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Opening extract from
Hostage Three

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THE COAST OF EYL,
PUNTLAND,
SOMALIA

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We stand on the diving platform of our yacht, in the brutal sunlight.

Dad's arm is around my shoulders. I can smell his sweat, the tang of it. This is fairly unusual. In real life, Dad smells of Clinique's moisturiser for men and a casual day for him is taking off his cufflinks. Now he's in a torn, short-sleeved shirt. But then this whole situation is so far from normal it's ridiculous.

There is a gun pointing right at my head.

The pirates are above us, the blazing ball of the sun overhead, frying us all, bleaching the barrel of the gun to a searing, dancing white.

Ahmed, the leader, is shouting about a navy dinghy that's getting too close.

— Turn dinghy around, he says loudly into the VHF handset. Turn around or we shoot hostage.

The dinghy does not turn around. It keeps bouncing over the waves towards us, and I can see navy soldiers in it, uniformed and armed. No one is meant to be armed, I think. That's part of the deal.

I tense up, feel my own shoulders hunch and my knees bend a little, as if someone has tied invisible but powerful string to my extremities and is pulling the ends, sharply, together.

— Don't worry, Amy, says Dad. No one's going to get shot.

— Shut up, Hostage One, says Ahmed.

We have numbers, you see:

My father is Hostage One.

The stepmother is Hostage Two.

I am Hostage Three.

I think this is to make it easier for them if they have to shoot us, though they say it won't happen if everyone follows their orders.

We all watch the dinghy, which is showing no signs at all of stopping. My skin is stinging all over from my sweat and from the loud blasting of the sun.

Ahmed thumbs the VHF handset again.

— Turn around! he shouts. Or hostage die.

At first, I was annoyed that the stepmother came before me, that she was Hostage Two and I was Hostage Three. It seemed typical – her, being more important than me. Standard operating procedure, ever since she came out of a taxi a year and a half ago, drunk from an office party, and into our lives. But that – me being annoyed – was before, before this stopped feeling in any way like an adventure and things started to fall apart. Now the stepmother's place in the hostage hierarchy is the last thing I'm worried about.

And I figured that if things went really badly wrong, she would probably get shot ahead of me.

Our crew also have numbers, but they're standing a little way away. Our family unit is like a force field, keeping the hired help at a distance.

— Stop dinghy, Ahmed says into the radio, or we shoot girl.

Oh, I think. So Hostage Three gets shot first anyway. The way I think this is strangely detached, like it's someone else who's about to get a bullet in the brain.

The dinghy does not turn around. Ahmed keeps his thumb on the *transmit* button.

— Farouz, shoot Hostage Three, he says.

Is that his voice breaking a little?

You don't want to do this, Ahmed, I want to shout to him. I know you don't want to do it. But what if he does? What if he really is prepared to see me die?

And what if Farouz is prepared to do it?

Farouz trains his gun on me, his hand shaking slightly. It's a pistol of some kind, the one he usually wears on his waistband, tied to it with string. I don't know what model it is, what calibre. That's not the kind of thing I'm interested in back in real life, though suddenly it seems terribly important to me, like if I die and don't know what precise model of gun killed me, I might never be able to rest.

— What kind of gun is that, Farouz? I ask.

— Shut up! Shut up! he shouts.

His hand is waving all over the place now, and I think maybe he'd miss anyway. But then Ahmed would shoot me, or one of the others. Ahmed and the other two have AK-47s. That's one of the guns I do know, and only because the terrorists always have them in films.

— Shoot her now, says Ahmed.

The dinghy is about thirty metres away. I can see a sailor on it, binoculars to his eyes. The whole scene is very focused, very sharp; and that's the right word, sharp, because it seems like everything – the waves, the white sail of the yacht, the collar of Dad's shirt – all the things around me would cut me

if I reached out and touched them. This feels especially true because in this heat my piercings have turned against me; the sun heats the bolts, and when I touch my face and move them, they scorch my skin.

— Kill her! Ahmed roars.

The stepmother begins to weep.

I stand there, waiting for the bang, but then I think, no, I won't hear it, will I? It's like lightning, a gunshot. Standing here, at the point of impact, I won't be aware of anything. There will be, for me, only energy and violence, and no sound at all.

I close my eyes, and wait to be killed.

My name is Amy Fields.

But the men call me Hostage Three.