being surrounded.

Our driver ground to a halt. To the left and right, the passenger doors opened. Outside the car, people were shouting and arguing in Somali. I glanced around, hoping there might be some innocent explanation. But to borrow Ahmed's expression, I understood one thing. We were being kidnapped.

'Shit,' said José, in a low, flat voice.

A guard reached into the car and tugged at my shirt, urging me to get out. I slid meekly along the seat, and jumped onto the hard gravelly ground. The guard, a tall, skinny fellow who looked about 21, had his Kalashnikov pointing at my stomach. We were no more than 20 yards from the nearest houses, but I didn't even think about trying to make a break for it. Being held at gunpoint has a mesmerising effect on the uninitiated. The overriding instinct is to do exactly what you are told. The guards gestured at us to get in their pick-up, and we did so without a hint of protest. To anyone watching at that moment, we probably looked like we were just changing cars because of a puncture.

Two guards leapt in the back seat either side of us and slammed the doors shut, wedging me in so tight it was impossible to move my arms. The pick-up roared off, wheels skidding in the gravel. I looked

behind to see the other bodyguards in the back of the pick-up, guns at the ready in case anyone chased us. Their uniforms flapped in the wind as we gathered speed.

Then, darkness. Scrawny hands either side of us draped a scruffy green jacket over our heads, so we could neither see nor be seen. The musky body odour of the jacket's previous wearer mingled with my breath, now coming sharp and shallow. I could sense we were heading out of town, away from what little law and order Bossaso had. As we hurtled onto a rough back track, a narrow gap opened in the folds of the jacket. Through it I could see the desert that led towards the mountains, speeding past like a film on fast-forward. The driver was plunging through the rocky dunes with the speed and skill of a rally driver. Behind us, the rest of gang yelled at each other over the engine's mounting roar. There were laughs and whoops, the sounds of people who knew they'd got away with it. Where were Ahmed and Mustapha? No idea. Not that they were likely to be much help. The very men they'd hired to keep us from getting kidnapped were now kidnapping us themselves. Were *they* in on this, I wondered? Suddenly it felt as if forces unknown had been plotting this ever since we set foot in Puntland. As if all those conversations in Somali around us had been leading up to this very moment.

'Is there anything we can do, José?' I said weakly.

He made no reply. The bodyguard next to me, the tall fellow who'd dragged me out of the car, rapped me over the head with his gun butt for talking. But I had to ask. If we were going to try to escape, now was the time to do it rather than in the middle of nowhere. For a brief, mad moment I considered trying to lean forward and jerk the steering wheel, rolling the pick-up over. Then I realised it was a stunt I'd only ever seen work on TV shows like *The A-Team*. Colonel Hannibal's plans always came together, but mine, I suspected would not. Crammed in together like this, we'd all end up with broken backs.

I thought of trying to dial the *Sunday Telegraph* foreign desk in London via my mobile phone in my trouser pocket. Even if I couldn't speak to them direct, perhaps whoever picked up the phone would

hear the gang's shouts in the background and sense something was wrong. But when I wormed my hand into my pocket, the guard to my right spotted the movement and grabbed the phone himself. As he did so, the jacket slipped from my head. He didn't bother putting it back. We were now right out in the desert, and he was obviously beginning to feel more relaxed.

And me? How did I feel? I'd spent much of my life reporting on other peoples' wars, tragedies and traumas, asking them to put into words how it felt when disaster struck. Now I realised why so many of them shrugged or began their response with the phrase: 'It's impossible to describe...'

It is indeed hard to do justice in words to what moments of extreme fear are really like. Most of us experience them so seldom that we lack the necessary emotional vocabulary. Nor, indeed do we really need it. At such times, our brains are designed to go into fight-and-flight mode, not sit around self-analysing. I was aware, though, of a feeling of detachment, a disbelief that it could actually be me, *yes, me*, that this was happening to, that of all the world's six billion people, I had scooped one of the jackpots in that day's global lottery of bad luck. The fear was there, but it felt strangely numbed, as if my brain had self-prescribed some strong natural Valium. Somewhere inside me though, a muffled voice was repeating the same emergency announcement, over and over again.

Oh my God. We have been kidnapped. This is bad. This is very, very bad.

The guards in the back of the pick-up were jabbering away, shouting instructions to the driver above the roar of the engine. In the conversation, only one word sounded vaguely familiar. It sounded like 'Kismayo', the name of a city in southern Somalia. Kismayo was not a place we wanted to go to. It was a stronghold of the Shabab militia, who'd imposed a kind of Taliban rule. The month before, they'd stoned a 13-year-old girl to death on trumped up charges of adultery and the Americans had launched missile strikes against the Shabab's leaders earlier in the year, claiming they were harbouring Al Qaeda fugitives. I'd no idea who'd snared us, but if they were taking us to be guests of the Shabab, we'd get a very hostile reception. At

best, they'd probably use us as human shields in case the Americans carried any more airstrikes; at worst, it was a televised beheading. I tried to remind myself that no foreign hostage had yet been killed in Somalia – to my knowledge, anyway. But that muffled voice in my head couldn't help whispering: *'There's a first time for everything, you know.'*

The mountains drew nearer. Soon we were in the foothills, coursing along a dried-up river. The pick-up's tyres spun their way over beds of smooth, water-washed pebbles. Finally, when the trail got too steep, we ground to a halt in front of a thicket of trees. As the guards spilled out, I counted them. Seven, not the eight that we'd paid for. Fucking Ahmed and Mustapha. They'd even ripped us off on the number of kidnappers we should've had.

The guards ordered us out, and pointed to where the riverbed continued, up a sparsely wooded canyon.

'Imshi!' yelled one of them.

He was another teenager, with a face so thin and craggy that shadows cast across it even in the midday sun. White desert dust from the journey still covered his cheeks and forehead, transforming him into a grinning skull with black eye sockets, a Somali Jolly Roger. *'Imshi'*, I knew, meant 'walk' in Arabic. Just in case I didn't understand, he pointed to his gun and mimed a bullet going in my forehead. José and I marched off with our hands above our heads.

'Maa fi mushkilleh', I said.

It was Arabic for 'no problem', a phrase that I'd learned in Iraq. Mainly for use when there was in fact a very big problem indeed. We scrambled up the canyon, shoulders wincing in expectation of a bullet. The kidnappers fanned out, a couple ahead of us, the rest behind, guns drawn. José pulled alongside.

'Are you okay?' I asked him.

'Me, I am okay, yes. But I am concerned for my parents. They will be very worried. My father has a heart condition.'

I imagined some elderly Spanish man keeling over in front of the TV news, and tried not to think about my own father doing the same.

‘Listen, man, we’ll get through this okay,’ I said, not really believing it. ‘We’ll just have to be strong, and...’

‘IMSHI!’

Another guard, a bald, wizened guy in his 40s or 50s, interrupted us, pointing a finger to his lips.

Ten minutes further up, we came to a clearing and stopped. They gathered around us, guns drawn. A new fear hit me. What if they were just going to kill us? Just as I was thinking what a discreet, soundproofed spot this would be to shoot us and hide our bodies, one of them delved into a rucksack and handed us a bottle of mineral water. They obviously planned to keep us alive. For now, anyway.

‘Imshi!’

The canyon steepened, bearing round to the right into a wide valley where we could see the start of the mountains proper. God only knew where we were. It was the emptiest, most barren landscape I’d ever seen. Trees and plants were almost non-existent. The valley slopes were strewn with sharp, twisted shards of black and brown volcanic rock, which clinked like metal as they dislodged under our feet. There was no path, forcing us to pick our way carefully like mountain goats. While José was wearing hiking boots, I had on only a pair of Next slip-on shoes. They’d been my default choice of work footwear ever since Baghdad, where my Iraqi translators had advised me against the standard war-reporters’ get-up of combat trousers and hiking boots. It was too close to how US government officials dressed, they said, and therefore the equivalent of painting a target on one’s back. Now, with every step, I was regretting ever listening to them, as sharp rock edges dug into the soles of my feet. If we carried on like this, I’d end up not just with ferocious blisters, but a broken ankle. Somehow, I doubted I’d be excused and sent home. I looked at my watch. 1pm. We should have been on the plane by now. Daallo Airlines Flight D377, with its leopardskin seats and complimentary water, now seemed like the gateway to a beautiful, parallel life, stretching away like a missed turning.

After an hour of yomping that would have tested applicants to the Parachute Regiment, we stopped on a pass half-way up the

valley. Sweat was pouring off my forehead, stinging my eyes. As I searched for a rock comfortable enough to sit on, I saw the skull-faced kidnapper squatting down to take a crap, dropping his trousers with a practised ease that meant I didn't look away in time. Another kidnapper, the tall, wiry guy who'd been wedged next to me in the pick-up, rummaged in a small blue rucksack. Like a Scout leader, he produced a handful of Mars bars and handed them round. It struck a surreal note. *Mars bars*? I didn't even know they sold them in Somalia. The gang tucked in, chewing noisily and with their mouths open.

'Me, I prefer Snickers,' said José, with a grin.

I smiled back weakly. At least he was keeping his sense of humour. I'd feared he might be angry. After all, it was me who'd asked him to come to Somalia in the first place. We'd worked well as a team, we'd had fun drinking gin and chewing qhat on Saturday, but we were both still essentially strangers, thrown into this mess together. There was no telling what he'd be like to be held hostage with, or what he might vent on me if things started getting really rough. Weren't there stories about hostages who'd had to be kept in separate confinement to stop them attacking each other? He seemed okay now, but what about after a couple of weeks? Or months? Or years? He was probably thinking the same about me.

However long we ended up together, I knew all too well the horrors that we might be in for. Getting taken hostage was something I'd dreaded ever since becoming a foreign correspondent, the one great occupational hazard of a great occupation. During my time in Iraq, Baghdad had turned into the kidnap capital of the world, insurgent groups actively hunting Westerners and parading them in amateur movies released on the web. In the run-down hotel I stayed at, a former brothel called the Al Dulaimi, no less than six colleagues had been abducted, prompting rumours that the hotel was cursed. All had eventually been released, but some had been held for months on end, their terrified, haunted faces staring out from terrorist video nasties. They were still among the lucky ones. Other kidnap victims had been beheaded or otherwise killed, their last moments filmed for

Al Qaeda propaganda broadcasts. The fear of kidnap had been the defining experience of reporting in Iraq, squatting malevolently in one's mind during every waking minute, and sometimes intruding into one's dreams. It was what every correspondent dreaded most, the one ordeal that might arguably be called a fate worse than death. It had even given me the title of the book I'd written about my time out there, *The Curse of the Al Dulaimi Hotel*.

Come to think of it, if I live to tell the tale of this kidnap, sales might go up a bit. And if I don't, they'll probably go up even more.

Jesus, was this really the time to think about that? My mind was rewinding and fast-forwarding through every aspect of my entire life, re-assessing things in the light of what had just happened. Book sales aside, the changes were not generally for the better. Now, I'd no longer be remembered as Colin Freeman the intrepid foreign correspondent. Now I'd be forever remembered as Colin Freeman the kidnap victim, who fell for the glamour of foreign correspondence, but paid the price. Or Colin Freeman, the guy who went blundering around dangerous places to boost his ego, because he couldn't make a go of normal life. Whose family were now about to go through absolute hell worrying about him.

Guilt surged through me. All of a sudden, the last five years of my career – by far the happiest of my professional life – looked like one long exercise in reckless selfishness. I imagined the awful moment when my parents would get the call from the office saying that I was missing. They were both in their 60s. Even if I eventually got released, something like this could give one of them a heart attack. And all because their son thought it was fun to flirt with danger. Then there was Jane. Where did this leave us? She'd be going spare over a man who didn't even seem to know if he loved her or not.

'Imshi,' said the Scout Leader.

Mars Bar break over, we carried on up. The air was cooling with the altitude, but the sun was still fierce. Fearing sunburn and a headache, I asked for something to cover my head. I was handed the green jacket used to hood us during the getaway. Knotting its sleeves, I fashioned it into a headdress. The smell of its previous owner's stale body odour hit me again. I tried not to think what lice, fleas and

other armpit-loving fauna might be lingering there. The gang thinned out, two on close guard, four in single file behind. A scout walked up ahead. Around us, mountains stretched on every side. Bossaso and the coastline were nowhere to be seen. I could see no huts, no path, no footprints, no litter, no sign that humankind had ever passed this way before. In terms of feeling far from civilisation, only being abducted by aliens would beat this.

I was reminded of a trip I'd done to Afghanistan in 2004, as a little light relief from Iraq. At the time, the US military was in yet another offensive to hunt down Osama bin Laden, who was still thought to be somewhere in its eastern mountains. I'd always found it surprising that they hadn't found him already, given all their manpower and technology, but once I got to Afghanistan I began to realise why. The place has a vastness and remoteness that simply no longer exists in the Western world. It first struck me on a trip to Bamyan, the village where the Taliban blew up some 1,500 year old statues of the Buddha. A few hours' drive out of Kabul, the driver had suddenly pulled onto a tiny, rocky sidetrack. I'd assumed he was about to take a piss. Instead, it was the start of the main road to Bamyan, another 12 hours' scramble up what wasn't much more than a cattletrack. Yet by Afghan standards, this was a good road. Other places, far further away, had none at all, just donkey tracks linking endless mountains and valleys. I ended up wondering not so much why the Americans hadn't caught Bin Laden yet, as why they'd ever thought it would be possible in the first place.

The mountains we were in now felt rather similar. Indeed, if the US really was 'closing in' on bin Laden in Afghanistan, this was probably the kind of place he'd flee to. Then, as we reached the crest of one mountain pass and marched down the other side, a lone figure appeared in the distance.

He was a boy, about 12 or 13, leading half a dozen donkeys towards us along a wide ridge of russet gravel. At first my heart leaped. Here, at least, was a witness, someone who might tell the outside world where we'd been seen. Then I realised it could lead to something horrible.