



## Chapter 36

During the three years they had known each other they had never been for a walk together. They had become friends, confidantes, lovers. They had strolled along the Yarra path near the park but they had never been for an actual walk.

Thus, it came as some surprise to Steven to realise that Frances was very fit and was a steady, brisk, no-nonsense walker. It was not something he would have predicted, either in her haughty Duchess public mode or in her private, relaxed mode. She normally glided along, nun-like, seamlessly and effortlessly. As a walker, she was a determined strider.

He found himself struggling to keep up with her and had to consciously quicken his stride in order that he not become a laggard.

Once they had developed a pace, conversation became difficult and unnecessary. There is a certain comradely, mutual satisfaction which comes from walking with someone at a synchronised pace, so they allowed themselves to fall into a rhythm and to let their individual thoughts flow freely.

Frances was excited to be taking Steven to the Magic Place, which was the term she had subsequently adopted in her own thoughts. She was not sure what to expect. Not sure what feelings would come over her. Not sure of her reaction. But she knew that her relationship with him would be dishonest unless he was aware of this element of her life.

As they walked, the pathway became more inclined and Steven was now finding it more difficult to walk. He slipped behind her as his panting became noticeably deeper and louder than hers.





Even Eliyahu was finding her pace difficult to keep up with and was forced to trot to avoid lagging increasingly behind her.

They passed along quiet country roads, through lanes, across fields and down narrow tracks until they reached a small gravelled car park. This was clearly one of the entrances to the forest reserve.

Frances stopped and sat down on a car park bollard, waiting for Steven and Eliyahu to catch up to her.

'Wow,' panted Steven. 'I can see why you normally drive here. I thought that I was pretty fit but you were leaving me for dead.'

Frances smiled, looking cool and unruffled but with her face reddened by the exertion. 'It's only about twenty minutes from here ... and you can relax, because the track from here is quite narrow, so we can't really walk very fast.'

'Thank God for that.'

Frances stood up and did thigh stretches. She encouraged him to do the same. 'Come on Steven, stretch them out, as hard as you can.'

She then led the way into the forest with Eliyahu on a lead, trotting beside her.

The track she picked winded through constantly changing vegetation. They passed through stands of massive mountain ashes which dwarfed them and shielded the sun.

The track looked to be rarely used but was definable enough for Frances to easily follow it. It meandered down by a trickling stream, then into an open area and back into a large copse of wattle trees that had taken hold deep within the forest and then expanded outwards.

Talking was difficult, as they could not walk side by side. Frances kept calling out descriptions of what they were going through and continually encouraged him with, 'We're almost there.'

The track then led onto a dirt road, which they followed for several minutes, at which time Frances stopped and turned





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around. 'We are very nearly there.' She looked excited and Eliyahu began wagging his tail and barking, with the anticipation that he would soon be able to lie down and go to sleep.

The Magic Place was almost exactly as Frances had described. The dirt road continued but on the right there was a natural clearing, covered in green grass. Surrounding it were copses of different species of trees. The seat was just as Steven had imagined. On the other side of the clearing, the sound of a bubbling creek provided a comforting backdrop. The sun shone on it, as if a search light was focused on a point on a stage, to direct the attention of the audience to a particular object.

Steven breathed in and took in the scene as if it was a movie and he was the director. In his imagination, the screen shot would be dominated by uplifting, optimistic, beautiful music. He envisioned the camera panning slowly around the scene and then fixing on the image of Frances. The camera focus on her would begin from a distance, taking in the wide panorama and then slowly moving ever closer to her to capture her stance, which was both humble and awed, rather like a visitor entering Westminster Abbey for the first time. In his mind, the shot would move in closer to capture the faraway look in her eyes. The look of someone in the presence of something far greater than her. An ethereal, faraway look of wonderment.

Frances smiled at him and he cleared his thoughts. He became conscious that he should say something but was aware that anything he said would sound contrived and forced, so he decided to say nothing. He knew that this was a special moment for her, although he wasn't exactly sure why it was.

Frances beckoned for him to sit next to her on the seat. Eliyahu did not require an invitation. He was already lying next to the seat, breathing heavily, tongue panting wildly, eyes becoming dopey.





They sat together in silence. There was no need to speak. The sounds of unfiltered nature, with no human noise to compete with them, provided a subtle orchestral soundtrack. Chirping birds from a dozen different species, squabbling ducks quacking in the background, the soothing rustle of the leaves high up in the adjoining strand of mountain ashes, the gurgling and hissing sound of the waters in the creek.

Frances crossed her legs and almost in an act of supplication, joined her hands together on her lap and closed her eyes. Steven turned to look at her. He could sense her moving into another realm. It was as if he was observing a Mother Superior at prayer. There was a look on her face of utter serenity.

The movie scenario kept returning to him as he observed each element in the scene. If he was the ghostly director, he would direct the cameraman to freeze the scene of the woman on the bench. The scene would initially encompass the whole bench and the whole of her; the background would be blurred. He would continue the scene far beyond what an audience would expect. It would appear almost as if it were a still photograph, with the only indication that it wasn't being the almost imperceptible movement of her chest as she breathed in and breathed out, slowly but fully, her chest rising and then falling, rising and falling — calming the audience, slowing them down, focusing their thoughts entirely on the image before them.

The soundtrack of the nature concerto would be progressively turned down, to be eventually replaced by silence punctured by the slow, distant, soft beating of a heart. The still-life photograph would gradually alter, with the light from the sun focusing the scene on the image of her body and then on to her face.

Steven could not still his thoughts. He was an observer of the scene but he could not participate in it. He felt that Frances had become transformed into someone he did not know and he felt disconcerted and alienated by this.





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He turned from her and closed his eyes, willing his mind to free itself of the thoughts travelling through like a fast flowing river. He opened his eyes and again took in the scene before him. It was indeed a beautiful, peaceful place but he could find nothing spiritual about it. He felt like a tourist at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the holiest place in the holiest city for the Jewish people. He remembered seeing men praying at the Wall, oblivious to those around them, transported back to the time of King Solomon. Steven had never been one of them. He had taken in that scene as an impatient tourist. Something to photograph, before moving on to the next attraction.

He began to fidget but was aware that he should keep as still as possible, for the sake of decorum and out of respect for Frances.

After many minutes, she opened her eyes. It was as if she was awakening from an intense dream. She blinked and looked around, and then became conscious of Steven sitting on the bench and of Eliyahu lying on the ground next to her. She appeared startled and disorientated. 'I guess I should be getting you back.' Her voice was whisper-quiet, disassociated, spoken almost as if he was not there.

She stirred and nudged Eliyahu gently with her foot. He looked up at her. A look of pleading in his dark, soulful eyes. *Carry me mistress*, he seemed to say.

They made their way back along the dirt road and then onto the track. Eliyahu led the way, pleased to be heading home. Steven followed and Frances took up the rear. She no longer bounded along but walked slowly and methodically, falling behind Steven. There was now no spring in her step.

He wanted to joke with her, to engage, to chatter — but he could sense that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts. The three of them walked along in single file but it was as if each was quite alone. Eliyahu had images in his mind of his bowl of water





*Eliyahu's Mistress*

and his soft doggie cushion awaiting him. Steven walked with a sense of foreboding. It was as if an outside force had changed the course of his life but he did not know why or how. Frances was quiet and blank and sad.

The early morning mist had now returned and introduced a menacing air, blocking out the descending sun and further dampening their mood.

