

## Murder Ballad

Her world collapsed around a single moment. A single act. That was all it took for what she understood as reality to be altered for ever.

She watched the blood splatter from the girl's open mouth like vomit, engulfing and uncontainable. The knife must have gone in right to the hilt, driven as it was by so much force, like he had been trying to punch right through her. She tried and failed to apprehend her thoughts before they turned to the massive organ damage necessary to have precipitated such an eruption. The girl would bleed out in a matter of minutes, maybe seconds.

There was no numbing moment of disbelief to anaesthetise her fear. This was real. This was now. She was better wired than most people to fundamentally understand this.

Just as she had learned that dreams can come true, that things you have merely fantasised about can suddenly become everyday reality, so was she starkly aware that the darkest dreads could be made manifest too. Most people's dreams didn't come true. Most people didn't get to play their music to thousands of people in city after city, night after night. Most people didn't see a human being murdered before their very eyes and know that they were next.

The girl now slumped to the ground, collapsing in stages; one hand clutching her stomach, the other extended to steady herself, as though a fear of toppling over were the chief of her concerns. Then she flopped forward on to her face, folded up like a doll.

The attacker barely cast a glance towards his victim. Now that she had been dealt with, and was no longer of value to him, the girl ceased to merit his consideration.

In those brief seconds, she thought of the years she had lived, and of all the time and effort it had taken to reach this stage in

her career. The doors that were opening. The places she was yet to go. It seemed so unfair that all of it could be gone in the blink of an eye. Yet she knew just how sudden, how arbitrary and capricious fate could be.

Watching the blood pour from a scared, astonished mouth, she had just as immediately grasped the implications for anyone who could testify to having seen it happen.

He was moving forward, simmering with an aggression he could tap into at will. Those muscular arms, that body honed and sculpted to brutal purpose.

Killing machine.

She thought she saw movement from the floor, but it was just the blood pooling around the girl's waist.

She felt a cold, iron paralysis, a crippling fear of flight that fear of death could not overcome. She was petrified. She was powerless.

She was next.

The payment was gone, the only leverage, and it had bought nothing.

That thought seemed almost random, flashing past like just another piece of debris in the vortex of this tornado. Once upon a time, the notion of losing that much money would have been catastrophic. Right now it was barely relevant.

It didn't look like she would be needing it.

## Investigated Reporter

They didn't look like cops. Not at first, when he walked to his seat on the other side of the table. More like lawyers, surrounded as they were by piles of notes and stacks of folders, binders and hard-bound volumes. They seemed a little swamped, a little distracted, referring to various loose sheets and plastic-wrapped documents as he sat down, as though they had to remind themselves of who he was and why he was there.

It wasn't like any interview room he'd been in before either. It was a bright and airy upstairs office, lots of windows, a couple of framed prints and the walls covered in a recently painted soothing shade of light blue. All very neutral, very non-threatening.

This was in marked contrast to the language and tone of the missives by which he had been compelled to come to London. They had made it clear that if he didn't cooperate by travelling voluntarily, he'd be doing so in the back of a van. Yet now they were acting like it was at his own convenience. He even had an appointment. It was like visiting the proctologist; all very polite, respectful and professional, but ultimately you knew that the point of the exercise was for someone to ram their finger up your arse.

'I'm Detective Sergeant Ben Mitchell; this is Detective Constable Audrey Pine. We are both with Metropolitan Police Specialist Operations, operating under the auspices of the Westercruik Inquiry, whose full powers we are at liberty to command.'

The preamble went on for a bit after that, like the terms and conditions you never read before clicking Yes to installing a piece of software: the details and the legalese weren't important, as you both knew there was no option but to proceed. The appointment thing was a bit of paradoxical mummery to establish their credentials too. Its purpose was to underline that he was not even that

important in the greater scheme of what they were about here and to remind him that this thing was a juggernaut, so step carefully lest you end up under the wheels.

It was Pine who spoke first.

‘Alec Forman,’ she stated matter-of-factly, like she was taking the register.

‘Present,’ he replied, eliciting a grimly weary look. She wasn’t in the mood for humour. That was fine, because neither was he.

Pine looked late thirties or early forties, pale and skinny with a dyed-blonde bob. She might have been younger: her impassive expression and a complexion betraying a committed smoking habit were probably putting a few years on her. She seemed all the more pallid next to Mitchell, who was brown of skin and jet black of hair.

‘You’ve been publishing under that byline for roughly the past three years.’

When I’ve been published at all, he thought.

‘You’ve been in journalism more than two decades. You’ve worked in London, Los Angeles and Scotland. You’ve largely been freelance since the mid-nineties. You started off in Glasgow then moved to London when you were hired as an investigative reporter on the . . .’

On and on she went, with the expression and the tone of voice that conveyed an indefatigable stamina for bureaucratic detail, far more than a mortal man like him could possibly endure. His only salvation might be her need to nip out for a fag. If she had Nicorette gum, he was doomed.

He wasn’t so sure about her strategy, it had to be said. She just kept telling him things about himself, which didn’t strike him as a likely means of tripping him up. There were a few hazy periods, granted, but he was generally accepted as the world authority on the subject of his own life.

These were mere overtures, however. They were circling, trying to make him wonder where they’d come from when they finally decided to attack. Either that or the plan was to remind him of just how far he had fallen in order to have made the desperate mistakes that had ultimately brought him to this room.

‘Your time in London, working for the Exposure team, you carved out a bit of a name for yourself. You were very much ahead of the curve.’

Mitchell was speaking, glancing back down at a document as he did so, like he hadn’t had enough time to prepare for this. Aye, right.

The journalist occasionally known but decreasingly published as Alec Forman still said nothing.

‘In fact, you were cited by name several times during the Leveson Inquiry and reference was made to quite a range of, shall we say, improvisational methods of procuring information. It was alleged that, in order to stand up your stories, you employed computer hacking, unauthorised, invasive and covert electronic surveillance, even burglary. This is going all the way back to the early nineties. You truly were a trailblazer for all that ultimately became rotten about modern journalism.’

No, they didn’t look like cops: not until they started asking questions, at which juncture the humourless condescension was unmistakable. They must teach it at Hendon.

He knew he was being goaded and he ought to deny the cop a response. Maybe three years ago he’d have been strong enough to resist. These days his skin had worn a lot thinner from being the whipping boy.

If you prick me, do I not bleed? If you wrong me, shall I not fuck your shit right up?

‘Those were allegations made by individuals and organisations bearing long-term grudges about having their own sharp practices exposed.’

‘Your editors at the time stated at the inquiry that highly sensitive documents and other evidence frequently came into your hands through unnamed sources: sometimes documents and evidence that had previously been quietly resting in a safe.’

‘Yes, and they were so uncomfortable about the provenance of my information that they said absolutely nothing about it until they were in front of an inquiry and needing to offer up a sacrificial goat.’

‘So where did all those documents come from?’

‘Unnamed sources. Many and various sources. That’s journalism, or at least it was, once upon a time. As far as I remember it, no specific evidence was produced to support these allegations.’

Mitchell glanced intently down at the fire hazard of loose leafs in front of him, like there might be a citation there that would refute this last statement. There wasn’t, but he had a pretty good comeback nonetheless.

‘In the year 2000 you were found guilty of breaking and entering, were you not? You were jailed and served a total of seven months.’

Mitchell ran a finger down the sheet he was looking at, like he was double-checking.

‘Oh, sorry, that’s not strictly true. Part of that prison time was while you were on remand for a charge of murder.’

Mitchell spoke with a very measured pronunciation, like he savoured his own elocution. There were trace elements of Brummie in there, but mainly his accent spoke of good schooling and attention to detail. He seemed dynamic and determined, a permanent searching seriousness about his expression.

Mitchell looked a good bit younger than Pine, but was clearly the one in the driving seat. Probably highly ambitious and dexterously political too, to have got himself a gig on this inquiry. His suit looked good on him as well, the bastard.

Oh, Christ.

He winced inside as the import of the moment struck home. Comes to us all, sure enough: he had just told himself the polis were looking younger.

Somebody shoot me in the fucking head, he thought.

‘Does it mention anywhere in your documentation that I was completely exonerated?’ he asked, trying not to sound rattled but succeeding only in alerting Mitchell to the fact that he was.

Mitchell responded by stepping things up.

‘Did you break into an apartment in Knightsbridge while it was being used for sexual liaisons by Sir Anthony Mead?’

He responded with a blank look, then wondered if that appeared

more guilty than an outright denial. Acting like you don't know who Anthony Mead is: yeah, that'll fox him.

'Did you break into Anthony Mead's home?'

'I couldn't even tell you where that might be. Home Counties are all the one to me.'

That was payback for Pine saying London, Los Angeles and Scotland. Really sticking it to them here.

'So you know his house is in the Home Counties.'

Shit.

'Did you plant a bug or a DVR to record him?'

'No.'

'Did you hack his mobile phone?'

'No.'

'Did you hack Angela Goldman's phone?'

'No.'

'Did you break into Angela Goldman's flat?'

'No.'

'Were you aware that Angela Goldman was having an affair with Anthony Mead? Did you use this information to blackmail either of them into revealing his encryption password?'

Round and round they went, back over the same ground several times. He figured it couldn't be to see whether he contradicted himself, as it's hard to contradict one-word answers, especially when the answer is almost invariably no. He couldn't be sure what the endgame was, what agendas were at work, but he did know there was one thing they would definitely be seeking, sooner or later. He was also sure they wouldn't be getting it. It was one of the few things he *could* consider himself sure of these days.

'How did you feel during the Leveson Inquiry?' Pine asked.

'I wasn't watching it through my fingers, if that's what you think. I wasn't watching it with a bucket of popcorn either, though if I was I'd have been throwing it at the screen. It was like Glastonbury for humbug and hypocrisy. An all-time-great line-up of self-serving wankers.'

'Not your profession's finest hour.'

'Look who's talking. Met, did you say?'

He'd have given them points if one of them had said touché. They just stared back, that cop thing where you don't know whether they're playing the humourless bastard angle to keep you uncomfortable or whether they simply are humourless bastards.

'The real damage came after Leveson for you, though, didn't it?' asked Mitchell. 'You used the phrase "sacrificial goat".'

'Yes. Kind of like the "one bad apple" defence synonymous with accusations of police brutality or corruption.'

Mitchell didn't bite.

'It seemed expedient for a lot of your former employers to distance themselves from you.'

'Aye, but give them credit for an impressive exercise in having their cake and eating it. They denied they knew how I operated, but made me the totem of everything they now considered verboten.'

'But the bottom line was that you were effectively unemployable. Was that when you started using the name Alec Forman?'

He said nothing. They knew this shit. It was written down in front of them. Were they trying to get him to relive the moment? Start blubbing right there at the table and open up to them when they offered a hanky?

'It was also around this time that your marriage broke up, wasn't it?' asked Pine; though again, she wasn't really asking.

Still he said nothing, but this time because he really didn't want to go there.

'You're divorced now?' Mitchell enquired casually, like he needed to dot an i.

'Separated.'

Christ. He had got a lump in his throat there, and he hoped it hadn't been detectable in his voice. What the hell? He hadn't felt like this in ages. Why was it threatening to surface now, in front of these bloodless stiff? And where were they going with this?

Well, he knew the ultimate destination, but was starting to get confused by the route, like a tourist being gypped by an unscrupulous cab-driver.

'Did Leveson and the resulting fallout contribute to the break-up of your marriage?'



‘We’re still married,’ he replied.

Aye, right, said another voice.

‘That kind of exposure must have put an intolerable strain on your relationship,’ Pine suggested.

‘We were having problems before that. It certainly didn’t help,’ he conceded, hoping the acknowledgement would get them off the subject.

Fat chance. Mitchell had good sense for this stuff. He knew when to press home.

‘Was your ex-wife aware of your methods?’

Fuck you.

‘Or was she appalled to learn of them through the same channels as her friends, her colleagues, her family?’

Fuck you.

‘Did she feel ashamed? Was she angry with you? Did you feel shame for what you put her through?’

Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.

(Yes. Yes. Yes.)

‘She’s not my ex-wife,’ he managed to state.

Mitchell consulted the documents again.

‘You haven’t lived together for some time. More than a year, I believe.’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Listen, I’m not some automated vessel of the state on a bureaucratic errand. I’ve a task to carry out, but I’m not without sympathy. We deal in human emotions here in this job: when you strip away the extraneous detail, that’s where the answers usually lie. I’m trying to develop a picture of your state of mind, post-Leveson, post your separation, when you began working on this story.’

‘I had been working on it before either of those things. The time-frame isn’t as simple as you think. Proper investigative journalism can be a very long game. It’s about cultivating contacts, following up small possibilities, keeping track of things that might not immediately appear significant.’

‘And yet you stepped up the pace rather precipitously, didn’t you? In a manner displaying an impatience and a failure of judge-

ment quite out of keeping with your previous record. That's what I'm getting at. You were trying to get back in the game with one swing: prove everybody wrong about you being washed up; show the world – show *Sarah* – that there was a massive, moral, public-interest justification for the methods over which you'd been vilified.'

He said nothing, trying to remain impassive, but he was struggling. Especially when Mitchell spoke her name. That wasn't the worst part, though: the worst part was that the fucker was right on the money.

'A conspiracy orchestrated by British and US intelligence and security forces to blame terrorist organisations for atrocities they themselves carried out. That's real tinfoil-hat stuff.'

'The story I was working on was a little more nuanced than that, but I know how it looks. We all know how it looks.'

'Well, on the plus side, on this occasion we are prepared to believe that you got the crucial evidence from an unnamed source.'

Finally. Fucking finally. Let's get to it, then.

'Who gave you the laptop?' Mitchell asked.

He sighed, slumping a little in his chair, assuming the posture of a broken man. It wasn't a tough sell. He *was* a broken man.

'I have this friend who's a keen golfer,' he told them with an air of surrender. 'I mean, really keen. He'll play in a hurricane, torrential rain, freezing winds, anything. One day I saw him heading to the links with his clubs when there was snow on the ground.'

It was the turn of Mitchell and Pine to look like they weren't sure where this was going, but having worked so long to get him to open up, they were prepared to be patient.

'I asked him what the hell he was doing and he said he had this new ball with a GPS tracker. Even in the snow, he could locate it anywhere. Amazing. So I asked him what you just asked me: Where did you get it? His answer was the same as mine.'

'What?' Mitchell asked, intrigued.

'I found it.'

They didn't like that. He knew he was bringing down upon himself the full pom-pocalypse of criminal law and cop-grade self-importance, but it was always going to come to this anyway.

‘Did you enjoy prison?’ Mitchell asked.

When they started asking really stupid questions was when you knew you’d truly pissed them off.

‘Do you want to go back there?’

‘To be honest, if it was between prison and connecting in Terminal Five at Heathrow, I’d choose T5. Just. So no.’

‘You are far from being the focus of this inquiry, but if you obstruct it you will feel the full force that it can bring to bear.’

He folded his arms and sat back in his seat.

‘I’m not naming my source. I don’t care what you threaten me with.’

‘I’m not bluffing here. When I report back, there is every chance they’ll escalate this. This inquiry is going to need heads on spikes by the end, and it’ll get them one way or another. One of them doesn’t have to be yours. They’re after bigger game here. Who gave you the laptop?’

‘I’m not naming my source.’

They sat in silence for a long couple of minutes, Mitchell and Pine staring at him every time he glanced up. They were like disappointed parents waiting for a huffy kid to apologise.

‘It doesn’t have to go this way,’ Mitchell said eventually. ‘You could still have a career again. There is a lot of unseen influence at play in these things. If you were to cooperate, then who knows what doors might open . . .’

Mitchell said this with a shrug, trailing the bait, saying let’s negotiate, if that’s what it takes.

He just shook his head.

‘You’re right. I’ve been desperate. But not that desperate.’

‘Then you’re finished,’ Mitchell said.

‘I can leave?’

‘I mean in journalism. Under *any* byline.’

He gave the cops a wry, humourless chuckle.

‘That was already true when I walked in here,’ he told them. ‘You haven’t taken anything away from me, officer. In fact, you’ve already proven things aren’t quite as bad as some people made out: after Leveson, there were those who said I couldn’t get arrested.’

Mitchell looked at him with almost pitying disgust.  
'You haven't *been* arrested, Mr Parlabane.'

The mixture of bravado, anxiety and defiance was already turning into something cold and sour in his gut before he left the building. He had stood his ground and made it through his first tangle with the Westercruik Inquiry, but when he walked back outside, the same reality would be waiting for him: one in which he was a disgraced and disparaged hack nobody in the business would ever go near again.

And it wasn't because of burglary or computer hacking or any of the other shit that came out in the wash. He hadn't hacked any murder victim's phone, or pursued any illegal activity just to find out whether two D-list celebrities were shagging. He had nothing to be ashamed of there.

There were plenty of guys who had done horrible shit and walked back into jobs as soon as their jail time was over. In the perverse and hypocritical world of journalism, the Leveson Inquiry had merely proven their mettle regarding how far they'd go to get a story; not to mention how they could keep their mouths shut to protect the cowardly pricks upstairs.

It wasn't even that he had broken a golden rule and become the story. That was consequence rather than cause.

His sin was far worse than that.

It was that he'd been played.

He got scapegoated. He got screwed over. He got angry. Fair enough. But then he got desperate, and then he got played. There was just a memorial plaque now where his reputation used to stand. His judgement would be forever suspect.

In the past it was at times such as this that he would have sat down with Sarah and talked things through. Then, everything would look brighter after two hours of blethers and a bottle of wine.

Now that was over too.

He filled out some paperwork and then went for a slash, trying not to catch his reflection in the mirror as he washed his hands.

He saw Pine on the steps just outside the main entrance, smoking a roll-up. It looked oddly studenty; he'd figured her for Marlies or B&H.

'I can see why your wife left you,' she said.

Disarmingly, it didn't sound like a dig. It was like she was concerned.

'There's stubborn, and then there's pointlessly self-destructive,' she added.

'What does that mean?'

'It means, I don't get why you're prepared to take the fall for someone who burned you. You were set up and your source left you twisting in the wind. Whoever he is, he ruined any chance you had of resurrecting your career. You could go to prison and yet you still won't name him.'

'As someone smarter than me once said, principles only mean something if you stand by them when they're inconvenient.'

'Principles strike me as a luxury you can't afford any more, especially when they're the principles of a profession that's chewed you up and spat you out. Why would you stand by them now?'

'Because they're all I've got left.'

## The Opposite of Journalism

Parlabane took another sip of his coffee and wondered how long he could spin out the process of drinking it: a delicate balancing act between having no plausible justification for remaining seated in this café and discovering just how lukewarm a latte his palate could tolerate. He had just missed a train back to Edinburgh and now had a couple of hours to wait before the next one. Time was, he'd have seized the opportunity to take a wander around a gallery or browse a few record shops, but he was low on funds and lower on motivation.

Sitting in a railway station café seemed appropriate: a neutral space, transitory, temporary. He didn't belong anywhere right now. He wanted out of London, but there wasn't much waiting for him back in Edinburgh either.

Since he returned from his disastrously vainglorious quest to 'get back in the game with one swing', as Officer Mitchell astutely put it, he had spent recent weeks crashing in spare rooms and on settees while he tried to sort out something more permanent. He was not so much reaping a dividend of long-standing goodwill on the part of old friends as feeling like a charity case. They all wanted to help him out because they felt sorry for him, but though they were prepared to offer him a berth, it was horribly awkward. Christ, it wasn't like anybody wanted to sit up late with a couple of bottles, blethering like they used to. How could they?

'Well, Jack, what will we talk about first: the break-up of your marriage or the death of your career?'

He wasn't enjoying the coffee, or the joyless atmosphere of the café, but nor was he in a hurry to get on that train. He knew he wouldn't be travelling hopefully and he wasn't looking forward to

what awaited him when he arrived. At least sitting in this place he had an excuse for doing nothing.

There was a line between reasonably describing one's status as freelance and more honestly calling it unemployed. He had crossed it a while back and was now wandering the hazy borderlands of the next such marker: the one that lay between the terms 'unemployed journalist' and 'former journalist'.

It was busy on the other side of that line, the arse having fallen out of the industry as it struggled to accept that we were effectively in the post-print era. There were still jobs to be had, filling up the content-ravenous beasts that roamed the new digital landscape, but not for journalists. Parlabane's problem was not so much that nobody would hire him: it was that the job he did no longer existed.

He felt the buzz of his mobile from his jacket pocket. The absence of a ringtone was a legacy of times when it went off so often that the noise was as irritating as it was unnecessary, and the device seldom off his person anyway. Nowadays the fact that it was still only on vibrate was mildly embarrassing: on the rare occasions that it sounded, it merely served to tell him he was kidding himself.

The screen showed a number rather than a name. He sighed. That most likely meant he was dealing with a misdial or about to hear some recorded spam. He answered anyway.

'Hello. Is that . . . Jack?' asked a female voice.

'Depends,' he replied, instantly regretting it for both its pitiful defensiveness and the fact that it made him sound like a twat. 'Who's this?'

'It's Mairi,' she said.

'Mairi who?' he replied, thinking it was turning into a knock-knock joke. Punchline: 'Mairi whoever you like, Sarah's divorcing you, arsehole.'

'Mairi Lafferty. Do you remember me? Donald's sister.'

Donald. Jesus.

It was a sledgehammer to the psyche when he realised his old friend had been dead longer than he ever knew him. And to that Parlabane could add the survivor's guilt of realising how long it had been since he'd even thought of the guy.

‘Mairi. Sure. I haven’t seen you . . .’

(. . . since the funeral.)

‘Yeah,’ she said, not wanting to go there either. ‘You’re in Edinburgh now, is that right?’

‘Not this second. I’m actually at King’s Cross, waiting for a train.’

‘Don’t get on it. I need to talk to you about something. In person.’

Parlabane hadn’t seen Mairi in fifteen years, but they had clearly been kind to her. She stood in the doorway of a Hoxton flat dressed in black designer jeans and a leather jacket, her hair in a tinted black bob that looked expensively tasteful, matching her skin tone so as not to draw attention to the dye-job. He knew she had to be forty-one or forty-two, so she was maybe on the cusp of dressing a little young for her age, but she was carrying it off.

Back in another lifetime, Mairi had been Donald’s trendy little sister: brassy, stylish and constantly insinuating herself into her big brother’s world, where she wasn’t welcome; at least not in Donald’s view. There was one lurking in the background of every male adolescence: the mate’s younger sister who you secretly fancied but you knew it was wrong and anyway it was never going to happen. She was way too cool for you, and even if your seniority gave you some cachet, you didn’t want to be one of those creepy guys dating a girl three years younger.

So how old did that make him feel, to recall a time when three years seemed like a major difference?

She beckoned him inside and led him to the kitchen. On the way there, he had briefly wondered why she had a couch in her hall, before realising that the narrow passageway was actually her living room. She got a couple of beers from the fridge and placed them on the kitchen table alongside a blue folder and a small pile of magazines. *Mojo* was on top, *Q* underneath, and possibly *Tatler* at the foot of the pile. This last immediately made Parlabane think Mairi must be doing very well for herself, as in his experience the only people who read it were women of her age who fitted that description, or much younger ones hoping to marry men who fitted that description.



They traded small talk, which mainly consisted of Parlabane asking Mairi sufficient questions about herself as to prevent her from reciprocating. He felt acutely conscious of it *being* small talk, and yet it felt all the more necessary in order to paper over the weirdness. This wasn't merely two people who hadn't spoken in fifteen years, but two people whose cumulative conversation prior to that could comfortably have been transcribed on a Sinclair ZX80.

'So what is it you do with yourself?' he asked, not having gleaned much data from his brief transit through her home. A glance at her left hand established the absence of any significant rings, but although that didn't preclude the existence of a significant other, this really wasn't an area he wanted to get into.

'I'm in the music business. I've got my own management company.'

'Oh, wow,' he said, pitching at impressed but not surprised, hoping not to sound patronising. 'What's it called?'

'LAF-M. As in Lafferty, Mairi, but pronounced like *la femme*.'

'Which acts do you manage?' he asked, hoping to hell he had heard of one of them and that it wasn't some *X-Factor* maggot he wanted to machine-gun.

'I started off managing Cassidy. Remember them?'

Parlabane did. They were an all-girl vocal group who had enjoyed a number-one hit around 2002. They had been indistinguishable from their peers and would have barely stuck in his memory but for the fact that they had also hit the top ten with an utterly unlikely cover of 'She Knows' by Balaam and the Angel.

Now, more than a decade later, Parlabane finally worked out why.

'"She Knows",' he said. 'That was your idea.'

Mairi nodded but didn't elaborate. They both knew she didn't have to. Donald had been a big Balaam fan, spending hours back-combing those goth-locks of his before a police regulation shearing saw them gone for ever.

'And what about these days?' he asked.

'We'll get to that,' she replied. 'It's why I'm here. I want to offer you a job.'

‘In music management?’ he asked, laughing.

‘No. Something a little closer to your normal beat. I’m prepared to pay you a daily rate of three hundred pounds, plus expenses.’

Parlabane tried to remain impassive, but there was little point in pretending it didn’t sound generous. However, it did also sound temporary, so he didn’t reckon she was about to pitch him a gig as a press officer.

‘My normal beat? Investigative reporter?’

‘Investigative, yes. Reporting not so much. In fact, you might say it was the opposite of journalism, because the point is to keep it quiet.’

‘I thought the opposite of journalism was royal correspondent, but I’m listening. What is it you want me to look into?’

She winced rather apologetically, picking at the foil on the neck of her beer bottle.

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you until you agree to do it. This is something that would be a big story if anyone found out, and I need to prevent that from happening. Discretion is everything here. I’m sorry.’

‘So let me get this clear: you want me to look into something that would be a big story, but I’m not allowed to tell anybody?’

‘I know it goes against the grain, Jack, but that’s why I’m prepared to pay.’

‘So why not hire a private investigator?’

‘It’s delicate. I need someone who can investigate people without them realising they’re being investigated. A journalist asking questions would be perfectly normal, and you’ve got a plausible pedigree.’

So she knew about all the soft-soap stuff he’d written for the music glossies. It had been during a time post-Leveson when he still had friends in the industry and his hard-bitten reputation was actually a plus point for the magazines when they were pitching to bands for an interview. Even then he had regarded it as a form of selling out, but that was *before*. These days he’d bite your hand off if you offered a gig interviewing One Direction for *Hello!*.

‘Why don’t you just tell me, Mairi?’ he reasoned. ‘There’s something redundant about demanding a non-disclosure agreement from

a guy that nobody would listen to even if he did disclose it. Which I won't, by the way. You've come to me in confidence.'

Mairi sighed and gave her head a tiny shake.

'Sorry, Jack. I can't do that. No offence, and I appreciate how it must sound, me not taking you at your word after all you did for Donald, but that's just how this has to be.'

Christ, he thought: how big must this story be if she's prepared to walk away, after admitting she was low on alternatives?

Even as he asked himself this, consumed by the eager curiosity he had been addicted to for decades, he realised that she *wasn't* prepared to walk away, and not because she was bluffing. She had known before she called him at King's Cross that it wouldn't come to this, because he would be the one to fold.

'Okay,' he told her. 'I'm not fighting off alternative employment offers with a shitty stick, but then I think you probably knew that.'

Just to underline that she did, Mairi produced the pre-prepared NDA from inside the blue folder.

Parlabane paused only a moment over the document before applying his pen, pondering whether being paid *not* to write a story marked a new low.

'At least I don't need to sweat that this is some Mephistophelean deal. I sold my soul so long ago I'd need to ring my accountant to find out who bought it.'

Mairi didn't laugh, nor even smile.

'If that were true, I wouldn't have asked you here.'

'So why *have* you asked me here?' he enquired, having signed for the right to do so.

Mairi slid her copies of *Q* and *Mojo* out of the way and pointed, rather unexpectedly, to *Tatler*, which she spun around so that it was facing Parlabane the right way up. He scanned the tag lines, picking up on the words 'Savage Earth Heart's warrior women', which was when he realised that one of the two figures posed in ancient battle dress on the cover was Heike Gunn. He hadn't recognised her at first, not so much because of the Roman costume, but due to her signature porcelain-blond curls having been replaced by flowing locks dyed a cheap-looking shade of pink.

‘You manage Savage Earth Heart?’ he asked, impressed, but this time unable to conceal the surprise in his tone.

‘For the past two years, just about.’

‘I gather Ms Gunn’s a bit of a control freak.’

This was the polite version. ‘Manipulative psycho bitch’ was the phrase that best suited the accounts he’d heard.

‘She takes on too many burdens,’ Mairi replied, with what sounded like dutiful neutrality. There was something else there too, but he couldn’t pinpoint what.

‘She emptied one of the founding members, if I recall. Who’s playing fiddle for them now?’

Mairi pointed to *Tatler* again, indicating the other cover girl. Parlabane belatedly noticed that the object she was balletically thrusting towards Heike was not in fact a sword, but a violin bow.

‘Monica Halcrow,’ Mairi said, slightly incredulous, slightly irritated. ‘You telling me you didn’t see the photos?’

Parlabane realised he was a few pages behind and haemorrhaging ‘down with the kids’ points.

‘What photos? Safe to say I’ve been focused on other stuff recently.’

‘Never mind. What’s more pertinent is that the third album – *Smuggler’s Soul* – is due for release in just over a fortnight, coinciding with a thirty-five-date US tour. It’s the first major-label release of a three-album deal with Sentinel, who are putting serious marketing muscle behind this. The band have just completed a sell-out tour of Europe and the new single, “Stolen Glances”, is currently top ten in seventeen territories. The world is at Heike’s feet.’

‘It certainly sounds like it. So what’s the problem?’

‘I don’t know where the fuck she is.’