

THE STRETCH

PROLOGUE

The gun went off, catching Preston Snow by surprise, and he felt as if he'd been punched hard in the stomach. There was no burning sensation, and surprisingly little pain, just a dull ache and a spreading coldness. His eyes widened as he stared at the face of the man who'd shot him. Unfeeling blue eyes stared back at him.

Snow clutched a hand to his stomach and staggered backwards, blood pulsing from between his fingers. There seemed to be a lot of blood, but still he was hardly aware of any pain.

The man with the gun watched dispassionately, the gun now at his side. His face was totally blank as if he had absolutely no interest in whether Snow lived or died.

Snow felt the strength drain from his legs. He stumbled over a coffee table and fell on his side, barely conscious of where he was. The coldness was spreading from his stomach, up across his chest, a coldness that seemed to be drawing all the strength from his limbs. He tried to speak but no words would come and it was an effort to breathe. He managed to get up on his hands and knees and crawled towards the stairs.

The man who pulled the trigger stood in the middle of the room, watching Snow with a look of bored disinterest.

Snow scrambled up the stairs, frantically trying to get away from the man. He had a gun upstairs, somewhere. It was in one of the drawers in the bedroom. If he could get to it, if he could defend himself, then maybe, just maybe, he'd stand a chance.

His tracksuit top was drenched in blood and it flopped around as he crawled. He heard footsteps behind him but he didn't look back. He felt himself drifting in and out of consciousness and shook his head fiercely, trying to clear his thoughts. "Stay focused, man," he muttered to himself. "Stay fucking focused."

He looked down at his stomach as he crawled and saw blood dripping down on to the threadbare stair carpet. He tried to stem the bleeding but as he pressed his hand against his stomach a bolt of pain shot through his midriff. He grunted. It felt as if a hot knife had been twisted inside his stomach.

"For fuck's sake, Snow, will you stay still!" shouted the man with the gun.

Snow took a quick look over his shoulder. The man was standing at the bottom of the stairs, gesticulating with his gun.

Snow reached the upstairs landing and pushed himself upright. He staggered towards the bedroom, putting his free hand against the wall to maintain his balance, smearing it with blood.

The man followed him up the stairs. He took his time, with a lengthy pause between each step. It was the precision that Snow found terrifying. The man was taking it slowly, knowing that he had all the time in the world: no one would come to Snow's aid. If anyone had heard the gunshot, they wouldn't want to get involved. It wasn't the sort of area where people telephoned three nines.

Snow collapsed in front of the dressing table and pulled out one of the drawers. No gun. He cursed. Where'd he put it? Where hell had he put it? He tried to concentrate, tried to remember where he'd last see the weapon. He pulled open a second drawer and rifled through socks and underwear, cursing his stupidity for not having the gun out in the open. No gun. He tore the drawer out of the cupboard and tipped the contents on to the floor and searched frantically. It wasn't there.

There were footsteps behind him and Snow twisted around. The man stood in the doorway, the gun at his side, a confident smile on his face. Snow's head swam and he slumped backwards, sliding down against the dressing table, his head banging against one of the open drawers.

Snow's eyes fluttered shut. He could feel consciousness slipping away. The pain was going, replaced by a warm glow. He sighed and his hand slipped away from his stomach, drenched in blood.

The man walked over and looked down at Snow. He prodded Snow's leg with his foot, but Snow didn't react. Snow's chin was down on his chest and a bloody froth dribbled from between his lips. Blood pooled on the floor around his waist, a thick treacly redness that seemed to sit on the surface of the carpet, refusing to sink into the pile.

"You dead, Snow?" he sneered. "Don't tell me you're dead already."

He raised his foot and stamped down on Snow's hand, crushing his bloody fingers. Snow's eyes opened wide and he screamed in pain. The man grinned triumphantly and levelled the gun at Snow's face.

They filed into the jury box one by one, and Sam Greene could tell by the way they avoided looking at her that the news was bad. Her heart sank.

"It'll be okay, Mum," said her son Jamie, giving her hand a small squeeze.

Sam shook her head. "No, Jamie," she whispered. "It's not going to be okay."

Sam's husband looked across at her from the dock. "Chin up, love," he mouthed. Terry looked tired. There were dark patches under his eyes and when he smiled Sam could see the worry lines etched into his forehead. She was sure there was a touch more grey at his temples but he still looked good for fifty-two though; broad-shouldered and flat-stomached with the confident good looks that turned the heads of women half his age.

Sam fingered the small crucifix that was hanging around her neck on a thin gold chain. And hadn't that always been Terry's problem, she thought. Too handsome for his own good.

Sam tried to smile back at Terry but she could feel tears welling up in her eyes and she blinked them back. It wasn't fair. Her husband's fate lay in the hands of twelve men and women who knew nothing about him, and yet they and they alone had the power to put him behind bars for the rest of his life.

Sam watched them as they took their seats. Eight women and four men. That was in their favour, Terry's solicitor had said, because Terry was a good-looking guy and women were less likely to convict a man that they fancied. Three of the jury were black, and even Laurence Patterson had to admit that that wasn't such good news, because the man Terry had been accused of shooting was black. "When all's said and done they do stick together, Samantha, but let's look on the bright side, shall we?" he'd said, and he'd patted her gently on the shoulder the way you'd console someone at a funeral. Everyone dressed in their Sunday best, faces sombre, avoiding eye contact, all gathered together to say a final farewell to Terry Greene.

A tear ran down Sam's cheek and she brushed it away with the back of her hand, determined that no one would see her cry. She knew there'd be photographers outside and they'd like nothing more than a picture of her with tears running down her face. She'd been in court every day, and without fail the tabloids had carried photographs of her arriving or leaving, always mentioning the fact that she was forty-eight years old and that she used to be a singer and dancer. 'Faded Sixties singer' one of the Daily Mail's more acid female feature writers had called her, and Sam had silently seethed at the unfairness of that. Her career had barely started to get off the ground before she'd met and married Terry, and as for 'faded', that was just malicious. She was the mother of three grown-up children and under more pressure than she's ever been in her whole life, how was she supposed to look? Radiant?

Considering the pressure she was under, Sam figured that she looked damn good. At least one of the prosecution lawyers kept looking at her with more than a professional interest, smiling each time he caught her eye. Every morning she took extra care to get her make-up just right, enough to cover up the effects of not-enough sleep, but not so much that she'd look as if she was trying too hard. And she'd been to the hairdresser to get her hair colour topped up just before the case started. Again, nothing too obvious, but she needed a little help to keep its original dark blonde sheen.

Patterson twisted around in his seat and gave her a confident smile. She acknowledged him with a nod but couldn't bring herself to smile back at him.

"Will your foreman please stand," said the clerk of the court.

A middle-aged man got to his feet and self-consciously rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Sam took a deep breath, steeling herself for the worst. Jamie squeezed her hand again and she squeezed back.

“Have you reached a verdict upon which you have all agreed?”

“We have. Yes.”

“On the charge of murder, do you find the defendant Terrence William Greene guilty or not guilty?”

The foreman rubbed his nose again, then cleared his throat. He was a small, nondescript man in a cheap suit and Sam figured that this was his one moment of glory in a life filled with mediocrity, and that he was determined to make the most of it. “Guilty,” he said, stretching the word out as if relishing the sound of it.

Sam cursed under her breath.

Someone cheered behind her and Sam turned around. Two detectives were grinning and slapping their boss on the back. Detective Chief Inspector Frank Welch, the man responsible for putting her husband in the dock. Welch grinned at Sam and she turned away quickly, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing how upset she was.

The judge nodded at Terry’s barrister. “Mr Orvice, is there anything you wish to say on behalf of the defendant?”

The barrister looked across at Terry, who shook his head.

“No, your honour.”

The judge fixed Terry with a look of contempt. “Terrence Greene, stand up.”

Terry got to his feet and adjusted his tie, and straightened his shoulders. He was wearing a dark blue suit, one of his many Armanis, a crisp white shirt and a tie that Sam didn’t recognise. He looked the judge in the eye, his chin raised defiantly.

“Before I pass sentence, I have a few words to say about the conduct of one of the witnesses in this case,” said the judge. He turned to look at Sam, and she fought the urge to look away. She felt her cheeks redden but she continued to stare at him, concentrating on his thin, humourless lips.

“Despite the weight of forensic evidence against the defendant, his wife Samantha Greene has insisted that she was with him on the night of the murder. I disbelieve her account of events, as did the jury, and I regard her claims as at best misguided and at worst a deliberate attempt to pervert the course of justice.”

“You should hang the lying bitch!” A young black man with shoulder-length dreadlocks had got to his feet and was screaming at the judge. A pretty black girl tried to persuade him to sit down. “She knows he killed my brother! Should be in the fucking dock with him!”

Two uniformed policemen hustled him out of the court. The black girl followed, imploring them to let him go. Luke Snow and his sister Nancy. Brother and sister of the man Terry was accused of killing. A middle-aged black couple shook their heads tearfully but stayed where they were, not wanting to leave until they’d heard the sentence. Preston Snow’s parents.

As the courtroom doors banged shut, the judge once again fixed Sam with his baleful stare. “I hope the police will take a close look at the evidence given by Mrs Greene, with a view to considering a charge of perjury. The love of a wife for a husband is no excuse for lying to a court of law.”

Sam stared back at the judge, knowing that there was nothing she could say or do. Her mouth had gone dry and it hurt when she swallowed. It seemed like an eternity before the judge turned away from her and looked back at Terry.

“Terrence William Greene, you have been found guilty of the murder of Preston Snow. A savage, brutal murder for which you have shown no remorse. The sentence of the court is life imprisonment. Take him down.”

Two burly custody officers moved either side of Terry. Terry blew a kiss at Sam, winked, then walked down the stairs leading from the dock to the holding cells below the courtroom.

“Are you going home, Mum?” asked Jamie.

Sam nodded and got to her feet. “You coming?”

Jamie looked at his watch. I’ve got to get back to Exeter. Exams tomorrow.”

“How about a coffee first before you go?”

Jamie looked suddenly concerned. “Are you okay?”

Sam screwed up her face. “I feel a bit numb, really. I don’t think it’s hit me yet.”

Jamie nodded. “I know what you mean. I sort of expected the worst, but life? I can’t imagine Dad behind bars for life, can you? Not Dad.”

“We’ll get through it, Jamie. So will he.” She gave him a hug. “Thanks for coming.”

“I wasn’t sure if Dad would’ve wanted me here.”

“Of course he did. Don’t be silly.”

Jamie nodded towards the doors. “I’ll walk you out.”

“You will not!” Sam said quickly. “The last thing I want is for you to be photographed with me. You’ve gotten off lightly so far, the last thing we want is for your face to be splashed across the papers with mine. Lawyer-in-the-making in court for drug baron’s murder trial. Just what you need to kick-start your career.”

“I’m not ashamed of Dad,” he said.

“I know you’re not. And neither am I. Bet let’s not make things more difficult than they already are, shall we? You sneak out, they’ll be too busy looking for me. I’ll see you at the coffee bar we went to last time, yeah?”

“Okay, Mum.” Jamie kissed her on the cheek and headed out of the courtroom.

Sam stood where she was to give him time to leave the building. She desperately wanted a cigarette but smoking was forbidden inside the court building.

Patterson appeared at her elbow holding a stack of files. “Samantha, I’m gutted. But it’s not over.”

“Swings and roundabouts, Laurence.”

“We’ll appeal, of course,” said Patterson.

“Whatever.”

Patterson placed a hand on her elbow. “Can you call in at Richard’s office this afternoon? It’s at Terry’s request.” Richard Asher was Terry’s accountant, and Sam didn’t feel ready to start talking money.

“Can’t it wait?”

Behind her she heard raucous laughter, then a Geordie voice. “Great job, Frank.” It was Doug Simpson, a detective inspector, the man who’d come around to Sam’s house with a search warrant and who’d spent the best part of four hours looking in every nook and cranny with half a dozen uniformed policemen. Simpson was patting Welch on the back. “The look on his face when the judge said life. Like he expected to be let off with a slap on the wrist.”

Welch said nothing, but he grinned triumphantly.

The Crown Prosecution Service’s barrister walked by and gave Welch a thumbs-up. “Thanks, Frank. Wish all my cases were as open and shut as that.”

Welch’s grin widened as he walked past Sam, and Patterson steered her away into a corner. “It’s important, Samantha. I wouldn’t ask otherwise.”

“Okay. Fine. Whatever. I’ll be there.” She looked around the wood-panelled entrance hall. “Is there a back way out, Laurence?”

“I’m afraid not. Not for members of the public.”

“What about for wives of convicted murderers?”

Patterson smiled thinly and shook his head.

Sam took a deep breath and walked towards the double doors that led out to the street. She heard the click-click-click of cameras and the buzz of questions before she even pushed the doors open. The Press were huddled around Welch and Simpson, whose faces were white in the glare of television camera lights.

Sam kept her head down but it was useless, they were waiting for her, and like hounds on a fresh scent they bore down on her, throwing questions from all sides. How did she feel, what were her plans, how had her husband taken the sentence, had she lied?

Sam tried to push through them. “Please, I’ve nothing to say,” she shouted. “Nothing.”

Two figures barred her way. A man and a woman. Sam raised her head and looked at them. It was Mr and Mrs Snow, the victim’s parents, dressed as if they’d just come from church. They were both in their late fifties, he in a dark tweed suit and highly polished

brogues, she in a blue flowery print dress and a dark blue coat, with a matching blue hat with a wide band into which had been tucked three silk daisies.

Sam tried to get by them, but Mrs Snow moved to block her way. "How could you?" she hissed at Sam. "You gave your word before God and you lied. How could you do that?"

Sam shook her head. Mrs Snow raised a gloved hand and Sam stared at her unflinchingly, waiting for the blow. The older woman lowered her hand and burst into tears. Her husband put an arm around her shoulders. His eyes were dull and flat, as if he wasn't even aware of Sam or the near-constant barrage of flashes as the photographers clicked away.

Sam pushed around them.

The questions continued. Did she know why her husband had killed Preston Snow, had her husband asked her to lie for him, where was she the night Snow was shot? Sam tried to blot out the shouts, tried to imagine they weren't there. A television camera appeared at her side and a bleached blonde with too much make-up thrust a bulbous microphone in her face. Sam pushed the microphone away. "Don't you understand – no comment!" she shouted.

She reached her car, a black convertible Saab. It was penned in by two almost-new saloons and Sam knew instinctively that the Press had done it, cutting off her avenue of escape. She whirled around. "Can someone please move this car!" she yelled, but she could barely hear her own voice above the noise of the Press pack.

A battered old Land Rover roared up, smoke belching from its exhaust. "Mum! Get in!" It was Jamie. He threw open the door and Sam climbed in gratefully.

"Jamie, you're a life saver," she gasped.

Jamie grinned and accelerated. As he roared away from the still-shouting journalists, a bottle smacked into the windscreen, cracking it down one side. Through the side window Sam saw Luke Snow screaming and shaking his fist.

Jamie slammed on the brakes. "Bastard!"

"Leave it, Jamie," Sam said.

"Look what he's done."

"Forget it."

Jamie looked as if he was going to argue, but Sam patted him on the leg. "Come on, I'll buy you a coffee. And a new windscreen."

Jamie accelerated away, still cursing.

She rubbed the back of his neck as he drove. "You should go and see him, as soon as you can."

"I will. Laura wasn't there."

"Yeah. Probably too upsetting for her. You know what your sister's like. It's Trish I feel really sorry for. They're bound to give her a hard time at school."

Jamie drove them to a coffee bar and they sat in the window sipping cappuccinos in silence.

"Why did you lie for him, Mum?" Jamie asked eventually. "After everything he did to you."

"We're neither of kids, Jamie. Anyway, who says I lied?"

"The judge for one. Come on, the forensic alone was enough to convict him. Plus they had an eye witness. I don't know why you bothered."

Jamie had a smear of frothy milk across his upper lip. Sam reached over and wiped it away with her thumb.

"What are you going to do, Mum?"

"Been asking myself the very same question."

* * *

A cheer went up as Frank Welch walked into the CID office flanked by Detective Inspector Doug Simpson and Detective Sergeant Fred Clarke. Welch raised a hand in acknowledgement. There were two cases of lager on a side table, along with half a dozen

bottles of red wine, stacks of paper cups and a few packets of crisps. Clarke headed straight for the lager.

“Drink, Frank?” asked Simpson.

“Get me an orange juice and lemonade, Doug. I’m going to have a word with the governor.”

Welch went down the corridor and was waved through to Superintendent Simon Edwards’ office by his secretary. “He’s been waiting for you, Chief Inspector,” she said.

Edwards was buried in paperwork, but he stood up and shook Welch’s hand as soon as he walked in. “Great work, Frank. First class. Pass on my congratulations to the team. I took the liberty of arranging a small libation.”

“Much appreciated, sir.”

“Not every day we see a villain like Terry Green sent down.”

“No, sir.”

Edwards sat down and picked up his fountain pen. When Welch didn’t move towards the door, Edwards put his pen down again. “Something on your mind, Frank?”

“Greene’s wife, Samantha. She lied through her teeth. The judge gave her a tongue lashing, but I’d like to send the file on to the DIP.”

Edwards winced. “I’m not convinced that’s in anyone’s best interests, Frank. You’re not married, are you?”

It was a rhetorical question. Edwards was well aware that Welch had never been married. Welch answered anyway.

“No, sir.”

“Wives stand by their husbands. That’s what they do, bless ’em. For better or worse.”

Welch put his hands on the superintendent’s desk and leaned towards him, but he could see from the look on his boss’s face that he resented the territorial encroachment, so he stood up again and folded his arms. “The judge said he thought there was a case of perjury to answer, that’s all I’m saying. She lied in court.”

“But it didn’t do any good, did it, Frank? Greene still went down. Let sleeping dogs lie. Okay?”

Welch said nothing. He wanted to argue the point, but he had worked with Edwards long enough to know that there was no point. Once the superintendent had made his mind up, it was like a steel trap. Nothing would budge him, and he’d regard even reasoned argument as a challenge to his authority. Welch nodded slowly. “Okay, sir.”

“Good man,” said Edwards, and returned to his paperwork.

Back in the main CID room, Simpson held out a paper cup to Welch. “There you go, boss.”

Welch took it but didn’t drink.

“What’s up?” asked Simpson.

“Difference of opinion with the governor,” said Welch. “He thinks Sam Green’s a sleeping dog. I think she’s a lying bitch.”