

Experience

A murderer held me hostage

The story was all over the news that spring morning 12 years ago. It didn't sound real - a man had escaped from an Atlanta courtroom, killing a judge and two others, and was on the loose somewhere in the city.

I was shocked by the reports but I wasn't paying too much attention at the time; I was busy moving flat. That evening, I finished my waitressing shift and busied myself unpacking boxes. I made a quick trip to buy some cigarettes. It was 2am, but I lived in a safe neighbourhood.

Unlocking my front door, I heard a noise behind me and spun round just as a man rushed towards me with a gun. As I screamed, he covered my mouth with his hand and pushed me through the open door: "Scream again and I'll have to kill you."

"Please," I cried. "I have a little girl. Her dad was killed two years ago; I'm all she has left."

This was all true - my husband, Mack, had been killed in a knife attack and I'd turned to drugs to blot out the pain. While I was pulling my life together, my daughter was living nearby with my aunt.

By now the man was stalking through my apartment. "Do you know who I am?" he said.

I shook my head.

"Haven't you been watching the news?"

Of course - the man I'd seen on television all day; the man they were calling the Courthouse Killer.

"I'm meeting my daughter tomorrow," I said. "Will I be able to leave to see her?"

"No," he snapped.

He made me sit in the bath and pointed the gun at my chest. I remember feeling overcome with sadness that my daughter would lose me, too.



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But then he started talking. He told me he'd been waiting to stand trial for rape. "I was falsely accused," he said.

He asked my name and I felt a flare of hope. I knew if he saw me as a person, rather than a threat, I'd have a chance of getting out alive.

"I'm Ashley," I told him. "My daughter is Paige. Do you have any children?" He told me he had a little boy, born just a few days earlier. He sounded proud but sad, too, as if he knew now that he'd never see him.

The man turned on the television. The news was full of reports of his escape. He began riffling through my books, picking up a self-help title. I started reading him excerpts. We chatted about all kinds of things and I even cooked him blueberry pancakes. For some reason, he trusted me.

"You know you need to turn yourself in," I told him. "You've killed people and you have to pay for what you did." He didn't reply, but he didn't get angry either.

More than seven hours had passed when he asked, "What time do you have to leave to see your little girl?"

"About now."

"Go," he told me. "And please tell Paige I said hello."

"Is there anything I can do while you're gone?" he added, as I went out the front door.

"You could hang that mirror for me," I replied.

I drove several blocks before I felt safe enough to pull over and call the police. Once they were convinced that it wasn't a hoax, they made me return to the apartment block. By the time I got there, Swat teams had surrounded it and helicopters buzzed overhead.

I watched as the man came out of my flat, waving one of my white T-shirts. I later discovered he'd hung the mirror, just as I'd asked.

Soon after, I packed up my flat and moved in with my aunt. I never touched drugs again.

A year later, Paige and I moved into our own flat. At the same time, I met up with an old friend, Daniel. We married in 2007, and the following year I testified against the Courthouse Killer. I was too scared to look at him, but my family told me his face softened when he saw me.

He was sentenced to life, without possibility of parole.

Paige is 13 now and has a one-year-old brother. I'm working as a radiology technician and I also do a lot of public speaking. In some ways I'm glad I was held hostage that night. If I hadn't been there to calm the man down, he might have continued on his killing rampage - and without that wake-up call, it might have taken me years to pull my life together.

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Do you have an experience to share?
Email experience@guardian.co.uk