

Late one night in March 1996, I received an unexpected telephone call from a senior BBC journalist. 'I need to talk to you privately about Diana's interview with *Panorama*,' he said. I was stunned by his next remark: 'The interview was obtained by deception and forgery. We cannot discuss this over the phone.'

The next evening, we met for drinks in the Caxton Bar at St Ermin's Hotel, near St James's Park. It was an appropriate venue for our discreet discussion: during the Second World War, Britain's Special Operations Executive launched covert operations from the hotel's second floor. MI6 was stationed two floors above and, during the Cold War, once imported prostitutes into a safe room to placate the Soviet defector and double agent Oleg Penkovsky. It is rumoured that a secret tunnel runs from underneath the grand staircase in the lobby all the way to the Palace of Westminster.

My BBC source was nervous and deeply troubled. It had barely been four months since Diana, Princess of Wales had given an explosive and unprecedented interview to the BBC, in which she had unburdened her soul, confirmed Prince Charles's affair with Camilla Parker Bowles, acknowledged her own infidelity, and confided that the Royal Family and the British establishment regarded her 'as a threat'.

Watched by 23 million people, the interview changed the course of Diana's life. The broadcast resulted in her divorce from Prince Charles being finalised, destroying any prospect of a reconciliation. Within weeks, she was ostracised from the Royal Family and lost the protective shield of the close protection officers who kept the paparazzi at bay. For the BBC, it was a prestigious scoop, and the interviewer, an ambitious young *Panorama* reporter called Martin Bashir, was garlanded with awards and praise. However, according to my source at the BBC, the interview was obtained by deceit and forgery. As I sat listening that evening in 1996, a shocking tale unfolded. Fortunately, I kept my notes and diaries, and so, 25 years later, *Tatler* can reveal the inside story of how Diana and her brother, Charles, Earl Spencer, were duped by Bashir, and how the BBC may have instigated a cover-up.

The interview was obtained at a time when a media frenzy surrounded the Royal Family and establishment figures. A bugged phone call between Prince Charles and Camilla had recently been leaked and the paparazzi hounded Diana day and night. The tabloid press was running rampant exposing Tory MPs in a series of sex scandals based on dubious tip-offs. And reporters were regularly and illegally hacking into the voicemail messages of celebrities and politicians. This was long before the reforms introduced by the Leveson Inquiry changed the way the media worked – back then, it was a Wild West in which some journalists were willing to employ any dirty trick in pursuit of a scoop.

However, even the most unscrupulous tabloid hack would have bristled at the methods involved in obtaining the Diana interview. The web of deceit began on 29 August 1995, when Bashir commissioned a BBC graphic designer called Matt Wiessler to mock up two bank statements, based on 'private information'. Bashir declined to say what the documents were for, except that he needed them to be done overnight, and added: 'If I show them to a



**BROTHERLY LOVE**  
Princess Diana greets her brother, Viscount Althorp (later Earl Spencer), at the Birthright Ball in November 1985 – almost 10 years to the day before she gave the *Panorama* interview



particular person, it might lead to something that will have a real impact.' Wiessler duly drew up the fake bank statements – an act he was later to bitterly regret – and the next day, a driver dispatched the documents to Bashir at Heathrow Airport, as he was on his way to meet Earl Spencer at Althorp, the family's ancestral seat in Northamptonshire.

Bashir's mission was to persuade the earl to introduce him to his sister Diana in the hope that it might result in an interview. His timing was perfect. At that moment, Charles Spencer was unhappy about the tabloids' intrusion into his family's personal life and may well have been vulnerable to claims that people close to him were being bribed to leak secrets. At the meeting at Althorp, Bashir produced the bank statements drawn up by Wiessler, which purported to show that Alan Waller, the earl's former head of security, had received £4,000 from News International (the owner of the *News of the World* and *The Sun*) and a further £6,500 from an offshore company called Penfolds Consultants, registered in Jersey. In fact, the 'payments' were fictitious. Bashir is thought to have chosen Penfolds because he knew that Earl Spencer could not check its veracity, as it is extremely difficult to identify the owners of offshore companies. (Penfolds was in fact owned by a business associate of the former England football manager Terry Venables, and there is no suggestion that Waller, Penfolds or Venables were involved in any way in Bashir's alleged plan.)

long-serving butler, Paul Burrell. 'We pulled up the floorboards, looking for listening devices. We even had someone from MI5 come in and unplug all the electrical appliances to look inside and see if there was any possibility of tapping. She was told that beams could be sent from satellites and reflected from mirrors on the inside of the palace to listen to conversations, so we took down every mirror.' Her neurosis was so intense that she even believed Prince Charles was planning 'an accident in my car', according to a note she sent to Burrell.

And so the princess was tragically susceptible to claims of secret plots and covert surveillance. 'At last, someone in my family knows what it's like to be me,' she told her brother.

**T**he trap was set. Two weeks later, on 19 September 1995, Diana met her brother and Bashir at a friend's flat in South Kensington. Bashir allegedly realised that Diana was receptive to claims that the secret state was spying on her on behalf of Buckingham Palace. According to Earl Spencer, Bashir told Diana that MI6 was tracking her car, intercepting her mail and tapping her phone. It was all nonsense, and should have sounded alarm bells about Bashir's credibility, as MI6 is responsible for intelligence-gathering abroad and has no operational role in

## THE PRINCESS WAS TRAGICALLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO CLAIMS OF SECRET PLOTS AND SURVEILLANCE. 'AT LAST, SOMEONE IN MY FAMILY KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE ME,' SHE TOLD HER BROTHER

The earl was curious. Encouraged by the response, Bashir relayed other outlandish claims, according to Earl Spencer's notes at the time, which suggest the reporter told him that Commander Richard Aylard, former private secretary to Prince Charles, was spying on Diana, reporting on her movements and receiving secret payments from MI5, who were tapping her phone. Bashir also allegedly waved what appeared to be a Coutts bank statement in front of Earl Spencer, with details of what he said were payments from MI5 to Aylard and Patrick Jephson, private secretary to the princess. These claims were untrue, and it seems that Bashir brandished the Coutts documents in front of the earl without actually handing them over. I have a theory as to why: because Bashir may have drawn up the Coutts 'bank statement' himself.

After the meeting, Earl Spencer telephoned Diana. He conveyed the allegations and described the bank statements. It was a vulnerable time in the princess's life. She was, according to her brother, 'in a fragile psychological state', unhappy after the separation from Prince Charles and convinced that courtiers were conspiring against her. She believed she was being followed and that MI5 was bugging her phones, planning to leak her private comments to the press. 'She had become jumpy and edgy,' recalled her close friend Rosa Monckton.

By the summer of 1995, the princess had become paranoid. 'She thought all her phone calls were being tapped,' said her

the UK. For good measure, Bashir is said to have added that Prince Charles was in love with Tiggy Legge-Bourke, the nanny of Prince William and Prince Harry. If Diana believed Bashir, it was because she wanted to.

Earl Spencer has since said that by the end of the meeting, he had lost faith in the BBC reporter and recalled telling Diana later that Bashir was 'clearly bad and clearly lying', and that he was sorry for 'wasting her time'. But Bashir had successfully fuelled Diana's fantasies and convinced her of his bogus claims. He seems to have been particularly adept at winning her confidence. 'Martin was the best one-on-one reporter I have ever worked with in terms of persuading someone to be interviewed,' a former colleague of Bashir told me. 'He had a very disarming manner and made people feel secure and comfortable.'

Those powers of persuasion paid off. On 5 November 1995, Bashir recorded the fateful interview in elaborate secrecy at Kensington Palace and, two weeks later, it was broadcast on *Panorama*. It was regarded as the BBC scoop of the century. But Matt Wiessler, the BBC graphic designer, was feeling uneasy about the fake bank statements. He was gripped by ethical concerns and worried that he may have done something wrong – even illegal. And so he faxed the documents to Mark Killick, a producer at *Panorama*, and told him about Bashir's instructions. He needed advice – possibly protection. 'I am worried,' he said. 'There are ▷



◁ so many errors. The account numbers are wrong, the payments don't add up, and why did he mention Penfolds Consultants [the company on the bank statement]?

**K**illick immediately realised there was a problem. He knew that Penfolds Consultants had nothing to do with any royal bodyguards and it must be a fake document. But it was only an issue if Bashir had used the bank statement to persuade Earl Spencer and the princess to grant the interview. He confronted Bashir, asking him: 'What were they for?' 'This is none of your business,' Bashir replied. And so, according to my notes at the time, Killick walked into the office of Steve Hewlett, then editor of *Panorama*, with the award-winning reporter Tom Mangold and a colleague as witnesses. It was not an accusatory meeting, but a sullen Hewlett bristled at the disclosure of the bank statements. 'It may have been mentioned, but I don't see why this is any of your f\*\*\*ing business and I don't expect a word of this to appear anywhere,' he said. Killick was concerned about the reputational damage to *Panorama* if it was shown that forged documents had been used to hoodwink Diana into being interviewed. 'You can resolve this very easily by calling Earl Spencer and asking him if this was the case,' he said, according to my source. The irritated *Panorama* editor

was a fearsome sight for the BBC executive. 'Leave it with me,' Gardam replied.

Wiessler never received any explanation. Instead, he found himself blacklisted. 'We are taking steps to ensure that the graphic designer involved will not work for the BBC again,' said Tony (now Lord) Hall, then head of news and current affairs, in a statement to the board of governors. The statement was one of several BBC documents about the Diana interview later obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by Andy Webb, director of the Channel 4 documentary *Diana: The Truth Behind the Interview*. But many of the documents were heavily redacted and blacked out. 'The file was like a CIA report on a top-level sensitive intelligence mission,' an incredulous former BBC reporter told me.

While Wiessler was being stonewalled, *Panorama* journalists remained anxious about the absence of an inquiry. 'The issue was buried,' one told me. 'At the time, I thought it was a moment of madness by Martin [Bashir] and it was possible that the documents were never shown to Earl Spencer. But we needed to know.'

Wiessler was also not satisfied. He arranged to meet Bashir at an Italian restaurant in Balham, south London. 'Whatever you do, don't go to the media,' the celebrated reporter told him. 'Carry on talking to us. We didn't do anything wrong. You've got to trust us on this.' But the graphic designer walked out of that restaurant knowing that he needed to go to the press. 'Martin was just

## BASHIR'S CAREER FLOURISHED. HE LEFT THE BBC, WAS PAID AN EXORBITANT SALARY BY AN AMERICAN TELEVISION NETWORK AND SECURED AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL JACKSON

looked uninterested – and the call to Earl Spencer was never made.

By early December 1995, Wiessler was aware of the row inside *Panorama* and so carefully hid copies of the bank statements he had drawn up on two green floppy-disks marked 'Bash' at his flat in north-west London. But then, a week later, the graphic designer's flat was burgled and the disks were removed. No other items were stolen and there was no damage. 'I was absolutely freaked out,' he told ITV in 2020. 'I searched through my computer files in the office and I couldn't find any of the back-ups that I had made of the statements... I became quite paranoid, because I thought there must be more to this [bank] statement story than I can ever dream of. I'd never had a break-in before in my life. I just thought someone was sending me a message or something.'

A week later, the ground-floor office at Mark Killick's house in Surrey was also burgled and ransacked. There was no damage and nothing was taken. Fortunately, the producer had given copies of the incriminating forged documents to a friend for safekeeping in a secure location. There is no suggestion that anyone connected to the BBC was involved in either burglary.

The break-in infuriated Wiessler. He was convinced that it was connected to the false bank statements. Just before Christmas 1995, he stormed into the office of the senior BBC executive Tim Gardam and demanded an investigation into the bank statements and the burglary. Wiessler, a 6ft 8in, then-long-haired German,

simply covering for himself,' he later said in a television interview.

And that was when I received my phone call on 21 March 1996. While the disks containing the bank statements had been stolen, copies had been preserved by Wiessler at a friend's house as his 'insurance'. My inside source told me there had been an elaborate cover-up inside the BBC. 'All they had to do was call Earl Spencer and the issue could have been resolved,' said my informant. 'But they never called him and so that is why I called you.'

As a freelance journalist, I immediately realised the importance of the story. On 26 March 1996, I wrote a detailed memo to the then editor of the *Mail on Sunday*, Jonathan Holborow, and explained that he needed to obtain the bank statements from Wiessler. I added that my source at *Panorama* asked me not to have a byline on the story in order to protect his identity, as people in media circles were aware that we knew each other. A few days later, Wiessler approached Nick Fielding, a senior *Mail on Sunday* reporter, handing over the counterfeit documents. The paper approached Earl Spencer for comment, but he declined. Fielding did his own investigation and, on 7 April 1996, the *Mail on Sunday* splashed the story on its front page.

The publication forced the BBC's hand and an inquiry was launched under the auspices of Lord Hall, later director-general. But Earl Spencer was not consulted, and the BBC exonerated Bashir on the basis that there was no evidence the bank statements





LADY IN RED  
Arriving for a dinner in  
Argentina, in 1995,  
wearing a Catherine  
Walker dress

TATLER

were used to obtain the interview with Diana. Lord Hall told the inquiry: 'To produce such a graphic was unwise. He shouldn't have done it... I believe [Bashir] is, even with his lapse, an honest and honourable man. He is contrite.'

But some *Panorama* staff were not convinced. 'It was a complete whitewash,' said one former BBC journalist, who compared the inquiry into the fake documents with the News International investigation into phone hacking by *News of the World* reporters. 'Murdoch punished the wrongdoers and closed down the *News of the World* as a warning to others,' he told me. 'And so it is a strange world where News International's commercial ethics seem to trump those of the licence-fee-funded BBC.'

Meanwhile, Bashir's career flourished. He left the BBC, was paid an exorbitant salary by an American television network and secured an interview with Michael Jackson, who had been impressed by his Diana 'scoop'. He has never spoken publicly about the allegations and refused to talk to me. But he maintains that the bank statements were never shown to Diana and did not influence her decision to grant him the interview. As evidence, he points to a letter written by Diana that apparently praised Bashir, thanked him for his conduct before the interview and stated that she was never shown the bank statements. This letter has never been published, but its contents are expected to be revealed in a forthcoming BBC report by Judge Dyson, who is investigating these allegations. *Tatler* approached Bashir for comment, but his representative told us that while Bashir will co-operate with the Dyson investigation, he will not be commenting to anyone else before it is completed.

**F**riends of the princess disagree about whether or not she regretted speaking to *Panorama*. The former BBC royal correspondent Jennie Bond said Diana told her that she feared a gagging clause in her divorce settlement and she thought it was her only chance to give an interview. But Rosa Monckton maintains that Diana deeply regretted the interview because of 'the damage it did to my boys'.

For many years, Bashir's secrets remained hidden. It was not until last November that Earl Spencer released his notes of his meetings with the reporter, which suggest that the bank statements may have been one item in a catalogue of false smears, conspiracy theories and falsehoods against courtiers and members of the Royal Family, including the Queen. Bashir has always maintained that the fake bank statements did not persuade the princess to give the interview. But Earl Spencer disagrees: 'If it were not for me seeing those statements, I would not have introduced Bashir to my sister,' he has said.

Diana is, without question, one of the most important women of the 20th century. The interview she gave to *Panorama* was a pivotal event in her life after her separation from Prince Charles; in the months following it, she became increasingly isolated from the Royal Family. The first question Bashir asked during their fateful televised conversation was how prepared she'd been for the pressures of marrying into the Royal Family. Diana said that 'the most daunting aspect' of becoming the Princess of Wales was 'the media attention': 'The higher the media places you, the bigger the drop.' There can be little doubt that the tale behind the *Panorama* story will continue to emerge – or be drawn – into the light. □