

IN THE PRESTON CROWN COURT

R

v

SARAH WILLIAMS AND KATRINA WALSH

SENTENCING REMARKS

**Mr Justice Turner**

Sarah Williams, over a period of about eighteen months you plotted the murder of a woman whose only crime was to love the man you wanted for yourself. But let no one make the mistake of thinking that this was a crime of passion. It was a crime of obsession, of arrogance, of barbarity but, above all, it was a crime of pure evil. And over that period of eighteen months of scheming you found in Katrina Walsh both a fellow spirit and enthusiastic participant.

You, Walsh, are every bit as morally degenerate as Williams. No wonder you have been the best of friends over so many years. You have so much in common being not merely indifferent to the suffering you inflict on others but positively revelling in it. The evidence in this case as a whole and your diary entries, in particular, Walsh, make me sure that your motive in getting involved was the depraved satisfaction to be gained from helping to kill another human being. You knew all along that this was no game or fantasy. Sadie Hartley died for your amusement.

Of course, the plot involved many labyrinthine twists and turns but, as you were both fully aware, this was no fiction. On the contrary, it was, from an early stage, leading to one and only one conclusion: the well-rehearsed and savage

butchery of a blameless woman. The meandering and over-elaborate planning served to heighten your pleasure by deliciously postponing your ultimate and inevitable gratification. Doubtless, the features of secret agent style intrigue carried with them elements of fantasy but this was no harmless world of make-believe it was a game of death.

The first recorded discussions between you concerning the option of killing Sadie Hartley took place as long ago as August 2014 and I am satisfied that your diary, Walsh, correctly refers at that time to “endless murder plots for Ian’s other half”. When sending vile letters to Sadie Hartley failed to break up her relationship with Ian Johnson you, Williams, continued to pursue him. The first concrete plan to kill Sadie involved trying to recruit your ex-husband, Walsh, to act as a paid hitman. There can be no doubt that this was no game. It progressed no further only because Kevin Walsh did not want to get involved.

By October of last year, however, you were taking the first steps towards putting into place the plan which was to lead inexorably on to the murder. You bought a tracking device to put on Ian’s car to find out where he was going. You made a special trip all the way the Darmstadt in Germany to buy a stun gun which you knew to be illegal in England and celebrated the victory of smuggling it through customs. You knew then that the only purpose of the stun gun would be to render Sadie Hartley helpless so she would put up no resistance as she was being hacked to death. I am in no doubt that her murder was planned and rehearsed down to the finest detail.

I have read the dignified and poignant statements of Harry and Charlotte Hartley, Ian Johnson and Julie Taylor. They reveal Sadie Hartley to have been a loving mother, faithful partner and a woman dedicated to achieving and promoting advancements and improvement in the provision of intensive care medicine and in the areas of haematology and infection. The contrast between

her life affirming generosity of spirit and your vile, destructive, resentful and self-regarding hypocrisy could hardly be starker.

So now I proceed to the process of sentencing.

There is only one sentence for murder. It is life imprisonment.

But the law requires me to fix the period which must pass before you are both eligible for release on licence or, alternatively, to decide that you should never be released.

The minimum terms which I will impose should not be confused with determinate sentences of the same length. Because a determinate prisoner is normally released at the half way point in his sentence, a life sentence with a minimum term is the equivalent of a determinate sentence of double that length.

So, for instance, a 30 year minimum term is the equivalent of a determinate sentence of 60 years.

And there are two further important differences. A determinate prisoner knows that he will be released at the half way point. Someone sentenced to life imprisonment, as you both will be, will have no guarantee of release once the minimum term has passed. It will be for the Parole Board at that stage to say if it will be safe for you to be set free. And, even then, freedom will be relative. You will remain on licence for the rest of your lives. If you were to commit another offence or otherwise breach your licence, you would be liable to be recalled to prison.

The law requires me to set the minimum term by following a process of analysis involving distinct steps.

The first step is to identify a starting point according to defined criteria. These are to be found in sequential paragraphs in schedule 21 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. In this case it is not suggested that the circumstances of this offence, grave as they undoubtedly were, would be sufficient to justify a “whole life” sentence under paragraph 4. However, I do need to consider whether the seriousness of the offence is “particularly high” within paragraph 5 of the Schedule.

Paragraph 5 sets out a number of circumstances in which a case will normally fall into this category. However, the Court of Appeal has recently and repeatedly stressed that cases which are not expressly described in paragraph 5(2) may still, where appropriate, be treated as cases of particularly high seriousness.

In my view, there is every justification for taking a starting point of thirty years for both of you in this case. The particular and central features of this case which justify such an approach can be listed as follows:

- (i) The level of sophistication involved in the preparation for the murder involving as it did tracker devices, a car with falsified number plates and an imported stun gun was of an unparalleled degree more closely redolent of a clinical assassination than a personal killing;
- (ii) The period of many months over which the meticulous planning took place reveals not only the highest level of culpability but it also gave both of you every opportunity to reflect on the evil you were about to perpetrate. These were opportunities you repeatedly chose to ignore;
- (iii) The murder method you adopted involved not only taking a knife to the scene but invading your victim’s home at night and slaughtering

her like an animal by first incapacitating her with a massive electric shock to the head and then hacking and slashing her to death with almost unimaginable ferocity.

Neither of you has shown the slightest remorse about what you did to Sadie Harley or to the family and friends she left behind her; with you, Williams, resorting to arrogant insouciance and you, Walsh, putting on an ostentatious and devious show of feigned mental impairment to the police in a desperate attempt to avoid the consequences of what you had done. I am in no doubt, Walsh, that such co-operation you gave to the police in leading them to the evidence was entirely motivated by a desire to save your own skin. (I pause to record that, of course, I do not treat either of your denials of guilt as an aggravating factor, reflected as they are in the loss of the discount on your minimum term which you would otherwise have been ordered to serve had you pleaded guilty).

The second step is to take into account any aggravating or mitigating factors which would justify a departure from the starting point. I must be careful at this juncture not to double count as aggravating features those factors upon which I have based my categorisation of this offence as being of particularly high seriousness. In your cases, it is a potentially relevant mitigating factor that you have no previous criminal convictions but this is offset by the fact that you were both previously engaged in a very similar campaign of harassment and vilification against another woman whose husband you, Williams, coveted for yourself. This also involved you, Walsh, attempting criminally to sabotage his car. The outcome was, of course, very different from that in this trial but your stalking conduct did not stop until the police intervened with a warning. I am in no doubt that you both knew about this warning. I find the fact that, undeterred, you both so readily and promptly resumed a similar although vastly more malevolent pattern of behaviour

towards Sadie Hartley effectively cancels out the residual credit which would otherwise have reflected your good character. It follows that in your case a minimum term of 30 years is appropriate.

In your case, Walsh, I have to bear in mind that you did not physically carry out the murder nor were you present when it was happened. You appear from the contents of your diary to have acted under the delusion that as long as you were not there “at the sharp end” you would not go to prison.

How wrong you were.

I find that, but for your support and encouragement, there is a very real chance that this killing would never have occurred. Time and time again you provided the camouflage upon which Williams relied to distance herself from the murder. You were the perfect partner in crime: loyal, amoral and, perhaps most welcome of all, anonymous.

You spent hours, days and months plotting and scheming the death of Sadie Hartley a recreation from which, as your diaries reveal, you derived considerable pleasure and satisfaction.

You re-introduced your ex-husband to Williams intending that he should act as a hired killer.

You used a burner SIM to cover your tracks.

You bought the tracking devices on your credit card.

You set up an email address to be used, in particular, to make land registry searches to locate Sadie Hartley’s home.

You accompanied Williams to Germany to get the stun gun.

You bought and paid for the car to be used in the murder and bought and used the tape to change the registration number on the number plates.

You bought the clothes for Williams to wear when she committed the murder.

You bought the knife with which Williams stabbed Sadie Hartley to death and gave it to her for that very purpose.

You went on the sinister mission to pinpoint Sadie Hartley's home by passing yourself off as a flower delivery woman when you well knew at the time that those flowers were the equivalent of the black spot which presaged her death.

By pre-arrangement you met up with Williams after the murder with cleaning products to mop up the blood from the car.

You concealed all the grisly paraphernalia of murder at Collinge Form having first done your best to burn or destroy the contaminated items.

In your case, therefore, although some discount is called for to reflect the fact that you did not carry out the actual killing, the final sentence must adequately reflect the fact that you were a willing, sympathetic and energetic confederate right from the outset. The assistance you provided was sustained and practical. You were fully involved as a joint participant throughout. Accordingly, I am satisfied that a minimum term of 25 years is appropriate to reflect the extent of your involvement.

You will both have your minimum terms discounted for such time as you have each already spent in custody which in your case, Williams, is 210 days and in your case, Walsh, 208 days and you will each pay the appropriate level of victim surcharge.