

Burying Bad News

Chapter n – Wendover Station

Frances crunched the gravel on the drive under her soles, flipped the keyfob, pulled the Audi's passenger door open and threw her handbag on the seat. She scanned the low hanging grey clouds sceptically, slammed the door and swivelled on her heels, rounding the car boot. She lowered herself into the drivers' seat then thumbed through the collection of CDs. Finding nothing to enthuse her, she scanned the preset radio stations.

'Next on *Woman's Hour* a fascinating report on the Trokoski women of south-eastern Ghana –'

'For fuck's sake,' Frances whispered as she hit the scan button.

'...uPVC Windows at factory prices...'

'Bloody windows, bloody adverts.'

Click. Next was some tedious phone-in on BBC Radio Oxford about an incinerator. She endured plenty of this local drivel when Robert was being interviewed. Classic FM might be better? No. Katherine Jenkins was warbling some dirge of a pop song. It was bad enough seeing her spilling out of a ball gown on every other magazine cover without having to listen to her as well. Radio Two should be a safe haven: the modern girl-band track was reasonably pleasant, although obviously synthetic.

A smooth Scottish burr purred over the fading music.

'And don't forget, folks, Rock Einstein will be coming along in about fifteen minutes. We're just lining up today's budding geniuses, or is that geni-i, you know like the plural of terminus is termini or focus, foci. I wonder how you'd spell it? Absolutely fascinating but who cares?'

'I certainly don't,' Frances said to the radio, equivocating over whether she could stomach Jim Mann's banal bonhomie this time in the morning. But she liked the quiz. In a giddy moment a couple of weeks ago she had even submitted her name as a contestant to the programme's website. This was in defiance of a Labour Party policy: the apparatchiks instructed all MP's partners to avoid any media exposure whatsoever unless some nightmarish spin doctor was in attendance to help with the potty training. Rock Einstein was the only part of Jim Mann's show that Frances could normally endure; she fancied that she'd give the majority of contestants a run for their money.

She checked her make-up in the mirror on the back of the sun visor as she started the car. Her black-rimmed eyes were watery but not conspicuously bloodshot.

Frances had only driven a couple of hundred yards towards the gate when her phone rang. She reached into her bag with one hand and looked at the number on the display. It was an unfamiliar, 0207, from inner London. She answered the call out of curiosity and pulled over to the side of the drive behind the estate Land Rover which was also parked to the side of the drive

'Hello...yes...Frances Cross, that's right,' she answered. 'Oh, what a surprise. I was only just listening. Yes...yes...if you're ok with a mobile phone signal...Buckinghamshire...oh, all kinds of things really, 80s in particular, soundtrack to my youth...I'm well, I suppose you could say I'm a charity worker...OK. Yes. This number's fine.' The call ended, she put the phone on hands-free, clenched her fist and said 'Yes. Go for it.'

Frances caught a glimpse of Declan pruning a dormant row of vines and waved in his direction. She was expecting a short wave in return but he dropped his tools and hurried towards the car. She opened the passenger window and he crouched to speak, his breath steaming in the cold air.

‘You off out?’ he asked.

‘Yes, going to get the train into London. Do a bit of shopping.’

‘Anything else? You look good. Wasted on the shops,’ he said with a grin.

‘Thanks but no. I need to be back for some function this evening,’ she said.

‘Glad I’ve seen you. Do you know whose car that is?’

‘Which one?’ she asked.

‘Black BMW just outside the gate. It’s been there an hour or so.’

She saw the car parked about a hundred yards away through the bare hedge that marked the boundary with the country lane.

‘No idea. Never seen it before’ she replied.

‘OK. Just struck me as a bit odd. There’s a couple of people in the car but they’ve not got out. I’ll keep an eye on it while I’m pruning these Pinots.’

‘It’s probably nothing,’ she said.

‘Yeah, probably. Will you have time for me to, er, come over to the house later on?’ He winked.

‘Maybe, depends on trains and so on,’ she said with a small smile.

‘OK. Don’t let me stop you then. See you later.’

Declan headed back to the rows of Pinot Noir while Frances pulled back on to the drive and drove towards the gates. At the junction with the lane she looked to the left. The BMW was parked, slightly off the road, around fifty yards away. The driver and passenger were looking straight at her. She turned right, slammed her foot down and accelerated away, turning up the radio to listen to Jim Mann chattering idly away. This section of the road was long and straight, running along the top of the Chiltern ridge. Frances glanced in the rear view mirror and noticed the black BMW following behind her at a distance.

Her phone rang. She spotted the entrance to a field by the side of the road and pulled over next to the gate, through which she could see the patchwork of fields of the Vale of Aylesbury stretching out for miles below.

‘Frances Cross...yes...hello again.’ As she spoke, out of the corner of her eye she spotted the black BMW slowly pass her. She turned her head away towards the view below.

‘Hold on...No, there’s no problem but I’m starting to feel a little nervous. Look, if you’ve got someone else ready then...OK...it’s too late to...Jim’s just about to broadcast my name. No. No. That’s fine. I’m up for it. OK. I’ll turn it off.’

She turned the radio off and then pressed herself back into the passenger seat, screwed her eyes shut and allowed a guilty smile to spread across her face. As she reopened her eyes she saw a green Land Rover had just passed her. It looked like the one from the estate but it was too distant to check the number plate. If it *was* Declan driving then she wondered where he’d be heading.

Frances was the second of the two players on Rock Einstein. She put the phone through the car stereo speakers while listening Jim Mann gently interrogating the first contestant — Joe, the truck driver from Cumbernauld. A researcher occasionally chipped in on the line to offer encouragement and, no doubt, to check she hadn’t hung up due to nerves. She hummed along fretfully with the Robbie Williams track Jim played between the two rounds of the quiz. As Robbie subsided, the Rock Einstein jingle played through her car speakers followed by Jim’s

mellifluous tones. Frances sensed the release of adrenaline and felt a knot of excitement and danger in her stomach.

‘And our second contestant today is Frances Cross from the leafy home county of Buckinghamshire. Hello there Frances,’ Jim started.

‘Hello Jim. I love the show,’ Frances lied.

‘Oh Frances, don’t you know that flattery will get you everywhere?’ Jim chuckled. ‘Now what do you do with yourself?’

‘Now that’s a question, Jim’ she replied.

‘Heavens, I love this lady already. What a lovely voice you’ve got. It says here on the little cheat sheet I have ready at my right hand that you’re a charity worker.’

‘I like to turn my hand to a lot of things...’

Jim theatrically cleared his throat. ‘Now calm down Jim. Calm down. Sorry keep going Frances.’ She reciprocated with a flirty giggle.

‘My husband has a very busy job and I spend a lot of time supporting him in that but I do also get involved in a lot of charity work.’

‘Any charities in particular?’

‘Hearing dogs for deaf people is a local one. And I support charities that help women with psychological issues, like self-harm and eating disorders, for example.’

‘Wonderful stuff. And what kind of music are you into? I hear you’re a bit of an 80s girl.’

‘Oh yes. Anything that reminds me of my mis-spent youth – Duran Duran, Tears for Fears, Marillion.’

‘Oh yes, there’s nothing like a bit of Marillion. Anyway, Joe did pretty respectably. You’ve got eighteen to beat. Are you ready to play Rock Einstein?’

‘Fire away, Jim’

‘Here we go. What’s the Christian name of the singer who is principally known by his surname – Morrissey?’

‘Steven,’ she answered without hesitation.

‘Correct. Three points.’

‘I love the Smiths.’ Frances was enjoying this now, the vestiges of nervousness fading away.

‘UB40 had a hit in the 80s with a cover of “Red, Red Wine” but who had the original hit’

‘Neil Diamond. My dad used to love him.’

‘Bang on. Now listen to this short snippet of music’. He played an 80s-sounding piece of disco with female vocals. ‘Now that was called “Love Come Down”. Who sang it?’

‘That’s a tricky one Jim.’

‘I’ll have to start the timer...’ Jim chided.

‘Evelyn “Champagne” King.’

‘Well done.’

‘I think my luck’s in today.’

She was on a roll. Jim threw five more questions at Frances: she triumphantly answered each correctly. Jim’s excitement mounted as he built to the climax of the final question.

‘We know, Frances, you’ve already beaten Joe out of sight but can you do a clean sweep – the whole grand slam, the complete shebang? This is pretty extraordinary. Not many of our Rock Einsteins get 100%,’ he paused for effect ‘So are you raring to go Frances Cross from Buckinghamshire?’

‘I’m ready for you Jim.’

‘Which was the band that was reported in 2006 to be Gordon Brown’s favourite.’

‘Arctic Monkeys,’ she answered without hesitation.

‘Correct. Hooray.’ Jim played a celebratory jingle.

‘But he couldn’t name a single one of their songs could he?’ added Frances over the applause.

‘We’d better not go there. Let’s talk about you instead. Well done. You join the Rock Einstein Hall of Fame and you win the DAB digital radio.’

‘Wow. I think my husband’s going to be speechless when he finds out.’

Joe the truck driver was still on the line and offered his congratulations. ‘Get him to take you out for a drink. See what a canny wife he’s got.’

Jim brought the back-slapping to a close. ‘Now here’s George Michael.’

Frances punched her fist into her open palm. She lit a cigarette, enjoying it as she gave address details to a researcher for the delivery of her prize digital radio. She hung up, feeling a warm sense of satisfaction; a sense of achievement under pressure that she hadn’t felt for a long time. Immediately, this fulfilment started to be undermined by the niggling voice in the back of her mind: it was just a silly radio pop quiz based on trivia and pot luck. She had been surprisingly lucky: a couple of the questions on recent music were educated guesses and the rest played to her strengths. Yet it was something that she had achieved all by herself, on her own, and she’d done better than virtually all the other contestants. But she should have done well – she was an Oxford graduate for heaven’s sake. She deserved to feel good – at least until all hell broke loose if the party press office got to know about it – and her silly quip about Gordon Brown. What would the press make of that?

She tried to calm herself, block out the negative thoughts. ‘Enjoy the moment’ she thought. ‘Be mindful only of the moment.’ She deliberately slowed her breathing, something one of her counsellors had taught her. Closing her eyes she tried to relax, clear her thoughts but her anxiety wouldn’t be so easily quelled. Her mind meandered and wondered how she’d managed to accumulate such knowledge of pop music. Images from the past flashed into her mind: the studious teenager alone in her bedroom poring over textbooks while listening to the radio; tentatively passing round a joint in the early hour at a student party with some alternative band playing in the background; lying on a bed in a darkened room, pole axed by industrial strength antidepressants with only the CD player for company; with Robert, watching the party machine’s cultural zeitgeist videos sent to absurdly ensure ministers were aware of what was number one in the charts. It had all soaked in because she’d been passive, spectating, always listening, the music washing over her as she witnessed the events in her life; memories fixed to its rhythm. and she still had a quick mind – she was the perfect Rock Einstein mainly because she’d always been a spectator and a listener herself.

She lit a cigarette, turned the ignition then pulled out and drove distractedly along the lane. She rounded a bend and her attention was grabbed by the black BMW stopped by the roadside. She was surprised to see the estate Land Rover again, parked slightly further along the road.

Plunging through the dark beech woodland, Frances juggled her cigarette as she steered round the twists and turns of the descent, emerging eventually on to the outskirts of Wendover. She drove up the main street and turned into the station car park. Frances reached over to the passenger seat to collect together her handbag and phone. She opened the car door and heard the squeal of brakes from a by-now familiar car. The BMW had pulled up close to the Audi. Frances walked to the car parking

machine, fumbling amongst the coins in her purse as. A stout middle-aged woman squeezed out of the car, followed by a pony-tailed younger man with an expensive camera.

Frances pulled the ticket from the machine and returned to her car. The stout woman approached Frances.

‘Mrs Cross?’ she asked.

‘Yes?’ replied Frances.

‘Robert Cross’s, the minister’s, wife?’

‘I am. Why?’ Frances put the ticket in the windscreen and gathered her bag.

‘Patricia Cutts, working for the Daily Telegraph, could I ask you some questions?’

Frances turned round suddenly to face Cutts. ‘Sorry. If it’s anything to do with my husband you’ll need to speak to the relevant press officer.’

‘We only want to check some facts.’

‘Ask the press office. I don’t comment to journalists. Mind you, you’re pretty quick off the mark. Was it all a set-up?’ Frances clenched her teeth tightly as she ceased speculating. ‘I should have known I wasn’t picked at random. Bloody BBC. And they must have tipped you lot off as well. Still I bet I surprised you. Not just a pretty face?’

‘Pardon?’ Cutts looked puzzled.

‘Even so, I’ve nothing more to say about Rock Einstein’

‘Rock Einstein? What’s that? We wanted to ask you about your husband’s private office.’ Cutts shouted as Frances started to walk away across the car park while the young man lifted the camera to his eye and practised framing some shots.

Suddenly the Land Rover sped into the station car park and pulled up close to Frances. Declan leaped out.

‘Does your husband employ a researcher from Latvia called Ana?’ Cutts shouted.

‘Yes. That’s a matter of public record,’ Frances said without looking back at her interrogator.

‘Is she blonde and attractive?’ Cutts asked.

‘That’s irrelevant. I don’t want to answer any more questions.’

Declan stood between Frances and the reporter.

‘She said she doesn’t want to talk to you. Now clear off,’ said Declan, gesturing his meaning with his thumb.

‘This is a public place,’ said the photographer lining up his camera.

Declan turned to Frances. ‘Go and get your train Mrs Cross, I’ll sort these two out. I was watching them.’ Frances walked quickly towards the ticket office with Declan up hard by her and the reporter and photographer in pursuit.

‘You were right to keep an eye on them. Bloody reporters. So you saw them follow me and you decided to follow them yourself?’ Frances asked Declan quietly.

‘Yep. I thought you’d given them the slip when you stopped for ten minutes by the side of the road but I reckoned they’d be persistent so I waited to see what they’d do next.’

Cutts butted in with another question. ‘Mrs Cross, there are rumours that Ana spends a lot of time at your private house. Is that true?’

Frances bit her lip. ‘No comment.’

They reached the ticket office.

‘Go inside. Get your ticket,’ Declan said to Frances.

‘There are rumours Mrs Cross. Perhaps you ought to hear them first from us before we print them in the paper? Rumours that your husband is having an affair with Ana. Do you have any comment for us?’ Cutts shouted over the recorded announcement stating that the next train to London was imminent.

‘I’ve a comment. Print it and Mr Cross’ll sue your arse off,’ said Declan with menace as he stood blocking the ticket office doorway while Frances paid for her ticket. The journalist managed pushed past him. The photographer tried to follow but Declan grabbed his camera.

‘Hey. I like photography. Want to tell me how this works? Looks very expensive,’ he said, rolling the camera between his hands.

‘It is. Give it back,’ demanded the photographer.

Declan turned to Cutts. ‘I wouldn’t bother buying a ticket. I hear your train’s been cancelled...to wherever you’re going.’ He looked again at the camera. ‘Now where does that little memory card live? I’d say it’s normally near the batteries.’

‘Mrs Cross, do you think your husband *would* fall for a tall, beautiful, young blonde? Could he be a love cheat?’ shouted Cutts.

Frances was stunned. She wanted to yell ‘Go to hell you evil bitch’ but knew that was the kind of story the press were looking for.

‘Or is he into threesomes?’ shouted the photographer.

Declan suddenly dropped the camera on the hard waiting room floor. ‘Oops, clumsy.’ The flap that concealed the batteries and memory card broke open. ‘Oh, at least I can see where that little card fella fits now.’ He picked the camera up, opened the flap and whipped the memory card out. He handed it to Frances.

‘Here. For the family album. Now go for it,’ Declan shouted.

The train was approaching the platform and Frances shot out of the door adjoining the platform on the other side of the ticket office. Immediately Frances had passed through Declan placed himself in the doorway, blocking the journalists.

‘Sorry. I did tell you earlier that your train was cancelled.’ He grinned.

Frances jumped on the train and instantly pressed the close door button behind her as a precaution. She staggered, shocked, down the aisle and collapsed on to an empty set of three seats.

‘Shit,’ she whispered under her breath as the train accelerated out of Wendover station and up the long incline over the Chilterns towards London.

When the train reached Marylebone she waited to disembark for as long as she could. Cleaners worked around her to collect up the newspapers from the carriage and threw them into transparent plastic bags. She had been too stunned to call anyone from the train. Reception was patchy anyway. She wasn’t shocked by the allegations – she thought Ana was too clever to get involved in a seedy affair but she couldn’t be a hypocrite herself anyway. It was the press aspect that had rocked her to the core. If they really started to dig then they might have a field day.

She wondered if she would be stalked at this end of the journey but figured that the press’s only chance to catch her would be at the ticket barriers at Marylebone. If she headed on to the crowded Bakerloo Line without being spotted then no-one would find her later in the anonymity of London. She could relax in the safety of the crowd.