

## THE BIRTHDAY GIRL

It all happened so quickly that it was only after his abductors had shoved the sack over his head and made him lie down on the floor of the van that Anthony Freeman realised he hadn't said a word. He hadn't begged, pleaded or threatened, he'd just followed their shouted instructions as he'd half crawled, half fallen from the rear of the wrecked Mercedes. He was still in shock from the crash and he'd stumbled towards the van as his captors prodded him with the barrels of their Kalashnikovs.

It was like some crazy, surreal nightmare. Only minutes earlier he'd been standing outside the Holiday Inn, hunched into his sheepskin jacket and wondering whether the far-off rumbling sound was approaching thunder or artillery fire. The Mercedes had arrived on time, rattling along the road with its rear window missing and its licence plates removed. The driver was the man who'd picked him up at Split Airport several days earlier and driven him overland to Sarajevo, taking the dirt road used by the Red Cross to ferry supplies to the besieged city. Zlatko, his name was, father to six children, three of whom had died in the conflict. He'd refused to allow Freeman to help him load the bulky metal suitcase into the boot. It had been Zlatko who'd told Freeman the names of the abandoned villages they'd driven by, some of the ruins still smoking in the cold winter air, and it was Zlatko who'd explained that he'd taken the licence plates off the car to give them a better chance of getting through the many roadblocks. There was no way of knowing in advance who was manning the barricades and a wrong licence plate could be reason enough for a hail of bullets.

Zlatko had done everything possible to avoid the truck as it braked, and if he'd been a less skilful driver the crash would have been a lot worse. As it was, Zlatko's head had slammed into the steering wheel hard enough to stun him, and he'd been unconscious when the doors had been wrenched open. The kidnappers had raked his body with bullets from their assault rifles, the noise deafening in the confines of the car.

There were five of them, maybe six. All Freeman could remember were the black ski masks and the Kalashnikovs and the fact that he'd evacuated his bowels when they'd dragged him from the back seat, screaming at him in heavily accented English.

Freeman couldn't understand what they wanted from him. It wasn't as if he was in Beirut, where hostage-taking was a way of life. He was in Sarajevo; it was snipers and artillery attacks that you had to watch out for. It didn't make sense. The sack smelled of mouldy potatoes and something was crawling across his left cheek but he couldn't get to it because they'd tied his wrists behind his back with rope. His damp trousers were sticking to his skin. He could barely breathe and the musty smell made him want to gag.

Freeman jumped as whatever it was that was crawling around the inside of the sack bit him on the neck. He tried to move, to ease his discomfort, but a foot stamped down between his shoulder-blades and a voice hissed at him to lie still. He lost all track of time as he lay face down on the floor of the van. Eventually he heard his captors talking to each other and the van made a series of sharp turns and came to a halt. Uncaring hands pulled him out. His cramped legs gave way and as he slumped to the ground the men cursed. More hands clawed at his legs and he was carried bodily.

He heard the crunch of boots on broken glass, then the sounds of a door being thrown open. The footsteps became muffled and he realised he was being carried across a carpeted floor, and then he heard the sound of bolts being drawn back and he was hustled down a flight of wooden stairs. More bolts rattled and without warning he was thrown forward. His legs were still weak and he fell to the ground, his chest heaving from the effort of breathing through the thick, foul-smelling sackcloth. He heard the door crash shut behind him and the grate of rusty bolts and then he was alone in the cellar, more alone than he'd ever been in his life.

The doorbell rang just as Katherine Freeman stepped into the shower and she cursed. She stood under the steaming hot spray and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the water as it cascaded over her skin. The doorbell rang again, more urgently this time, and she knew

whoever it was wouldn't go away. She climbed carefully out of the shower stall and dried herself with a large pink towel. Downstairs the dog barked, but it was a welcoming yelp rather than a warning growl. Katherine checked herself in the mirror. She'd tied her shoulder-length blonde hair up so that she wouldn't get it too wet in the shower and she shook it free. "This had better be important," she told her reflection. The last thing she wanted was to go downstairs and find two earnest young men in grey suits asking her if she'd been saved.

She pursed her lips and examined the skin around her neck. "Katherine Freeman, you sure look good for a thirty-five-year-old broad," she said, and stuck out her tongue. She threw the towel into a large wicker basket and picked up a purple bathrobe. The doorbell rang again as she ran down the stairs. "I'm coming, I'm coming," she called. If it was Mormons, God help them, she thought. Buffy, her golden retriever, was sitting by the front door, her tail swishing from side to side. "A smart dog would have opened the door," said Katherine, and Buffy chuffed in agreement.

Katherine yanked the door open to find Maury Anderson standing on the porch. He was wearing a plaid sports jacket and brown trousers and his tie looked as if it had been knotted in a hurry. "Maury, I wasn't expecting you," she said, frowning. Anderson said nothing, and Katherine suddenly realised that something was wrong. Her hand flew up to her throat. "Oh God, it's Tony, isn't it? What's happened? Oh my God, what's happened?" Her voice rose and Anderson stepped forward to put his hands on her shoulders.

"It's okay," he said.

"He's dead, isn't he?" She began to shake and Buffy growled, sensing that something was wrong.

"No, he's not dead, I promise you, he's not dead. As far as I know he's not even hurt," Anderson said. His voice was quiet and soothing, as if he were trying to comfort an injured child.

Katherine pushed him away. "What do you mean, as far as you know? Maury, what's happened? Tell me."

"Let's go inside, Katherine. Let's sit down."

Katherine's robe had fallen open but neither she nor Anderson was aware of her nakedness. Anderson closed the door and held her arm as he led her to one of the couches that straddled the fireplace. He sat her down and then without asking he went over to the drinks cabinet and poured her a large measure of brandy with a splash of Coke. He handed it to her and she cupped it in both hands. She looked up at him, still fearing the worst.

"Tony's been kidnapped," Anderson said quietly.

The statement was so surprising that it took several seconds for it to register. Katherine had been sure that her husband had been involved in a traffic accident. Kidnappings happened to politicians or millionaires, not the boss of a struggling defence contractor. "Kidnapped?" she repeated. "You mean the Mafia or something?"

"No, not the Mafia," Anderson said. He sat down on the sofa, his hands clasped in his lap. "Terrorists are holding him hostage."

"Terrorists? In Italy?" Katherine remembered reading about terrorist groups in Italy who'd killed businessmen, shot them in the head and left them in their cars. Her heart raced.

Anderson took a deep breath. "He was in Sarajevo, Katherine."

"What the hell was he doing in Sarajevo?" She took a large mouthful of the brandy and Coke and gulped it down. There was a pewter cigarette case on the coffee table. She opened it and took out a cigarette. Her hand shook as she lit it.

"He was there to demonstrate our mine clearance system. We were putting together a deal."

"But he told me he was in Rome. He called me yesterday morning."

"I know, I know. He flew to Split and then drove to Sarajevo. It's a long story, but the upshot is that he's been taken hostage by Bosnian terrorists."

"What do they want?" Her voice was wavering and she fought to keep it steady.

"I don't know. All I've had is a phone call. They said we weren't to speak to the police and that we'd be contacted with their demands. If we call in the authorities, they'll kill him."

Katherine's hands shook so much that her drink spilled. Anderson took the glass from her hands. She grabbed at his arm. "What do we do, Maury? Tell me, what do we do?"

Anderson looked at her levelly. "That's up to you, Katherine," he said. Buffy whined and put her head on Katherine's knee.

"The FBI can't help us?" Katherine asked.

"It's out of their jurisdiction," Anderson said. "We'd have to go to the State Department."

"So let's do that."

"Katherine, Tony shouldn't even be in Serbia, never mind doing business there. There's a UN embargo."

"So? Tony's still an American citizen. The State Department has to get him back."

"Actually, the fact that he's Scottish makes it more complicated."

"Damn it, Maury. He's my husband. He's got a Green Card. The State Department has to take care of him."

"There's a war being fought over there. It's a shambles. No one's sure who's fighting who. We're not even sure who the bad guys are."

"Goddamn it, Maury, what was Tony doing there? What the hell was he doing there?" Her voice broke and she began to sob uncontrollably. She stubbed out the cigarette. Anderson took her in his arms and held her, tight.

"He was trying to help the firm," Anderson said. "We're desperate for contracts, you know that."

Katherine dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "I can't believe he didn't mention that he was going to Sarajevo."

"We didn't know until he was in Rome. The Serbs insisted on seeing him on their territory."

"Maury, this doesn't make any sense. I thought there was an exclusion zone or something around Sarajevo."

"Yeah, there is. He had to fly to a place called Split and then drive overland. The Serbs insisted, Katherine. We had to do it."

"We?" Katherine said. "We? What do you mean? I don't see you out there."

Anderson ignored her angry outburst. "We needed the contract," he said. "He probably didn't want to worry you. But as you know we're having cash-flow problems and we have to take orders from wherever we can."

Katherine pushed him away. "But you said there was a UN embargo? Doesn't that mean we can't sell to the Serbs?"

Anderson shrugged. "There are ways around all blockades," he said. "There are middlemen in Europe who'll handle it. Everybody's doing it. Not so long ago the Russians sold 360 million dollars' worth of weapons to them."

"Yes, but we're not Russians," Katherine said. "We're an American company."

Anderson sighed. "Look, the Russians were selling T-55 tanks and anti-aircraft missiles, serious weaponry. We're just talking about a few mine clearance systems. That's all."

"But you're saying that the authorities won't help us because Tony shouldn't have been there in the first place?"

"That's right," Anderson said. "But you're missing the point. We can't get help from anyone. If we do and the terrorists find out, they'll kill him."

Katherine closed her eyes, fighting the urge to slap Anderson across the face. "Damn you, Maury," she hissed. "What have you done?"

There were six guards taking it in turns to watch over Freeman, and over his weeks in captivity he'd made some sort of contact with them all. Freeman knew that the psychiatrists referred to it as the Stockholm Effect, when a hostage begins to form a relationship with his captors, but he also knew that there was a more fundamental reason for his need to communicate with his guards – sheer boredom. They allowed him no books or newspapers, no television or radio, and for long periods he was left alone, chained to a disused boiler in the freezing-cold basement.

Four of the men appeared to speak no English at all and communication with them was restricted to nods and gestures, but even their surly grunts were better than the hours of mind-numbing isolation. The fifth man's name was Stjepan, and he appeared to be the leader of the group. He was in his early twenties, thin and wiry with deep-set eyes that seemed to stare at Freeman from dark pits either side of a hooked nose. He spoke reasonable English but slowly and with such a thick accent that often he had to repeat himself to make himself understood. Stjepan told Freeman why he was being held hostage, and what would happen to him if the group's demands were not met. On the second day of his captivity, Stjepan had Freeman's aluminium suitcase brought down into the basement and demanded that he show him how to work the equipment it contained. Freeman had complied, though Stjepan's limited English meant it took several hours. The equipment was then carefully repacked into its case and taken back upstairs. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Stjepan had punched Freeman in the face, hard enough to split his lip.

A Sony video camera was brought down into the cellar and Freeman was handed a badly typed script to read. As he struggled with the poor grammar and inept vocabulary of the statement, he realised that the punch had probably been planned in advance to give more authenticity to the video, but the thought didn't make it hurt any the less. Freeman asked if he could record a personal message to his wife and Stjepan had agreed. When he'd finished Freeman was given a plate of watery stew and left alone.

While they waited for a response to the video, Stjepan was an occasional visitor to the basement, and Freeman felt it was because the young man wanted to practise his English. There was no further violence, which reinforced Freeman's belief that the punch in the face had been for effect rather than to punish him, but Stjepan always kept his assault rifle close by and left Freeman in no doubt that he was prepared to use it.

During his hours alone in the basement, Freeman spent a lot of time thinking about his wife and son, and it seemed that the more he replayed the memories the stronger they became. He began to recall events and conversations that he had thought were long forgotten, and as he sat on the cold concrete floor he wept for the life that had been taken from him. He missed his wife and he missed his son.

He lost track of time after just a few days. The basement was without windows and illuminated by a single bulb which hung from the ceiling by a frayed wire. Sometimes it was on but usually he was in darkness. Electricity was as scarce as medical supplies in the war-torn city. His meals came at irregular intervals, so he had no way of knowing what time, or day, it was.

The wait for news of the Bosnian's demands seemed interminable. Stjepan said that the tape was being sent over to the United States because they wanted to deal directly with Freeman's company. Freeman knew that made sense: the US government prohibited the sort of deal he'd been planning to sign with the Serbian Forces and he doubted that they would want to negotiate with Bosnian guerrillas. Once Maury Anderson heard that he was in trouble, Freeman knew he'd move heaven and earth to get him out. If anyone was to blame for Freeman's predicament it was Anderson and his insistence that Freeman fly to the former Yugoslavia to find new markets for the minefield clearing system they'd developed. NATO forces had turned him down flat, saying that they were developing their own system, and the only real European interest had come from the Serbian forces. A representative of the Serb military had made contact with Freeman in Rome and asked him to fly to Split for a demonstration. Freeman had wanted to refuse and had called Anderson in Baltimore to tell him as much. That was when his partner had broken the news of yet another US Army contract that had fallen through. The workforce of almost two hundred men was depending on Freeman, and if he didn't come up with a European contract soon almost half of them would have to be laid off. CRW Electronics was a family firm, founded by Freeman's father-in-law, and Freeman knew every one of the employees by name. Anderson had put him in an impossible position. He had no choice but to go.

Twelve hours later he was in a hotel in Split meeting a German middle-man who knew how to slip through the US trade blockade, for a price. Everything had been done in secrecy, including getting the equipment into the country on a mercy relief convoy, and Freeman had no idea how the Bosnians had discovered what he was up to. He'd asked Stjepan, but the man had refused to answer.

Stjepan was more forthcoming on his own background. Over the course of several days, he told Freeman that he had been fighting since Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence in June 1991, splitting the Balkans into warring factions. He was a Muslim and his parents had been killed by Serbs, though he refused to go into details. His sister, Mersiha, was also one of Freeman's guards and more often than not it was the young girl who brought his food and emptied the plastic bucket that they made him use as a toilet. Unlike Stjepan, Mersiha refused to talk to Freeman. At first he assumed that she couldn't speak English, because no matter what he said to her she glared at him as if she wished he were dead, and some days she would put his food just out of reach and later take it away, untouched.

Freeman waited until Stjepan seemed in a relaxed mood before asking him about his sister. He said that she had been particularly hard hit by the death of their parents, and that she could speak some English. Their mother had been a schoolteacher, he said. Freeman asked Stjepan why he had the young girl with him but Stjepan shrugged and said there was nowhere else for her to go.

Mersiha's black hair was tied back in a ponytail and her face was always streaked with dirt but there was no disguising her natural prettiness. Freeman knew that she'd be a lot prettier if she smiled and it became almost a compulsion, the urge to crack her sullen exterior and expose the real girl beneath. He greeted her each time she came down the steps, and thanked her when she put his food close enough for him to reach. He even thanked her whenever she emptied his plastic bucket, and he always used her name, but no matter how pleasant he tried to be, her expression never altered. Eventually he could stand it no more and he asked her point blank why she was so angry with him. His question seemed to have no more effect than his pleasantries, and Freeman thought that maybe she hadn't understood, but then she turned to him, almost in slow motion, and pointed her Kalashnikov at his stomach. The gun seemed huge in her small hands, but she handled it confidently and he watched in horror as her finger tightened on the trigger. He cowered as the young girl's lips parted into a grimace of hatred and contempt. "I hope they let me kill you," she hissed, and jabbed at him with the barrel of the gun as if it had a bayonet on the end. She looked as if she was going to say something else but then the moment passed and she regained her composure. She turned to go, but before she went back up the stairs she kicked his bucket to the far side of the basement, well beyond the reach of the chain.

The next time Freeman saw Stjepan he asked him why his sister seemed to hate him so much. Stjepan shrugged and in broken English said that he didn't want to talk about his sister. And he warned Freeman not to antagonise her. Freeman nodded and said he understood, though he wasn't sure that he did. He asked Stjepan how old the girl was and the man smiled. She'd be thirteen years old the following day.

As soon as she came down the stairs the next day, carrying a plate of bread and cheese, Freeman wished her a happy birthday in her own language, trying to pronounce it exactly as Stjepan had told him. She showed no reaction as she put the tin plate on the floor and pushed it towards him with her foot, covering him all the time with the Kalashnikov. Switching back to English, he told her that he had wanted to get her a present but that he hadn't been able to get to the shops. Her face remained impassive, but at least she was listening to him and her finger remained outside the trigger guard. Freeman began to sing 'Happy Birthday' to her, his voice echoing off the walls of his prison. She looked at him in disbelief, a worried frown on her face as if she feared that he'd gone crazy, then she realised what he was doing. When she smiled, it was as if the sun had come streaming into the basement.

Maury Anderson's office was like the man himself – showy, pretentious even, and definitely built for comfort. Katherine walked across the plush green carpet and sat down on the imported sofa which curved around one corner of the room. It was the best office in the building, with its view of the woods and fields, and no expense had been spared on its furnishings. It was the office that the company use to impress its clients. Her husband's office was in stark contrast, a small cubicle overlooking the car park with a threadbare carpet, cheap teak veneered furniture and one sagging couch.

Katherine studied Anderson as she lit a Virginia Slim. He was pacing up and down in front of his massive eighteenth-century desk, rubbing his hands together. He was dressed as if he were going to a funeral: a black suit, starched white shirt, sombre tie and gleaming black shoes. "You said you'd heard from the kidnappers," Katherine said, crossing her legs.

"Uh-huh," Anderson grunted. "It arrived by Federal Express an hour ago."

Katherine looked across at the large-screen television and video recorder which was normally used to show the firm's promotional films to clients. "A video?"

Anderson stopped pacing. Katherine had never seen him so tense. She wondered how bad it could be. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

Katherine shook her head. "Just show me the video, Maury," she said. She took a long drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke out through tightly pursed lips.

"You'd better prepare yourself, Katherine. He doesn't look too good."

Katherine nodded curtly and Anderson pressed the 'play' button. The screen flickered and then Tony was there, sitting on a stool and holding a sheet of paper that looked as if it had been torn from a child's exercise book. He was staring at the camera, then he jumped at a whispered command. He began to read from the note.

"I am held by Bosnian forces who are struggling against invaders from Serbia. The Serbs are killing our country like Hitler in Europe." Tony grimaced at the unwieldy English and looked off-screen. A harsh whisper told him to go on. "Anyone who trades with the Serbian invaders is an enemy of the people of Bosnia and will be treated so. If I am to be released, you must agree not to sell your weapon to the Serbs."

"Weapon?" Katherine said. Anderson held up a hand telling her to keep quiet until the end of the message.

"As compensation for breaking the United Nations embargo, you will give the Bosnian forces fifty of the equipment." Tony broke off from reading and looked at the camera. "They mean fifty of the MIDAS systems, Maury. They'll want the complete kits." The man standing behind the camera told Tony to keep to the script, but Tony insisted that he had to explain what was meant so that there'd be no misunderstanding. The off-screen voice grudgingly agreed. "They also want a quarter of a million dollars in cash, Maury. When it and the equipment is delivered to our contact in Rome, I'll be released," Tony continued. His voice faltered. "If this doesn't happen, I'll be killed. This video is proof that I'm alive and well. You'll be contacted within the next few days so that arrangements can be made."

The screen flickered as if the camera had been switched off and then Tony reappeared, looking directly into the camera. It felt to Katherine as if he was staring right at her and she shivered. "Katherine, I love you," he said. "Please don't worry, this will work out all right, I promise." His hand went up to his bruised and unshaven face and he smiled thinly. "Don't let this upset you. I cut myself shaving," he said. He smiled, and for a moment it seemed almost genuine. "They're treating me okay, and if Maury does as they ask they say I'll be released unharmed. I think they mean it, so just hang in there. I'll be back before you know it."

A whispered command made him turn to his right and Katherine got a closer look at his battered face. "Oh my God," she whispered. "What have they done to you?"

"Just one more minute," Tony pleaded, then he turned back to the camera. "Don't even think about coming over here, Katherine. It's not safe. They'll probably release me in Split and I'll fly to Europe, Rome maybe. I always promised you a trip to Rome, remember? I love you, Katherine, and..."

The screen went blank in mid-sentence. Katherine turned to Anderson. "Have they been in touch yet?"

Anderson shook his head. "No. Like I said, the video's only just arrived. I'll stay here night and day until they call."

"He's in a terrible state, Maury."

"I think it looks worse than it is. They haven't let him wash or shave."

"Maury, he's been beaten."

Anderson went behind his desk and sat down. "I don't know what to do, Katherine."

Katherine realised she'd finished her cigarette. She stubbed the butt in a crystal ashtray and lit another. "Do we have the equipment?"

Anderson nodded. "Sure. We were planning to sell them to the Serbs. They're all ready to go, complete with Serbo-Croat instruction manuals."

Katherine blew a tight plume of smoke up to the ceiling. "So we do as they say."

"You realise that with the cash we're talking about a million dollars, give or take?" Anderson said.

Katherine's eyes hardened. "And you realise that we're talking about my husband," she said coldly. "Give or take."

Anderson held her glance for several seconds, then he nodded. "I'll make the arrangements," he said quietly.

"Do that, Maury," Katherine said. "Do whatever it takes."