



from inner-city streets
to the corridors
of power

BONE & CANINE

'An incredibly tense page-turner' NICOLA MONAGHAN

DAVID BELBIN

At university in 1984 Sarah Bone and Nick Cane are very much in love, united in politics and protest. But when one chooses to join the police, they're sent down very different paths . . .

In Nottingham, 1997, Labour MP Sarah Bone celebrates a successful campaign to secure an appeal for convicted murderer Ed Clark. But at the party she discovers, in the most frightening way, that he might be guilty after all. Driven to uncover the truth about Ed and right any injustice, she also has to fight the most important election of a generation, one she is expected to lose. Sarah needs help.

Nick Cane is fresh out of prison after serving five years for growing wholesale quantities of cannabis. As a former activist, he'd like to join Sarah's campaign team but shouldn't be seen talking to her now. Working illegally as a cabby for his brother, he finds he's now a colleague of Ed Clark. And since he's seeing Polly Bolton, the sister of the man Ed is meant to have murdered, Nick needs to find the truth as much as Sarah does.

The old chemistry sparks as the couple are pushed back together to try to expose Ed Clark. Can an MP keep her relationship with an ex-con hidden from the media? And can Nick work out who betrayed him to the police five years earlier?

Bone and Cane introduces an original partnership for a major new crime series that moves between inner-city streets and the corridors of power to expose the criminal underbelly of the New Labour years.

'A compelling story that threw me right back to the 1997 election. Spare, uncompromising and very well written' Nicola Monaghan

About the Author

David Belbin is the author of more than thirty novels aimed at teenagers and his work has been translated into twenty-five languages.

He was born in Sheffield but has lived in Nottingham since going to university there; he now teaches Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University. This is his debut crime novel for adults.

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For James and Jane Urquhart

MARCH 1997

Members of Parliament can be many things. Campaigners. Law makers. Media personalities. Even detectives, of a public kind. One thing MPs can't be is shit-faced in public, especially in their own constituency. In the House, it was okay to let your hair down. When you were guest of honour at a very public party, it wasn't wise to be one drink away from legless. Sarah was well aware of this. But tonight she had a right to celebrate.

'Another?' The stocky man with the shaved head and fat neck had already planted two slobbery kisses on her lips. Sarah was determined to avoid a third.

'I'm going to take a pause,' she shouted. 'I've drunk enough already.'

Ed had been inside for several years, so he wouldn't be used to heavy social drinking. Yet he didn't look drunk, not as drunk as Sarah felt.

The PA blasted out 'Free Nelson Mandela'.

'Want a word,' he yelled over the music. 'Come outside for a minute.'

Ed had been given two life sentences for a double murder. The first victim was a police officer, Terry Shanks, who Ed had a grudge against. The second victim was the police officer's young wife, Liv. She had probably been raped before she was murdered, but Ed had not been charged with that.

Sarah, campaigning in a by-election that she wasn't expected to win, had made all sorts of promises to the voters. One of them was that, if elected, she would raise Ed's case in the House of Commons. She'd kept her promise, even helped found the campaign group that organized tonight's celebration. The more she found out about Ed's case, the more dodgy the conviction had looked, but his first application for appeal was turned down. This despite the only forensic connecting Ed to the scene – a hair on the carpet – being highly questionable.

Last year, Sarah had agreed to visit Clark in Nottingham Prison. She'd not been in a prison before, so arranged for the governor to show her round.

'You're the first politician we've had for a while,' he told her. 'We get the occasional judge or magistrate, but mainly it's out of sight, out of mind.'

Afterwards, the smell stayed with her for hours: stale, cooked cabbage, probably masking the stench of sweat and urine. She couldn't forget the wretched clothes of the men on the lifer's wing: cheap, worn-out rags that a charity shop would reject. Everything about the place made her question the justice system. It was so hopeless, so hateful. She expected prison to have taken its toll on Clark, but when they met, he was all smiles.

'You had a wander round then?'

‘Just a short one.’

‘I could tell by look on your face. It’s grim. But you learn to get by.’

Ed was far more cheerful than ninety per cent of the people who attended her MP’s surgeries. There was no swagger about him. He even took care to look at her face rather than her chest. He had fair hair then, which made him appear younger, softer.

‘I’ve made lots of mistakes in my life, but a double murder weren’t one of them,’ he told her. ‘Terry Shanks were one of theirs, so the police needed a result. I was the obvious suspect. But you’d have to be bloody stupid to kill the guy who put you inside only a couple of weeks after they released you.’

Sarah agreed that you would. Ed didn’t come across in the least stupid. Inside, he told her, he’d taken A levels in Sociology, Economics and Law, got good grades. He planned to start an Open University degree course.

‘You’ve got to do something to take your mind off life inside. The time I did before was enough to make me go straight. I’d never risk them sending me back, no matter how much I wanted revenge. Anyway, I weren’t bothered about getting back at Terry Shanks. He were only doing his job.’

Sarah believed Ed. The more she looked into the case, the more she thought that Clark’s conviction was a classic miscarriage of justice. Strong emotions had overwhelmed both judge and jury, resulting in a flawed verdict.

That visit to Nottingham Prison was a turning point in Sarah’s new parliamentary career. She had found an area that she wanted to focus on. She joined the Howard League for Penal Reform, began reading up on prisons, wrote to newspapers and the Director of Public Prosecutions, highlighted inconsistencies in the evidence that convicted Clark. The group she’d set up circulated a petition, organized a letter-writing campaign. At last, Ed was given leave to appeal. Yesterday lunchtime, Ed Clark’s conviction had been quashed.

Sarah followed the freed man out of the ballroom. In the corridor, he squeezed her arse. Sarah didn’t complain. Today, of all days, Ed could be excused for behaving badly. Sarah was aware that Ed fancied her. Some level of desire was the background hum to most of her relationships with straight men and she had become adept at avoiding unwanted advances. Her signals were only mixed if she intended them to be.

Once they were outside, the October breeze sobered her a little. There were other people on the balcony beyond the ballroom, but none within listening distance. Without warning, Ed gripped Sarah’s left thigh with his large right hand. He leant into her right ear.

‘You and me are going to celebrate in my room. Tonight.’

‘That’s very flattering,’ Sarah began, then realized the line wasn’t strong enough to deflect an ex-con the day after he’d got out. This evening, Ed’s prison humility had been replaced by a brute arrogance.

‘There are a dozen women in there who’d go upstairs with me the moment I clicked my fingers. You’re the only one I want.’

His hand moved another inch up her thigh. It didn’t pinch. Nor did it faze her: alcohol helped that way. She might have found the firmness of Ed’s grasp exciting had it come from a man she fancied.

‘I’m sorry, Ed. I have a boyfriend.’

‘I don’t give a shit,’ Ed whispered, hand stretching to the panty line. ‘You want me too. I know what makes you tick. When you visited me inside, I could see you thinking, *I hope he’s innocent, because really want to fuck him.*’

‘You’ve got it wrong. I helped you because you’re one of my constituents, nothing more. Now I have to go.’

She pulled away.

‘My room’s number seven, when you change your mind.’

Ed wasn’t a bad bloke. He was a randy, working class lad with a home-made tattoo on one arm and a hard-on for his local MP. Sarah empathised. When you’d served four and a half years for a crime you didn’t commit, you were desperate to get your end away. But she’d never succumbed to doling out a sympathy shag, not even with men she fancied. Not even when pissed.

Tonight, Ed had handled rejection well, all things considered. She’d had to fight off more assertive approaches from half a dozen of her fellow MPs. But now it was time to leave. Sarah hurried past several couples and found herself in the corridor behind the back of the over-lit ballroom. She’d noticed a public phone booth somewhere round here.

Not this corridor. One of these days, she would get herself a mobile phone. She took a turn at the end, noting that the fleur-de-lys pattern in the pale purple carpet was starting to move about. That was what came of letting people buy you doubles. There the booth was, next to Reception, where Ed Clark was getting his key from the desk. Sarah ducked into the phone booth, out of sight.

Dan answered on the tenth ring.

‘Tell me you haven’t had a drink.’

‘I haven’t had a drink. Sounds like you have, though.’

‘Is it that obvious? Look, I could really stand being rescued. If you turn up, we could make a graceful exit. And I’d owe you one.’

‘Did you remember to have anything to eat?’

‘Finger food.’

‘And you wonder why you’re drunk. Where are you?’ She named the hotel. ‘Twenty minutes. But don’t make me hang around. I was about to turn in.’

Sarah stepped out of the booth and tried to work out the quickest route back to the ballroom. Maybe she should freshen up first. Had she passed a bathroom? There was bound to be one by Reception. Sarah looked down the hall to make sure Ed had gone.

‘Sarah!’

Ed was coming out of his room, key in hand. Before she could head him off, he was upon her, an arm hooking beneath her elbow, as if to hold her up, then locking around her waist.

‘Glad I found you, duck. I knew you’d change your mind. Sorry about before. I shouldn’t have tried it on in public like that.’

He steered Sarah towards his room. The door hung open. She’d made a real pig’s ear of this. They were within earshot of Reception. News of any incident would be all over the party in minutes. Would it be easier to go into Ed’s ground floor room, sort it out there? Ed pushed her inside and the decision became irrelevant. Number seven. She’d have noticed it when walking past if she hadn’t been so slaughtered.

‘Don’t close the door.’

He ignored her. At least he didn’t lock it. There was a glazed look in his eyes that hadn’t been there minutes earlier. Sarah realized he’d taken something. There, on the dressing table, was a tell-tale white trail.

‘I was ringing my boyfriend. He’s coming to collect me. I’m sorry, Ed. I thought I made myself clear.’

‘We’d best be quick, then.’

He let go of her, had his hand on the buckle of his jeans. Now was the time to act. Still, Sarah hesitated. She was due to make two public appearances with Ed in the next week. He unzipped his flies.

‘Ed, it’s not going to happen. I’ve got to go.’

He grabbed her by both buttocks and pulled her towards him. This was getting out of hand. Sarah

wished she hadn't worn a dress. He was a sweaty animal, his erection digging into her waist.

'Ed, that's enough.'

He knocked her to the floor. Before she could react further, he clicked shut the lock on the hotel door and began to pull down his jeans. He got one leg off and she tried to get up, but he put a foot on her stomach, pressing her back down. In a moment of clarity, Sarah saw that she would have only one chance to fend him off. He lifted his foot in order to finish pulling off his jeans. She moaned and turned onto her left side.

He gave a growl of arousal and began to lower himself onto her. Sarah pulled back her right leg.

'Stop!' she said again.

Ed held himself up with his left arm. With his right he tried to push Sarah onto her back. This was it. Sarah let her shoulder fall. He thought she was succumbing. Then, instead of rolling onto her back she thrust her right knee into his groin.

Ed yelled and rolled off her, cursing. Sarah got to her feet. Her best green dress was ripped, she realized. Time to unlock the door. What did you do? Press? No, turn. Or maybe that thing on the side. Too late. Ed grabbed her ankles, pulling her down. Sarah lost balance and slipped. She landed hard on the matt green carpet. Her face was next to his. His eyes had watered from the pain, but he was grinning. How long before he recovered sufficiently to start again?

'I'll scream,' she told him. 'Someone will come. You don't want that.'

It was the stuff he'd taken, she told herself: coke, speed, some shitty street drug . . . With one hand he held her down, scratching her thigh with the other as he ripped her knickers down her legs. For a moment, he stared at her pubic hair. Next, he bunched her knickers in his right hand and held them to his nose.

'Frightened cunt,' he whispered in her ear. 'Lovely.'

Then he let go. It was as if that was all he'd wanted. Sarah stood quickly, put on her shoes. Ed sat up, legs apart, still in pain. This time, she remembered how to open the door – press in the switch on the side, turn the knob to the left. Ed began to speak softly.

'I did it, you know. Killed him and fucked her. She enjoyed it, I can tell you. Same way you'd enjoy it if you let yourself. Ashamed how much she enjoyed it, with hubby dead in the corner. Begged me to kill her too. So I did.'

The smile on his face was smug, rather than demented. Sarah couldn't read him well enough to know if he was telling the truth.

'I'm going to pretend none of this happened,' she said, in her MP's voice, like that put her in control. 'But I don't want to see you again. The rest of the week, the media stuff, don't show up. Call in ill or I'll have you arrested for assault.'

He lifted her knickers to his nose and sniffed them again. Sarah hurried down the corridor, out through Reception, into the chilly car park. She stood in the cool and collected herself. Then she hurried back in, used the bathroom and returned to the ballroom for her bag. She told the chair of the Campaign Committee that, sorry, she was exhausted and had to leave: no fuss please. There were no comments about the small rip in the side of her dress.

Ten minutes or so passed before Dan found her, waiting in the car park, holding her dress down over her cold bum. He didn't notice that she was shivering, but kissed her on the cheek.

'Quick getaway for once, huh?'

She nodded. During the drive home, Sarah only managed a couple of words, but if Dan made anything of this, he took it as drunken tiredness. They didn't talk as much as they used to, weren't as interested in each other's lives as partners ought to be. That was one of the reasons why, only a few days ago, they had tentatively agreed to split up. Neither of them could be bothered to try.

As soon as they got in, Sarah showered. In bed, when Sarah didn't respond to his caress, Dan turned

over. Within minutes, he was snoring. Sarah lay awake, thinking about Ed Clark's confession to double murder. She tried to convince herself that he was only winding her up.

Sarah sat in the plush Pugin Rooms, one of the House of Commons' less busy watering holes, uncertain whether she'd chosen the right outfit. She wore a Planet navy suit, aligned with a pale cream Ghost blouse. Lately the party had taken on a fashion consultant who advised women members on what to wear. Sarah tried to follow that advice, in the Commons at least, although a lot of the suggestions made her look like an 1980s bonds trader without the shoulder pads. She avoided heels, opting for plain Clarks flats with a decent sole. When you did as much walking as she did, you couldn't deny the need for sensible shoes.

'You've changed your hair. It looks great,' Donald said, by way of a greeting. Donald was Labour's Chief Whip, a dapper Scot.

'Thank you,' Sarah said, though she hadn't changed the style in two years. Her long, brown hair was a pain to manage. She had grown it to impress selection conferences with her femininity and she did like the way it framed her face. Having thick hair also hid her rather pointy ears, a family trait that reminded older members who her grandfather was. Sir Hugh Bone had been in Wilson's 1960s Labour cabinet. She'd soon tired of comments about the resemblance.

'Thanks for joining me.' Donald summoned a waiter with much the same casual authority as he'd summoned Sarah to meet him. She knew what he wanted. Sarah was the party's new spokesperson on miscarriages of justice. The evening before, she'd been on *Newsnight* accusing the Tories of wanting to abolish trial by jury. She'd gone off on one and added a line on the spread of HIV in British prisons going a step beyond party policy. She'd expected to be admonished, but not so urgently. With an election on the way, party discipline was moving into overdrive. She listened politely to her dressing down.

'I made it clear that I was venturing a personal opinion, not policy,' she responded when the Chief Whip was done.

'Needle exchanges in prisons, no matter how sensible, sound bad to the public,' Donald told her. 'We can't be soft on drugs.'

'In that case, the party has to support handing out condoms on demand,' Sarah argued.

'The Prison Officers Association wouldn't even consider that,' Donald said. 'There are all sorts of uses for condoms. But there's no point in getting into these operational issues until we're in government. And government is what I want to talk to you about.'

Their tea arrived. Sarah lifted the lid off the pot, gave the tea bags a stir, then let it rest a minute before pouring.

'You did well with that miscarriage of justice, must have done you a power of good in your constituency. Hasn't hurt you nationally, either, though the guy doesn't sound like a saint.'

'He isn't,' Sarah said, trying to keep the weekend's party at the back of her mind. 'But I think he'll

keep his nose clean, not embarrass us.'

~~'That's good. You're doing some media with him, I'm told.'~~

'Nothing controversial, I promise.'

In fact, after what happened last Saturday, she had pulled out of her joint TV appearance with Ed. It was only local TV, anyway. Sarah splashed a dash of milk into her bone china cup, then poured the tea.

'I'm sure that will be useful exposure in the run up to an election but – let's be frank – not useful enough. That's why I wanted to see you.' Donald tested the temperature of his tea. 'We'd like you in the government, Sarah. You're exactly the kind of person Tony wants to represent New Labour. But I can only appoint you if you're still an MP. Even our most optimistic polls show you falling short of re-election.'

'I know.' It had taken a big by-election swing for Sarah to get elected, two years ago. Nottingham West was normally a safe Conservative seat. Sarah stood at a time when the Tories were at only twenty-five per cent in the opinion polls and got in with a majority of five thousand. But by-election victories always reverted to the original holders. It was one of the ineluctable rules of British elections. Support for the government party would need to drop to below thirty per cent for Sarah to stand a chance this time.

'Am I missing something here? Do you not want to continue?'

'I want to continue. But Nottingham's my home, as well as my constituency. I can't let people down. After the general election, I'll look for another seat. A by-election, maybe . . .'

'And lose your chance? What will you do in the meantime? Work as a lobbyist while Johnnies-come-lately get the start you should have had? Wise up, Sarah. There won't be any by-elections, not Labour seats. Everybody who's ill or needs pensioning off will make a sudden exit in the next few days. It's already started. Soon it'll be a flood. If you want a move, I'll hold you a place. But I need to know now.'

Sarah sipped her tea. She was being offered the chance to behave like a Tory. Lots of their top players were being extricated from marginal constituencies and given safe seats to contest in the forthcoming election. For example, Barrett Jones, a member of the Tory cabinet, was standing against her. His old seat had become marginal after boundary changes, so he was deserting it. But Sarah wasn't a deserter.

'I appreciate the offer, Donald, I really do. However, if you're going to press me for an instant decision, it'd have to be a no. Can I have the weekend to think it over?'

Donald nodded. 'I can't promise, but we'd try and get you a Yorkshire or Derbyshire seat. Local roots help calm the locals when there isn't time for a full selection contest. Talk to me on Monday.'

He left Sarah alone with her strong tea. If the party had her parachuted into a new constituency at the last minute, could she live with that? A Yorkshire seat. It was very tempting, if it could be handled adroitly. But she already had a fallback plan. Her family came from Chesterfield, where Tony Benn had hinted that he meant to stand down at the next election but one. As a local girl, she'd stand a good chance there.

That said, selection processes were never a sure thing. In Nottingham West she'd had to defeat a former council leader, an ex-MP and two favourites of the hard left when she was selected to fight a by-election that was meant to be unwinnable.

Any minute now, the division bell would sound. Sarah finished her tea and tried to remember where the nearest Ladies was. This place wasn't designed for women – you always had to plan a pee. The Junior Trade Minister walked in. Sarah gave Jasper March the smallest nod.

'Have you got a moment, Sarah?' She sat on a select committee with Jasper, one of the less obnoxious Tories.

‘Thirty seconds.’

‘~~Could you spare me a couple of hours if I stood you dinner? Something I need to talk over. You choose the restaurant.~~’

Good food was a weakness of Sarah’s that she rarely had time to indulge. An MP’s salary meant she could afford to eat well, but few Labour colleagues shared her tastes and Dan wasn’t much of a gourmet. Sarah didn’t like to dine alone. She checked her diary.

‘I can do Quaglinos after the vote on Tuesday.’

‘Brilliant.’

This use of *brilliant* as a synonym for ‘really good’ was unexpected in a Tory minister, even a youngish one. Sarah wondered what he wanted.

While she waited for her question to come up, Sarah tried not to think about how different her life would be if she had a safe seat. Her turn came at 3.27 p.m. This was going out live on the BBC. She had brushed back her long, brown hair and hoped that her blue tailored suit made her look slim. She gave the number of her question. The PM referred her back to his earlier answer. Then Sarah rose again.

‘Will the Prime Minister show his concern about the spread of HIV and Hepatitis B in Her Majesty’s Prisons by allowing prison governors to sanction the free distribution of condoms to all inmates who require them?’

There were boos and animal-like jeers from the government benches. The PM blathered about understanding her concerns, but not wishing to do anything that might encourage drug taking.

‘The honourable gentleman seems to have misunderstood. I am not advocating needle exchanges in prisons, although there are strong arguments in favour of such action. I am suggesting urgent measures to reduce the tragic and costly spread of HIV through anal sex between prisoners.’

At the mention of anal sex, the PM’s eyes glazed over.

‘I have no such plans at this time.’

The Chief Whip joined Sarah as she left the chamber.

‘I can see tomorrow’s tabloid headlines: *New Labour Backs Gay Sex Orgies in Prisons*. Very helpful.’

He was playing at being angry. Or so she hoped.

‘Remember,’ Donald said. ‘I need a decision by Monday.’

Sarah took the 16.29 from St Pancras.

‘How does Ed Clark feel now he’s out?’ asked Brian Hicks. Brian, formerly the crime correspondent for the *Nottingham Evening Post*, was now their political editor. He was a small, fifty-something, roly-poly man with a dry wit and a constant thirst.

‘Haven’t you asked him?’ Sarah was surprised Clark hadn’t given Brian an interview. The paper had covered her campaign sympathetically.

‘I would, but he’s gone to Tunisia for a break. Paid for by the *Mirror*, who he’s sold his story to. When his compensation comes through, he should be a wealthy man. Half a million, he’s told his mates.’

‘Money can’t replace five lost years of freedom.’

‘Don’t get sentimental on me,’ Brian said. ‘Ed Clark was always a scrote. Half a million pounds is untold riches for someone like him.’

‘Ed did A levels in prison. He’s intelligent enough to use the money well.’

‘If you say so,’ Brian replied. ‘I presume now it’s established that Clark didn’t do it, you’ll be campaigning for the police to find the real killer.’

‘That’s for the police, not me.’

‘Off the record, the police are saying they’re not looking for anyone else. You know what that means, don’t you?’

‘I really can’t comment, Brian, on or off the record. I’m sorry.’

‘Either they’re still convinced Ed did it, or they blame the wife.’

Brian left the train at Leicester. He was heading for Derbyshire, where he and his wife had a weekend cottage. But his question wouldn’t go away. A police officer and his wife were dead. They had two children and wider families, all of whom deserved answers. Ed Clark was a scrote, a minor villain who’d picked up a handful of burglary and violence convictions over the years. The first four had resulted in non-custodial sentences. The day after Ed was released from a six-month sentence for his fifth offence, Terry Shanks, the policeman who’d put him in prison, had been murdered. His wife Liv, who had recently had sex, was found dead beside their bed. Both victims had been shot. Terry had also been bashed in the head, almost certainly before the shooting. The bodies were discovered when a neighbour brought the Shanks’ children home from primary school because their mother had failed to collect them.

There had been no direct evidence that Liv Shanks was raped. She had some vaginal tearing, a couple of bruises, and traces of a lubricant used on Durex. If Ed had raped Liv Shanks, he’d worn a condom. Some of Ed’s defenders suggested that Terry Shanks, the other murder victim, had raped his own wife and was also responsible for the bruises. Forensics showed that Terry had had sex within the previous twenty-four hours. In this theory, Liv knocked him out with a heavy blow to the head, then shot both him and herself with the unregistered gun Terry had recently bought for protection. According to the defence at Ed’s appeal, only a dodgy copper would keep such a gun. Liv, in the defence’s version, had killed Terry as retribution for marital rape, then killed herself rather than let the children know their mother had killed their father.

Forensics was not as exact a science as the TV shows suggested. Sarah didn’t have a theory as to who had killed the husband and wife. She only knew that the evidence against Clark, her constituent, was incredibly flimsy. DNA testing was in its infancy when the murders took place, but it was established that a used condom found in the bedroom bin contained Terry Shanks’ sperm. The prosecution had motivation, a disputed hair on the carpet and a dodgy witness – a neighbour who claimed she saw Clark leave the house half an hour before the bodies were found. In court, the defence drew out several inconsistencies in her testimony.

When Sarah first heard about the case, early in her by-election campaign, she figured that the imprisoned man was probably guilty. Ed Clark, a taxi driver, had a poor alibi. His girlfriend at the time worked as a prostitute on the Woodborough Road. She claimed Ed was watching out for her, but she had been with clients on and off that day. The Shanks lived less than two miles away, in Mapperley. Ed could have been there and back in half an hour.

By taking on Ed’s case, she turned a few friends into enemies. Some were police officers who had been colleagues during her brief stint in the force, ten years before. Privately, other officers told Sarah that they shared her doubts. The new evidence that swung the appeal was proof that the murder weapon, far from belonging to Ed, had been in Terry Shanks’ possession for several months before the murders.

If Ed didn’t do it, what had really happened? Sarah never did make up her mind. She didn’t think that Liv Shanks had killed her husband, then herself. There was no motive for that. A burglary gone wrong? Nothing had been taken. After Ed’s drunken boasts, Sarah had even less idea what to think. She only knew that the evidence against him was wafer-thin. The Law Lords agreed and he had won his appeal. Therefore Ed deserved to go free.

The appeal wouldn’t have happened but for Sarah. Most of the campaign’s supporters believed in her far more than they did in the alleged victim of injustice. If Ed committed new crimes, people

would hold Sarah responsible. And rightly so.

Quaglino's was half empty, which suited Sarah fine. She told Jasper March about Donald Dewar's offer of the week before.

'He gave me until yesterday. I thought of discussing it with my agent. The local party probably would have let me go, wished me well, all that. But they wouldn't have meant it and I'd have hated myself for ever. So I called him and said that I was staying in Nottingham West.'

'You did the right thing,' Jasper March told Sarah, then drained his espresso. 'I can see the decision's starting to eat away at you. Don't let it. Once you show the whips you'll put ambition over everything else, they've got you.'

'That's reassuring,' Sarah said.

They were on after-dinner brandies. March, ten years her senior, was an old fashioned Tory with old-fashioned good looks: square jaw, jet black hair, not too much tummy. Their conversation had been absorbing enough for the food to be of secondary importance. They'd had two bottles of Madiran: a complex, tannin-rich wine that complemented the game they'd eaten. Jasper had drunk more than her, but only a little. Sarah was pissed enough to be relaxed. Pissed enough to fancy him a little, even though he was too smooth to be her type. She'd been surprised when he asked her to dinner.

Jasper hadn't given the slightest hint of flirtation all evening, so she was probably safe from making a drunken fool of herself. She could count the number of men she'd slept with after drinking too much on the fingers of one hand. All three she regretted. Jasper was a barrister, she reminded herself, searching for something to talk about.

'Do you still practise?'

'No need to practise. I'm pretty good at it by now.'

She forced a smile. Jasper had made it clear to her that his marriage was over, that he would divorce after the election regardless of whether he held his seat. So maybe he was flirting, in a cack-handed way.

'I meant the law.'

'Not since I joined the government. But I'll keep my hand in – when – I mean *if* – we get shown the door. Politics isn't the be-all-and-end-all. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, nothing.' A waiter returned with Jasper's credit card. 'Why did you ask . . . me out to dinner, mean,' Sarah said, as the minister helped her on with her coat. 'I got the impression you had a specific thing you wanted to discuss with me.'

'I did have an excuse worked out,' Jasper said, with a rehearsed chuckle. 'Do you know, I can't for the life of me remember what it was.'

It didn't matter how pissed she was, or how long it had been since she had had a shag, Sarah would

not sleep with Jasper tonight. But she decided not to rule out the possibility of sleeping with him in the future. ~~When he put an arm around her waist as they were leaving the restaurant, she didn't~~ remove it. She didn't quite reciprocate either, only leant into him enough to let him see that his attentions weren't entirely unwelcome. Then the flashbulbs started going off.

Twenty minutes later, when she got back to her one-bedroom retreat in Parliament View, she rang Dan.

'I thought I ought to warn you, there'll be some press sniffing around tomorrow. They might even try to get to you at work.'

She explained what had happened with Jasper March.

'You don't waste much time, do you? I only moved out yesterday.'

'He said he wanted advice, not a date. Or a beard for the tabloids.'

'They won't get to me, but thanks for the warning. You ought to tell Winston.'

Winston was Sarah's electoral agent. She poured herself a pint of water before getting into bed. It was a double bed, though Dan had rarely come over from Nottingham to share it with her. His social-work job kept him there in the week and often left him drained at the weekends. They had been together for two years and could easily have drifted on for another two. Until one of them met somebody who really excited them. But Sarah was too busy to meet new people and Dan quite enjoyed having an MP as his partner. He didn't seem to mind theirs being a weekend-only relationship. Nor did he object vociferously when Sarah suggested that he move out. Indeed, he'd managed the whole thing in less than a month.

'At least they called you "a rising star",' Steve Carter told Sarah, six days later. Steve Carter was the closest friend Sarah had on the Labour benches. They were having a late lunch in Sarah's favourite small Italian restaurant, at a table well away from the window. The purpose of the lunch was to discuss damage limitation after the Jasper March story had been splashed all over the Tory tabloids. Sarah often acted as a soundboard for Steve and he, less often, did the same for her. 'And the serious Sundays didn't touch it,' he went on. 'They could tell that the story was a crock.'

'The *Mail On Sunday* had a nasty paragraph,' Sarah said. She had glanced at the papers on Sunday but not really taken them in.

'People who vote for you don't read the *Mail On Sunday*.'

'If I had some of their readers, I might have a chance of winning. "How did they know we were going to be there?" I asked him. "Somebody at the restaurant must have called them," he said. No fucking way. You should have seen him grab me as we went through the door – he knew they were outside. What I don't know is why he needed to do it.'

'His divorce is about to hit the papers,' Steve said. 'He's doing what we do every time we announce a watered-down policy – *getting his betrayal in first*.'

'You mean he'd rather be exposed as an adulterer than a cuckold?'

'My guess is he's hardly a cuckold. It was always a marriage of convenience, but she's fallen for someone else.'

'You mean. Oh shit, I mean, I knew about . . .' Sarah named the three most prominent gay Tory MPs, 'but March . . .'

'I'm pretty sure that's it. He escaped my gaydar for a while. But here's how I guessed: during my first few weeks here, he was quite friendly. When I came out, he became perceptibly cooler. He's too slick to be a homophobe. *Ergo* . . .'

'He didn't want to be gay by association. Fuck me.'

'You're asking the wrong man, sweetie.'

Steve had got in at the last election, after nine years working for the Low Pay Unit. He had come on shortly after being elected, and survived a lot of stick in his constituency as a consequence. Shortly after Steve came out, the former party leader, John Smith, showing his tolerance, made him an education spokesman. More recently, Tony Blair had made Steve shadow second in Transport. As Steve's career prospered, the local prejudice had quietened down.

'Excuse me.' Sarah looked round to see that she and Steve weren't the only MPs in the restaurant. She just wanted to say, treat it like water off a duck's back. It's the only way.' The speaker was Gill Temperley, a Home Office minister who had prospered under the current Prime Minister. 'Gossip's the engine oil of politics,' she went on. 'If you can, best to be flattered by it, to use it.'

'Like Jasper used me?' Sarah asked.

'I'm sure you'll find a way to use him back.' Gill gave her a wink which was almost dirty before gliding out of the room, followed at a discreet distance by a tall young man with a mop of blonde hair.

'Didn't know you two were friendly,' Steve said when they'd gone.

'That's the first time we've spoken.'

'A Compassionate Conservative. I thought they were a media myth.'

Sarah tried to work out how to phrase a delicate question. Steve was better at collecting gossip than she was. Pushing fifty, Gill was attractive, but not overwhelmingly so. In Parliament, as Sarah had found, a reasonable figure and a pretty face made any woman into an object of lust. Men had to have someone to fantasize about during long debates. She lowered her voice.

'Do you think the dirt on her is true?'

Gill was reputed to have an open marriage. Her husband was a Euro MP who spent weekdays in Brussels. Gill certainly had a different, always handsome, male 'researcher' every year, but that proved little.

'Oh yes.'

'But the papers leave her alone.'

'Tories are better at managing these things than we are. Gill's discreet. Both her and her hubby are friendly with the papers' owners. And they're rich enough to sue. A paper that wanted to get her would need its story spot on, fully backed up.'

'Whereas I can't afford to sue anyone,' Sarah pointed out.

'There was nothing in any of the papers for you to sue over. Litigation only benefits lawyers. Anyway, I'm telling you, babe, if the punters think you're fucking a handsome bastard it isn't going to hurt you one little bit.'

Sarah's fortnightly surgeries rotated around every ward in the constituency. The second surgery of the second month was in Stoneywood Library. Most of the cases she took on could be handled by a Citizens' Advice Bureau but an MP carried more weight with the agencies concerned, usually branches of the Home Office or Social Security. This Saturday, her last visitor was a member of the Shanks family, the dead police officer's younger sister, Polly Bolton. The poor cow had adopted the murdered couple's children.

Sarah had seen to it that Polly was the last appointment. They could go on as long as necessary. However, she was already running half an hour late.

'I'm so sorry,' she told Polly. 'But I can stay as long as it takes.'

'I can't.' Sarah's age, with hard, grey eyes, Polly looked nearer forty. For all that, her platinum blonde hair was professionally done and her steely, over made-up face formed a striking carapace, beneath which beauty might lurk. 'I go on shift in half an hour,' she continued. 'I've a taxi coming in ten minutes.'

'I do apologize.'

'Doesn't matter. What I have to say won't take long. That Ed Clark was all over the paper yesterday, going on about justice and the compensation he has coming. What I want to know is, where's justice for my brother, rotting in his grave? Where's justice for our Liv?'

'I share your concern,' Sarah said, wishing she could explain how true this was. She talked about police systems, about due legal process. Polly interrupted.

'Police talk to me. Terry was one of theirs. They say they'll reopen the case but there's no point, because they know who did it: Ed Clark. They say if Ed Clark puts a single foot wrong, they'll have him back inside, but they have to be careful or it'll look like victimization. Far as I can see, you and his lawyers are the only people who think Ed Clark's innocent. So tell me, who do you think did it?'

'I don't know,' Sarah said. 'Whatever officers who aren't connected to the case are telling you, the investigation is ongoing. Believe me, nobody will rest until they find out who killed your brother and sister-in-law. We all want to see that monster brought to justice.'

Polly stood abruptly and went to the library window.

'My taxi's here.'

'Let me walk you out.'

'If you have to.'

Sarah tried to make conversation as they walked, asking about the Shanks children, but the sister wasn't having it.

'That slimy Tory MP,' she said, apropos of nothing. 'How could you?'

Sarah gave the answer she'd given a hundred times in the last three weeks. 'It was a dinner about

work. The paper made up the rest.'

~~'Pull the other one. What kind of woman are you, standing up for murderers and adulterers?'~~

Sarah didn't reply, transfixed by the sight of the guy getting out of Polly's taxi. It couldn't be who she thought it was.

Polly, not expecting a reply from Sarah, left the building, went straight up to the driver. The cabby stubbed out the cigarette he'd just lit. From this distance, the taxi driver was a dead ringer for Sarah's first love, Nick Cane, aged by the twelve years since she'd seen him last.

When Sarah got in from the surgery, she tried to restore her spirits with a long bath. She opened the half bottle of champagne she kept on standby in the fridge. But drink didn't help. When she wasn't on a guilt trip about what Ed Clark might do now that he was out, she was thinking about the man driving the taxi.

She'd got off with Nick after a Labour Club meeting during their second year at uni. He was the best-looking bloke she'd ever been out with. The smartest, too. That evening, he'd actually come to resign from the party. Which dispute was it that alienated him? She didn't recall. He hadn't wanted to let his membership lapse. He'd wanted to tear up his card at a meeting. But when he'd got there, Sarah was the only other person who'd turned up. So they talked.

She'd seen him around before. He had a strong chin with a small dimple in the centre, warm eyes and dark, thick hair. Nick wasn't what she thought of as her type – she'd been drawn to more earnest men until she discovered how quickly they bored her. Nick liked a drink and a smoke, but he had a serious side and was more pragmatic than her. That first night they talked about Sarah running for the union presidency. The time might be right for a real socialist, Nick reckoned. Last year, the election had been won by a joke candidate who, when he became president, turned into a bureaucrat.

Nick helped Sarah to write her manifesto, advised her to grow her hair before having any photos taken. 'Blokes will vote for a woman they fancy. And they fancy women with long hair more than women with short hair. Proven fact.' She was twenty years old and it was her first election. He introduced her to dope, which she'd been sniffy about. The 'comrades' saw it as a decadent bourgeois habit. It relaxed her.

The union presidency was her first election victory. By then, she was living in a shared house with Nick. She won by a ten per cent margin over the Anarchist candidate. That summer, she and Nick hitched around Europe together. They visited her father, who was living in Spain. She took him to meet her paternal grandfather, Sir Hugh. Well into his seventies, he had retired from Parliament, but was still on top form. He entertained them with stories of suppressed scandals from the Wilson years when he had been a cabinet minister. Grandad also had scathing anecdotes about the turncoats who had recently defected from Labour to form the Social Democrats. The SDP went on to split the anti-Tory vote, letting the bastards back in by a landslide at the next general election, in 1983.

By then, Sarah was in her final year, after the interruption of a year spent as Union President. Nick was doing teacher training. She knocked herself out to get a first, while Nick found his course much more demanding than his degree had been. Nevertheless, the two of them made time to work for Labour in the general election. They were in love with the struggle against Thatcher, as well as each other.

That year, they considered getting married, but decided against. Marriage was a 'bourgeois institution'. Nick was less convinced of this argument than her.

'We might change our mind when we want kids,' he said. Sarah thought it best not to mention that she had no intention of ever having children.

But she couldn't hide her decision to join the police. They talked it over endlessly. Not rows, as such. Nick knew where she was coming from, understood that she wanted to make a difference, but h

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