

Episode 105: Jessica's kidnappers demanded \$45 million

I find it so interesting that sometimes we can take what seems to be a really small action, but it ends up being something really big.

Back in 1998, I was living in Maine with my wife and our two young kids. I was working at a regular office job. Then one day, I needed to have some printing done. This was before the days of the high-quality inkjet printers, so it was common to go to a local print shop and get whatever you needed to have printed.

While I was paying for my stuff, I noticed a small piece of paper on the counter. Someone had left a little note that said "I need tutoring in Microsoft Word. If you can help, call this number." And I thought, yeah I know Word, maybe I can help. So I took the note and called her later. I ended up going over there and we spent a couple of hours going through the various functions of Word, and how to do things. And she paid me.

So I thought, maybe this is a sort of side hustle that I could do in my spare time to make a little extra money. That's how my computer business, called The Computer Tutor, got started. And it turned into a full time job doing computer instruction and computer repair, for over 20 years. And that whole thing started just by me happening to notice that little piece of paper on the counter in that print shop.

Today you'll hear my conversation with Jessica. Back in 2011, she was on the phone with one of her co-workers. During that conversation, she made a decision that she wasn't all that comfortable with. And at the time, it didn't seem like a big deal.

But that seemingly small decision ended up changing the whole direction of her life.

Scott

You're an American. What were you doing in Somalia at that time?

Jessica

I know that it's not exactly everybody's primary work destination - it wasn't exactly a place that I had mapped out on my globe as to where I thought I was gonna end up working. I'm actually a teacher by profession. When I was finishing my teaching degree at a university outside of Philadelphia, I became really interested in finishing my degree and teaching abroad, and I found an international school in Nairobi, Kenya that can take me. So, I was actually the first teacher at my uni being trained to study and teach students abroad - and I just loved it. It was the most phenomenal experience working with kids from all different backgrounds and countries. When I finished up my student teaching, they offered me a full-time position and I took it because I wanted to stay in Africa. I was in my mid-20s - kind of a late bloomer. I've always liked to explore lots of different options, and my career path has definitely reflected that. So, I took my teaching position in Nairobi.

A couple of months after I started, I met this cute Swede in a nightclub one night - he was there working for a Swedish NGO - and we hit it off. About a year and a half later, we ended up married. At that point, he had been stationed with a different NGO up in Hargeisa Somaliland - if people are somewhat familiar with the layout of the land of Somalia, it's kind of shaped like a '7'.

So, we were up at the top left corner of that '7', but he traveled pretty much all over the place. We just decided a long-distance relationship wasn't what we wanted when we were starting out our marriage, so I quit my teaching job and moved up to Hargeisa to be with him. As a teacher I can find work anywhere, right? So, I ended up just tutoring and teaching English to refugees who were living on our compound for a while. Then, I ended up starting to do consultancy work for the UN. Then, that rolled into a full-time position for the Danish Demining Group, which was the main action unit of the Danish Refugee Council. My job was to manage all of their education programs. The education component of the Mine Action Unit was mine risk education, conflict management education, and firearm safety education in countries like Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya. Post-civil war, they still have leftover land mines and explosives laying around, especially in more rural areas. So, my job was to train our staff so that they could take the messaging out into the villages, especially the kids, like, "If you see something shiny laying on the ground, don't pick it up because it can explode and kill you, or it can blind you. That happens all the time." I know that it's not everybody's, like, dream job, but for me, I was, like, living my best life. I had a really meaningful and purposeful work, and it was exciting. I got to meet so many different people and go to so many cool places. Yeah, I was living my dream, for sure.

Scott

It sounds just awesome and so rewarding. I'm just thinking about the irony of this, though. You were doing humanitarian work there by providing demining education to, literally, save the lives of the people that live there, but then the people that lived there did this thing to you.

Jessica

Yeah.

Scott

Okay. You were on a brief trip to the NGO's field office. Just tell us what happened that day. How did this take place?

Jessica

Yeah. I managed a whole portfolio of East Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and all of Somalia - we had several field offices. I was called to do a staff training down in the southern part near Galkayo, which is, like, a little bit north of Mogadishu - which is probably what most people are familiar with when it comes to Somalia. I had actually canceled the staff training twice before because I didn't feel good about the security situation if, if you will. My counterpart, a Danish gentleman named Poul, was the program director for that particular field office. At the third attempt at planning this trip, I said, "I don't feel good about coming down. I don't feel like it's safe." And he minimized it and was like, "I'm here. It's fine." I just kept hemming and hawing because I had a feeling in my gut that something wasn't right. He essentially said, "If you don't get down here and do your job, then I'm gonna report you to our supervisor." As I said before, I loved my job. I think, sometimes, it's hard for people to understand that these kinds of jobs are competitive - you're actually getting paid and not just volunteering your time - and they're hard to come by. So, I felt pressured and scared that I might lose my job. So I thought, "I'm a school teacher from Ohio. Like, nothing bad happens to school teachers from Ohio. I'll be fine. What's the worst that can happen?" So, I got on a plane and flew down there.

It's a 3-day training. The first 2 days went great without a hitch. On the third day, we actually have to leave. There was a lot of clan conflict at the town of Galkayo, so the town was divided by North and South. In order to move across this dividing line between the North and South, you

have to, like, get in a whole new convoy of vehicles and have a whole new set of staff. So, everything had been planned and set up. It was quite a production to get to the south part of the city to conduct the training, but we did the training. Everything went great until about 3 o'clock in the afternoon when we got back into our convoy to be taken to the northern part of the city where we were going to sleep in the guest house and then head back up - I was going to go back up to Hargeisa. We were in a convoy of 3 vehicles. I actually had the local Somali security adviser sitting next to me in the vehicle. We pulled out of the compound gates and were heading north through Galkayo city. Then, about 10 minutes into the ride, somebody cuts us off in another vehicle and splashes mud all over our windows and our windshields. I was doing exactly what they tell you not to do - like not paying attention, texting my husband, and wondering what I'm gonna have for dinner that night. Then, all of a sudden, I hear the crack of the bat of an AK47 on the car hood and it just feels like we're surrounded by screaming angry Somali men. Then, the door is pulled open, the security adviser sitting next to me is pulled out, a guy with an AK got in, pointed it at my head, and started screaming at the driver to drive. Poul was in the front passenger seat. We have a local Somali driver. Then, a bunch of people got into the back of the vehicle and they just drove off through and out of town. We drove for hours out into the desert, stopped, changed vehicles, and then they changed personnel. At one point, I realized that there was a child in the car sitting right behind me - he was about 9 years old. He was wearing, like, belts of ammo and he got an AK. I think he was there to, like, learn the family trade. It took me a couple of hours to realize that we were not just being carjacked - I was hoping and praying that we would just be carjacked, that they'll take our stuff, kick us out of the car, and we can walk back to town even if it takes all night.

Scott

Right. But if that was the case, they would have kicked you out of the car from the start, right?

Jessica

I mean, they can do that. I was used to hearing about people getting carjacked in Nairobi - they would drive you around all night long, like, take your stuff, go to the ATM, empty out your bank account, and then kick you out and leave you somewhere in a slum or something. So, I knew what was up, but it wasn't until, like, several hours into the whole ordeal. Poul turned around and looked at me. I think he asked me if I'm okay and I was just like, "What is happening?" I just remember that he looked like he was so sorry - like, the look on his face was just pity. He was like, "We're being kidnapped." I was thinking, like, "I have no frame of reference for how bad this is, whatever it is, however this thing turns out, even if they only, like, kidnapped us for 2 days. Like, my life has changed forever." From this point on, nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Scott

He's got to be feeling a little bit guilty because he talked you into coming.

Jessica

Yeah, we didn't know about that until, like, day 27 when he finally admitted that there was a direct kidnapping threat on the organization, but didn't want to tell me because they didn't consider it a viable threat. Yeah, it has taken a lot for me to get over it. I don't think I'm there yet.

Scott

So, at that point, you were just coming to realize how bad it really is.

Jessica

Yeah. I was looking around and thinking, "I'm the only woman and American. We were driving south to, like, Al-Shabaab territory - things were not looking good. Then, somewhere in the middle of the night, they stopped, forced us out of the vehicle, and started shouting at us to walk. I know that whatever is waiting out there for me was not going to be good, so I refused and kept saying 'No. Finally, Poul came over and said, "Jessica, we have to walk. Like, we have to do what they're telling us to do or they're going to shoot us right here." So, I thought of it as, like, a march to my own execution - that was what I believed was happening. I was saying goodbye to my husband. I was saying goodbye to my dad, my sister, and my brother. I was, like, calling out to my mother who had passed away the year before. I was asking her for her strength. That was very important to me in what I believed to be my final moments - I don't know, it's weird. What went through my mind was, like, "I wouldn't disgrace myself" because I figured that I was going to be assaulted and then executed, because stories coming out of situations like this were quite violent. We walked for 20-30 minutes, and then we were stopped and forced down onto our knees. I was waiting for my head to be chopped from my body. Instead, I heard one of them say, "Sleep." I was thinking, like, "I didn't hear that, right?" Then, they say 'Sleep' again. They just, like, want to sully down in the dirt in the middle of the desert and go to sleep. How your body and minds work together to protect you when you're in such a state of shock and, like, fight-or-flight is so interesting, I think. I did, like, just passed out and fell asleep for a couple of hours. Then, I woke up the next morning lying in the dirt. I called it, like, this descent into just hell.

Scott

I've been in situations where I've got the adrenaline going and the last thing that I'd be able to do is just fall asleep. Was it because you were so exhausted mentally from walking and thinking?

Jessica

No, I think everything just knew that it needed to shut down. Like, it needed to protect me and just shut down. I don't think Poul slept - he was awake pretty much the whole night trying to figure out, like, "What is going on here? Like, who has us?" There were phone calls, there were all these people milling around, and there was all this commotion. I think the stress of the whole situation just caused me to pass out, essentially, and I don't know for how long.

Scott

You must have felt, like, a big sense of relief when they didn't just shoot you.

Jessica

Yeah, but then I woke up and it was like, "Okay, what's going to happen now?" Like, every single minute, something was changing or something could change, so we just never knew what to expect.

Scott

So, the next morning, you woke up. What happened after that?

Jessica

We waited. We asked to talk to the organization and call our families, but no one could understand us. They were all these armed men with explosives lying around, grenades, rocket launchers and, like, heavy artillery, but no one can speak any English. So, we had to wait until the translators comes in, and we thought that they met, like, the negotiator. About a week into the thing, some guy who spoke a little bit of English came in. Then, they drove us out into the

desert and put us on the phone in the middle of the night. We were supposed to call our families but their phone numbers have been shut down. I couldn't understand, like, why couldn't I get a hold of my husband or my dad. Then, we realize that there must have been, like, FBI and police involved and this must be, like, a tactic or procedure in order to keep everybody safe and how this is gonna go. So, they somehow had a phone number that goes to our organization. It appeared that they've set up, like, some sort of spokesperson to talk on behalf of the family and the organization - he is a Somali who speaks English and his name is Mohammed. I just couldn't, like, make my brain work because I was like, "Who is this person? Like, why can't I get a hold of anybody? Like, what is happening here?" It was constantly, like, mentally jarring. Like, you were put on the phone to talk to some person that you don't know, to answer security questions about yourself, and to remember, like, "What was your dog's your first dog's name?" You didn't know... like, if you answered wrong, maybe you're gonna get shot in the head. I mean, the stakes were so high and the unknowns are so unknown. So, it's just one big huge mindfuck the entire time - it's nuts!

Scott

Was that phone call what they would call a proof-of-life call?

Jessica

Exactly, yeah. So, I would say - like, the first 2 weeks into the ordeal, probably at the end of October and beginning of November in 2011 - that would have been our first proof-of-life call. We would have a series of 6 throughout the 93 days of captivity.

Scott

Obviously, as you mentioned, you were the only female surrounded by all of these men who hardly spoke any English. One thing I wanted to ask is... in your book, you talked about them being always high on some kind of a buzz from the stuff called khat. What is that? Why is it so pervasive over there?

Jessica

Well, it's a narcotic, so it's addictive. It's very pervasive in the culture. I think it's pretty popular in northern Kenya and Ethiopia as well - they call it 'Miraa' in Kenya. It forms a paste, essentially, and it gets very bitter and very dry. Then, it makes you feel high. To counteract the bitterness and, like, the dryness, they drink this super sweet tea - a black tea with, like, some cardamom. A normal tea kettle size would, maybe, have 6 cups of white sugar. So, it's almost like syrup. This is a country where the average expectancy was 46 at that time. People were living on less than \$1 a day. So, like, their teeth were rotting out and people were dying from infections in their brain that started from their teeth because of the khat and the tea that they're drinking. It also makes you not hungry. And, it's very social - they sit around in khat circles, they chew, they talk about God-only-knows-what, politics, whatever. They chew and chew into the night. Then, when they're coming down off of it, they would fall asleep till noon or 1 PM - that was the one thing that you could predict and count on throughout the course of the whole thing. The khat runner would come and find us wherever we were. We lived outside during the entire ordeal. We were not put in a house or any kind of shelter. We weren't thrown into a hole. We just lived out in the desert. We sat under trees during the day and slept out in the open at night as they did, but they would come, like, in shifts or cycles - they would be there for 3 or 4 days and then go home, sleep, eat, get a shower, do whatever they needed to do, and then they would come back out. But we never got a break.

Scott

Were you wearing the same clothes every day or did you have a spare change of clothes?

Jessica

They ended up bringing me some, like, Somali dresses. I remember, like, a week into it, I washed my underwear and put them up on a bush to dry, but then somebody took them - I couldn't make them understand that I needed underwear. So, it was a bit of a challenge to make a bunch of men who are armed and want to hurt you - as the only woman - understand that you have certain hygienic needs.

Scott

Well, just the simple prospect of going to the bathroom - how did you manage that? I mean, obviously, you want to maintain some degree of privacy, but you're always being guarded.

Jessica

Yeah, I mean, it was, like, barbaric. I felt like an animal. Like, I would try to find the furthest nearest bush. I was trying to shower - not a shower but, like, a spit bath. Every couple of days, they would give me some water, like, in a diesel can that they use interchangeably with diesel and water for cooking and washing. So, trying to stand out in the middle of the desert behind a thorn bush surrounded by men to get yourself to feel remotely clean is quite a challenge.

Scott

And that's just the physical aspect of it. I mean, you've got to feel helpless not knowing what's going to happen or how long you're going to be there.

Jessica

Yeah. I think, at one point, Amnesty International define torture as being detained without knowing the ends. I mean, like, it really is mental torture to not know when this thing is going to end. I had cancer a couple of years ago, so I had to go through radiation and cancer treatment and I know that that's finite. I know that those treatments are going to end, so I can tick those off on the calendar. While it's deeply distressing and anxiety-producing, at least I know there's an end. But when you're in a situation where you're being detained or held hostage, you have no idea how long this thing is going to take. The reality is that they often take not weeks, not months, but years to resolve. In my situation - thank God, it wasn't ideological - they just wanted money, but they started the ransom demand at \$45 million. Like, what is that? This was happening at a time like Captain Phillips' - lots of these big container ships were being taken by pirates off the coast of it, like, in the Indian Ocean, and \$45 million... you got millions and millions of dollars of product on the ship, but we're just 2 aid workers. Like, no matter how hard we tried, we could not make them understand that we're just 2 people - like, no one's gonna pay for it. No one's even gonna pay a million dollars for us. We're gonna be out here for a really long time.

Scott

You're the 'wealthy American'. 'Americans are all full of money.'

Jessica

Well, I think it's very indicative of a culture like Somalia because it's still largely nomadic and also clan-based. So, if somebody in their clan was in trouble, then all they would do is take a collection of money, camels, or goats, and then they would all contribute because they were all family. So, they would say to me, "There's, like, 350 million Americans out there. All you need is 45 million to contribute \$1 and then you can go free." Yeah, that's never gonna happen.

Scott

Well, these guys are not hired for their IQ.

Jessica

Yeah, the guys on the ground were just there to guard - they are not the masterminds behind this, they're not the financiers - they're just there to make sure we don't run off.

Scott

So they're even stupider than the people who are in charge...

Jessica

Yeah. But that's the scary part, right? I think it's scarier to be held hostage by stupid people than it is by people who actually have their wits about them, because who knows what's going to happen? I mean, I'm always very clear about the fact that I loved working in Somalia and I felt very privileged. No one ever asked me to come and work there - it was my choice. So, I don't think that it's reflective of the culture, or the people, or the country - there are bad and stupid people everywhere.

Scott

That's true. In your book, you talked about how your creative imagination helped you get through each day. How did that work?

Jessica

Well, fortunately, I think I have a lot of good characteristics for being a hostage - I'm, like, a serial daydreamer. The thing that used to get me in trouble during school turned out to be my saving grace because I can spend a lot of time inside my own head, and that ended up being my lifeline to the point where it was like a thing to look forward to when I started getting up. I had mentioned that I'd lost my mom the year before all of this happened. We lost her very suddenly, very tragically, and I was still very much in the throes of grieving when all of this happened. I had been thinking about taking a break from work - going and sitting in an ashram in India or something for a couple of months, crying it all out, or finding myself, I don't know. I was feeling that I was at some sort of crossroads.

I woke up one day and pulled my mat back under the thorn bush or the tree or whatever I was sitting under, and it dawned on me that I had 3 things that I was probably never gonna have again in my life if I lived and made it out of this thing alive. I had oodles of time and I had nothing to do. I had a lot of solitude because when they would leave me alone for, like, days and weeks where no one would even talk to me - I call it, like, 'Solitary confinement.' But when I was in the right frame of mind, it could be really peaceful. So, I thought, "Well, maybe this is my chance. This is not exactly what I was thinking when thinking about going to go and have that meditative find-myself experience, but I am not one to waste an opportunity." So, I decided that I was going to make a work plan for myself and get really organized about how I was going to spend my daydreams. I decided to take my life in increments in my memories and start from the very first memory that I could remember which was when I was, like, 4 years old. I was gonna dissect the whole thing, I was gonna think about everything in the smallest detail that I possibly could, then I was going to analyze it. Like, why did that person say that? Why did my mom do that? Why did that make me feel that way? At the time when I was 32, I had been married before and divorced.

I had analyzed and realized so many things that took place in my life up until then. So, it was actually a really profoundly beautiful time to be able to look at my life and realize, "I actually had this amazing life up until then." I was also able to forgive some people and, metaphorically, asked for forgiveness. It was a deep, deep time of connection with myself. It was also - I would call it - my most important come-to-Jesus moment. I realized that the reason I had gotten into this whole mess was that I didn't stand up for myself, I didn't want to go on that trip but I let myself be pressured. Then, I was able to move forward in terms of what I was going to do next and how I was going to operate in my life if I got a chance to continue living it. So, that part was actually really interesting and I'll never have the opportunity to do that again. Yeah, hopefully not. Yeah.

Scott

Hopefully not.

Jessica

Hopefully not, yeah.

Scott

What was Erik, your husband, doing this whole time? I mean, he had to just be frantic.

Jessica

I think, largely, he felt responsible - like, he was the reason that I had gone to Somalia. Of course, he had to call my dad and tell him that I had been kidnapped. I think that was the hardest phone call he ever had to make in his life. My dad is a wonderful person and I think he made sure Erik knew right off the bat, like, "Just make certain decisions. You can't ever persuade her to do anything she doesn't want to do. So, we're not sitting here blaming you for this happening. This is just something that happened." I think he put all of his energy into banging down doors, banging his fists on tables, meeting with the embassies and the FBI, getting the organization to do what they needed to do, running the middle man, and communicating with my family. Fortunately, he's very good with people - like, that's his superpower. So, I could feel that while I was sitting there. I remember saying to Poul that Erik's a bulldog - if anybody is demanding answers and action on our behalf, it's him.

Scott

But being that, kind of, aggressive person wanting to just get it resolved had to be a little bit frustrating since it was being handled by the FBI and other people that he couldn't really do much on his own.

Jessica

No, but they were really good. I mean, at that point, Erik had been working in Somalia or with Somalia for, like, 15 or 16 years. So, he had a lot of contextual knowledge than even the people in the organization or the KNR negotiators. Like, he had a lot of contextual experience and knowledge that I think he was able to help.

Scott

He's a good resource.

Jessica

Yeah, yes, absolutely.

Scott

How long were you held before you were able to actually speak with Erik? Can you talk about that phone call?

Jessica

Yeah. I didn't know - I had lost track of time. It was actually Thanksgiving Day. So, I was taken on October 25, 2011. I'm not sure what day Thanksgiving was that year, but it was roughly a month after. We did get to speak for about 2 minutes. The guys on the ground that were holding us were giving us a really hard time because they didn't trust the family communicator, **Muhammad**, and they wanted to talk to our family. So, through the course of, I guess, some phone calls - I don't know how it happened - they arranged to put Erik on the phone with me and I was not emotional, I was very goal-oriented. Like, "I needed to get out of here, so I need you to do exactly what I'm telling you to do. You need to tell Mohammed to speak on behalf of our family or whatever it was that he wanted." I think I remember blurting out, "I love you. I'm gonna be okay, but we got to get this thing resolved. We gotta get through this thing." So, it wasn't extremely touching, I think.

Scott

I'm just thinking from his standpoint. That had to be encouraging knowing that she still got her spunkiness, so she must be, at least, partially, okay.

Jessica

Well, I think that was important for me to communicate because it's so hard to explain that you're okay, but they don't know. Like, on that Tuesday when you wake up, you feel mentally strong and that your body is okay, but you could have, like, your arm chopped off and sent to them in the mail. So, I just needed him to know - take the message back to my family - that all of your works and efforts are worth it and, like, I'm going to come out of this thing and I'm going to be okay.

Scott

How was your health degrading over time? That was a big concern, obviously...

Jessica

It actually ended up saving my life. Because of the lack of sanitary conditions, I have a thyroid condition and then I got a urinary tract infection. It got so bad that it moved into a kidney infection and, like, I need to be hospitalized. I needed IVs and antibiotics fast, but they wouldn't bring me a doctor or medicine - they only needed me alive enough so that they can cash me in. They don't need me comfortable, they don't need me happy. So, I was raging with fevers, hallucinating from fevers, and feeling so much pain. I couldn't walk - I was, like, crawling to a nearby bush sick. They just looked at me like I was, kind of, a source of entertainment - like I am a zoo animal or something. My last proof-of-life call was on January 16, 2012. We had another, like, family communicator on the phone and it was a woman named **Alex**. I told her, "You guys have to do something like pay the ransom. Like, I don't know what you need to do, but you need to do something because I'm not going to make it out of here alive. Like, I bet I've got 2-3 weeks max. I am seriously ill. I'm sleeping on the dirt, like, 20 hours a day because I'm passing out from the pain. You got to do something." But we all knew that there was nothing she could do.

Scott

And what you didn't know the whole time is that the US military was monitoring you and knowing about your health problems.

Jessica

Yeah. Obviously, I had no way of knowing. I probably had some sort of conceptualization that if something like this were to happen to military personnel, they would be able to locate them and whatnot, but we're just 2 aid workers, so no one knows we're here and no one cares. Like, our only hope of getting out of here is paying the ransom. Every once in a while, we would hear something like a motor up in the sky - it wasn't a plane. We thought for a while that it was maybe a generator from a ship, but we didn't feel like we were close to the sea either. We didn't know where we were the whole time. We're just out in the middle of nowhere. There was no ambient light at night, so we knew we weren't within 20 miles of a town, so we couldn't figure out what that sound was. Now, I know that it was surveillance drones trying to get our location, but I didn't even dare to hope that it was something like that.

Scott

Right. That would be too good to be true. If it were, you'd have to think, "Well, okay. If they know where I am, why haven't they come to get me already?" They knew that your health was degrading. As you said, your bad health was what actually saved you because that's what made the decision of "We got to do go now."

Jessica

Yeah. What set the wheels in motion was that last proof-of-life call on January 16. They took that information to Erik and, then, he took all my symptoms and whatever I said to my doctor in Nairobi, and the doctor was like, "Erik, you gotta get her out. If you don't get her out in the next couple of weeks, she's dead." So, he took that information to Matthew Espenshade, the FBI lead agent for the case who was based in Nairobi, who is just the most amazing human being in the whole world. He said that there was another agent in there - he told them what I said, looked at each other, and then they just walked out of the room. He didn't know what was gonna happen and when it was gonna happen, but he knew something was up.

Scott

Of course, you didn't know when it was gonna happen, either.

Jessica

No, I didn't know that it was even a possibility.

Scott

Right. Let's hear about that night. It was late at night and there was no moon - I think that was deliberate. The reason they chose that night was it was completely dark.

Jessica

Yeah. It was January 24, 2012. I was starting to feel pretty low mentally. I remember laying down on a mat. There were 2 stars that come out at the same time every night - I named 1 for my mom and I would talk to her, like, every night before I would fall asleep. This particular evening, I was like, "You got to do something. You gotta go and tell God that he needs to do something or else I'm gonna die. I miss you, but I'm not ready to meet you. I'd like to stay here on this earth and finish off this life." I fell asleep and woke up a couple of hours later, just feeling super, super sick. I tried to pull myself up off my mat and say the word 'Toilet', which is how we asked for permission to leave the mat. There were 9 guards on the ground that night. Every

single night - like, all the 92 nights before - at least one of the guards would be awake to make sure that we didn't run off or our camp wasn't attacked or whatever. That night, everybody was completely passed out - all 9 of them. I kept saying the word 'Toilet' but no one would get up. My need became too great, so I took a small penlight and started flashing it because I didn't want them to think that I had escaped if somebody did woke up because I was making a lot of noise.

I did what I needed to do, came back to my mat, rolled myself up in my blanket, and tried to go back to sleep, but I heard something in the grass. We were sleeping in, kind of, like, a clearing in the middle of this desert fields, and there's like tall grasses around us and stuff. I thought those were animals or something coming out. I was so weary, I was so tired, I was so sick, and I was thinking, like, "Great, now I have to contend with some sort of weird wild animal coming at me out here with no protection." I got up a couple of times to, kind of, like, see what was happening around but I couldn't see anything, so I rolled back up in my blanket. After about 30 seconds went by, the pirates sleeping on my left jumped up. I couldn't see anything because everything was clouded over - there was no moon, there were no stars - but I could, kind of, make out his face and sense that he is terrified. Then, he's screamed to all of the other guards to get up. These guys were shouting, screaming, being hit by bullets, and hitting the ground. Like, people were dying all around me and I was still laying on the ground and I was like, "Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh, god, oh god." I was thinking like, "I'm seriously not going to make it out of this thing alive. Goddammit, I'm not going to make it out of this thing alive!" I thought that, maybe, we're being taken by another group - maybe, it's Al-Shabaab. It never once crossed my mind that it could be help until I felt somebody grabbing my legs and shoulders and pulling the blanket away from my face - I was, like, trying to hold it up to protect myself. I heard this young American man's voice. He knows my name. He said, "Jessica, it's okay. We're the American military. You're safe. We're gonna take you home now." The blanket came down from my face and I, kind of like, struggled to sit up. I couldn't see clearly but I could make out some dark figures like masks. big people, men, whatever. I was just completely overtaken by shock.

All I could say over and over again is, "You're American?! You're American?!!" I just couldn't, like, make my mind compute what is happening. He kind of got down on my level and said, "We've been watching you for a really long time. We know how sick you've been." He has medicines and a bottle of clean water. One of them said, "Okay, we need to move. We need to get your shoes because you need to walk. Do you have any shoes?" I'm like, "I have no idea where my shoes are." He explained to me, "Okay, I'm gonna pick you up, put you over my shoulder, and just take off running. Just hold on." He scooped me up, threw me over his shoulder, and just took off running. I just remember looking at the ground and thinking, like, "Oh, my God. I am a school teacher from Ohio. How is this my life right now? What is happening?" He carried me to some space that's deemed, I guess, safe and put me down on the ground. My first question was, "Where's Poul? Did he make it out? Is he still alive?" He was sitting there. He leaned over to me, and he's like, "Jessica, do you know who these guys are?" "Poul, I really don't care. Whoever it is doesn't matter. They have gotten us out. We are gonna survive this thing." And he's like, "This is SEAL Team Six. Like, these are the guys that got Osama bin Laden." Like, WOW!!! I still just cannot wrap my brain around the complexity of the entire thing. I mean, it has been 10 years out and I'm still unraveling this whole thing. Like, every month, I hear something from somebody - like, over LinkedIn - who reaches out to me, and they're like, "I flew the helicopter," "I flew the plane there. The guys jumped out.," or "I was the medic." It was just, like, mind-boggling how many hundreds, if not thousands, of people were involved in this rescue mission - it's crazy!

Scott

So your name is probably on a lot of these military people's resumes.

Jessica

Oh, yeah. Like, my story is something that they use in training and stuff because almost everything was so aligned - like, it was a perfect operation. I think there were, like, 20-30 SEALs in on the ground - I don't even know for sure. Every single one of them came home. There were no casualties and no American lives lost. The hostages both returned. These guys are the best of the best. But still, like, you cannot predict all of the variables and crazy things that can go wrong. It was a textbook rescue - everything went off without a hitch.

Scott

So you were carried away to safety. I can understand you just couldn't quite process it. This actually happened after more than 3 months.

Jessica

I hadn't given up hope, but I also realized that I couldn't do much about my body - like my body was gonna give up. There was only so much I could do. The only thing I had control of was my mind.

Scott

I liked when you talked about - when you were in the helicopter - that first snack bar.

Jessica

Yeah. They were celebrating, Like, "Are you hungry? Do you want a Snickers bar? Do you want chips and salsa?" I couldn't remember if I was eating or not. I just remember I couldn't make any decisions, and that would be something that would follow me for a very long time. I was sitting there on the plane when the lights came up and I could, sort of, make sense of what was happening. One of them came over to me, got down on his knee, handed me a folded piece of fabric - I looked down and saw that it was an American flag - and he said, "Welcome home, Jessica." Then, I just had, like, this tidal wave of emotions - like, a puddle of tears - starting to sink in from what had really taken place, and then I'm actually alive and I'm gonna go home... Incredible...

Scott

I was really intrigued by the psychological aspects of your reunion with Erik - they limited that first face-to-face contact deliberately. What's behind that?

Jessica

I participated in the Department of Defense's Hostage Reintegration Program - it was completely voluntary. I figured that they've done this before - they got me out, they know what they're doing - so I had already committed to whatever it took to restore my mental health for if and when I get out. So I said, "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it." So, like, the first phone call with Eric was 5 minutes - that's all I got. I realized that 5 minutes is plenty, because 2 minutes almost felt like too much - like, he had so much to say and I just couldn't take it. The first meeting that we had was at a military base in Italy, where they had flown me and him in to reunite us. I was hospitalized for one hour. Then, the next day, we were able to have lunch together. Then, the next day, we had dinner. They were, like, chaperones making sure that I was okay and wasn't going to, like, go completely berserk and run out of the building - it was all for my support, mental health, and protection, and his too. In January, I was at the Joint Special

Operations Command talking to a team of psychologists about this experience because they wanted to know, like, what worked and what didn't work. I would say that it worked very well. You didn't think it sounds so great. You think you're just gonna want to be with your loved ones 24/7. But oh, my goodness, after spending so much time alone in solitary confinement, it's just too much, too intense, and you get so tired so quickly. So, I definitely recommend it to anybody coming back from captivity. I felt very lucky to be able to participate in it.

Scott

The night that you were rescued, your father got a phone call...

Jessica

Oh, yeah. Oh, that's such a story. It was the night of the State of the Union address - President Obama had given the State of the Union. My sister and my dad were actually in, like, downtown DC for meetings with the FBI, and they had not gone well, they were not feeling good, they were not feeling hopeful, there were people in the FBI that knew what was going to happen, what was taking place, but they weren't allowed to say anything to my family.

So, my family was in the dark that a rescue operation was going to be taking place. All they knew was I was going to be sitting there for the foreseeable future. My dad lives in central Virginia. He's not a city person, so he just wanted to get out of town. The victim assistance support team convinced my dad and sister to stay in a hotel downtown because traffic is bad, there was the State of the Union, etc. So, my dad and my sister were sitting in a hotel room in downtown DC when he got a phone call to confirm that it is indeed his phone number and that he needs to keep the line clear for the next hour. He's a phenomenal storyteller - I love hearing him tell any story, and this one is a particularly good one. My sister was like, "What do you think that was about?" My dad said, "Well, it's either really good or really bad." So, they just sat there in this hotel room in silence. Then, he kept getting these phone calls, like, 4 or 5 times, saying, "Is this a good number? Keep this line clear." Finally, he got a call in which they said, "The next voice you're gonna hear will be the President of the United States." Then, President Obama got on the phone and was like, "John, this is Barack Obama. I just wanted to call you and let you know that your daughter has been rescued. She's safe, she's alive, and she's coming home. As a father to 2 daughters. I just wanted to call and tell you father-to-father. I can't imagine what you've been through over these last few months, but this nightmare is over."

My sister was over there - she could hear what was going on and she was, like, freaking out. My dad was trying to tell her, like, "SHHHHH. Be quiet. I'm talking to the President of the United States." So, I think that was a pretty surreal moment for all of them. I was in the hospital in Djibouti when somebody told me that President Obama called my dad to let him know. I was like, "That can't be right. You don't know what you're talking about." Because I didn't understand the implications and the magnitude - I had no idea that I had hit the media and had become such a big thing.

Scott

That is just incredible. Since then, were you diagnosed with anything in particular like PTSD?

Jessica

Yeah.

Scott

How did you get through that?

Jessica

I would say that I'm still getting through it. It's just my life's journey - not a day goes by that I don't think about it. I took a break for a while because it has gotten too much. I went back to teaching in the traditional classroom, which was fine until it wasn't. My path has moved me back to telling this story in a different place, which has been very empowering. It wasn't until, like, a few years after the aftermath that I found this book written by, I believe, a journalist named Laurence Gonzales - the book is called 'Surviving Survival'. He talks about how difficult the aftermath of surviving actually is.

It was like, "Oh, my God, I felt so seen, I felt so understood, and I realized that I wasn't alone, that this is a thing when people experience a pretty significant trauma." Similarly, trying to reinvent yourself after something like that is its own trauma. So, it's been intense. It has not been easy. I lost my profession. I couldn't go back into the field and work. My organization was like, "Well, if you can't go back into the field, then we can't employ you." So, I left Africa and relocated to the US, which had never really been my plan. I've got this Swedish husband. We had a baby - I got pregnant 2 weeks after the rescue, which we joked around about the book being called 'Impossible Odds' - that was the impossible odds. Now, I've got this baby, I've got PTSD, I've got postpartum anxiety, and it was really, really hard. I think it wasn't until I really started talking openly about it that I found relief because when you keep things to yourself and don't talk about them, you feel more isolated, you feel more like a freak, and you feel more alone. Two years ago, I started a podcast called, "We should talk about that" with my co-host - mental health is a huge part of what we talked about - and I have found that to be such a cathartic project and experience for me because I'm not alone. I've met a few other people who have survived a kidnapping, but trauma is trauma and pain is pain. Everybody is surviving something.

Scott

We'll have links to your podcast titled "We should talk about that" and also your book. When you talk about finding it cathartic, I had so many guests on this podcast telling me the same thing - just telling it verbally to some other person is therapeutic and cathartic, and it's just such a big help. Did it help to write the book as well - just to get it all out there?

Jessica

I think so. Yeah, I do. We wrote it pretty soon after. We worked with a ghostwriter, Anthony Flacco, as well, so, that was helpful. Well, I wrote parts of it - I was in the middle of having a baby and everything and couldn't have written the whole thing by myself.

Scott

Well, you want to do it while the details were still in your head, too, right?

Jessica

Yeah. Because there's a lot of stuff I don't remember anymore. Originally, we just wrote it because there are so many people that we can never possibly thank in person. Also, we wanted it written down before we forgot those details and for our son to have. I never, like, thought that it would lead me to a professional speaking career or teaching professional speaking - like, none of that. I just want to get the details out and then be done with it. A lot of your guests said that it's a lot of work turning your pain into purpose, but it's also very, very rewarding and healing - this is my life's path.

Scott

It's worth the effort.

Jessica

Yeah, I think so.

Scott

You mentioned you do public speaking. I don't work for a company - I'm self-employed - but if I work for a company, and they had had you come in and tell your story, that would just be an amazing experience. Is that who you normally speak to? Where do you usually go?

Jessica

Yeah. All kinds of companies and associations, a lot of times. COVID has definitely put a dent in the speaking opportunities. A lot of organizations have conferences and they want somebody to kick it off, close it off, inspire, or motivate. I did a TEDx talk in 2020 and it's called, "Change is Your Proof of Life." So, a lot of what I talk about is when things aren't changing, we're not really living. So, I talked about how change can actually be an opportunity for us to reinvent ourselves and to bring us to our life's purpose and all of the experiences that I've had. So, I did that. I also teach professional speaking. I mainly work with women because I feel, like, a large part of my story is about the fact that I didn't exercise my voice - like, I didn't stand up for myself. So, I think it's really important for women to feel empowered especially if they want to get up on the stage and get paid to speak. There weren't enough women doing that too. So, I have been in the industry for, I guess, 9 years now. I've teamed up with another survivor - a Boston Marathon bombing survivor - Rebekah Gregory. We have, like, a group coaching program for women. Then, I also do one-on-one coaching for women who want to tell their stories and create a business and a brand out of the hardship that they've experienced, because you really can turn it into something that helps a lot of people and make a living doing it.

Scott

You've obviously done that. That's amazing. Well, you've got your podcast, your public speaking, and your book. I read the book. Obviously, in the book, you got a chance to go into a lot more detail than what we covered here in the podcast. So, I would highly recommend that. Is there any part of this that we haven't covered that you want to include?

Jessica

Yeah, I hang out on Instagram or LinkedIn a lot. So, you can find me at @jessicacbuchanan. My website is jessbuchanan.com. I love interacting with people and book clubs. I'm happy to answer any questions and the whole thing. So yeah, reach out.

Scott

As I was putting together this episode, I reached out to President Obama for a comment. I really wanted to get his perspective on making that phone call to Jessica's father, to finally let him know that she was safe and coming home. Wouldn't you have loved to be there and see his reaction to hear that news? I haven't heard back yet from the former President, but if I do I'll include that in a future episode.

If you liked this episode, there was a previous episode that you might also enjoy. This one also involved someone trying to rescue a family member, but not because of a kidnapping. Acaimie had to go on a rescue mission to get her husband, because he had fallen into a volcano –

Acaimie

I heard, like, a really, really faint help. Then, I called again because I wasn't sure if that was what I heard. Then, I heard it again. Then, at that point in time, I turned around, faced the mountain, and started climbing down as quickly as I could. I started screaming his name because I was pretty certain by that point in time that he actually called out - it was, like, an extremely desperate-sounding, weak-sounding, gasping-for-air help that I heard from him.

Scott

That's episode 36, called Acaimie rescued her husband. Great story.

And if you haven't yet joined our Facebook listener group, what are you waiting for? We've got around 2300 people there, and they all listen to this podcast just like you do, so we have lots to talk about! And a lot of the previous guests on the podcast are in there too, and they can answer questions you might have about their story. So we're all waiting for you to come over and join in the discussion – just go to [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/facebook).

And now, we have this week's Listener Story. This one is from a friend of mine, Eric Gray. He's also a podcaster, and when you hear his voice you'll probably think "Okay, I'd like to hear more of that!" His show is called Dumb People with Terrible Ideas, and if you like humor combined with sarcasm, you'll enjoy it. Today, Eric tells the story of the time his work got him an invitation to the White House.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks!

(Listener Story)**Eric**

I attended a Christmas party at the White House. I received an invitation in the mail - there was calligraphy on the outside. The return address said "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue" and I immediately thought that someone was playing a prank. Inside was an invitation that directed me to call the Social Secretary. I had to leave some personal information there for me and my guest so that they could vet us beforehand and make sure that we weren't a security risk. I told my girlfriend, "Last month, I brought you to Olive Garden. Next month, I'm bringing you to the White House." At the East Wing entrance, it's a lot like the TSA checkpoint at an airport. There were tons of Secret Service agents - some were in uniform, some were not. There's a long list of things that you can't bring in. The people who had accidentally left a lighter, car keys, or whatever in their pocket, they still allowed them in because we were reminded that we were guests, and that was pretty cool.

Once inside, we walked up some stairs. Then, we were on the first floor of the White House. Immediately, you start recognizing things that you've seen on TV - like, the long hallway where I remember Reagan walking down to a podium to address the nation, or the East Room where they've held concerts, press events, and even funerals there. We took a million pictures and it really didn't seem like there was much security. There was a guard or two that was stationed at the staircase, which led up to the President's living quarters - the bedrooms and stuff - but other than that, we had, kind of, run of the place, at least on that floor. Every president gets to decorate the White House as they choose. At that time, the President had a dog named Bo. So, there were little Portuguese Water Dog figurines of Bo everywhere. There were pictures, stuffed doggies, and stuff that's all mingled in with portraits of Abe Lincoln and John F. Kennedy on the walls. They were 2 buffets filled with shrimps, finger sandwiches, champagne, and stuff to

munch on. I learned later that these types of parties are paid for by the president himself - not the government - because a Christmas party isn't considered official business. Our favorite room was the red room. It's a small parlor area that was painted in such a rich deep maroon color. I googled it later and found out that it was Nancy Reagan's favorite room too. That's also where my girlfriend spilled red wine on an antique couch.

The President had an event in North Carolina that day. Halfway through the party, he landed on the South Lawn. I was looking out the window as he left the helicopter, walked into the White House, and gave us a short speech in the foyer right behind the front door that you see on TV, which you never see open. It was just really informal - it's his home after all. The First Lady said, "Hello", told us to clean up before we left - which was a joke - I thought that was kind of cute. The President mingled with us for a bit and then said, "I gotta get back to work." So, we wound up staying for another hour - just 200 folks all meandering throughout the people's house, the White House. We felt like the luckiest people in the world for just a little bit. Shortly afterward, I married my girlfriend. I think the White House Trip really sealed the deal.