



Chapter 39

Early spring, 2013

September is invariably a cold, dark, depressing, bleak month in Melbourne.

Visitors from the Northern Hemisphere generally have a rose-coloured image of Australia, of it being uniformly bright and sunny. The reality can be very different. Although Melbourne's winter can in no way be compared to North America or Europe, there can be days and sometimes weeks in a row when the temperature barely hits twelve degrees. And it is not just the temperature that is the issue but the wind, the gloom and the wet.

If there was any month of the year in which one was likely to retreat and feel flat and morose, September would be it.

Steven could tell from her greeting that Frances was not in her usual ebullient mood. His calls were normally answered by her with restrained but noticeable excitement, which he could easily discern in her voice. He knew that his calls were anticipated and relished.

This time there was an element of deadpan which, although she tried, she could not fully hide. Probably no one else would have picked this up except him and perhaps her son Will.

He led the conversation by providing a running commentary of his day's activities, the anecdotes he had stored in his mind to share with her, the thoughts and ideas which had gone into his mental checklist — but he was met with politeness, an attempt at interest but a door which was closed.





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‘Are you okay, Frances?’

‘Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Thanks for asking.’

He was not satisfied with her response. ‘I can tell that you aren’t, so what’s bugging you?’

‘Oh. I just had a bad sleep last night and work is beginning to annoy me a bit ... and the garden is looking horrible ... and I went to my doctor yesterday for a check-up and she wants me to have some more tests. But I’m not going to. And Elly has been limping, I took him to the vet and it looks like he needs some sort of operation ... aaaand apart from that, everything is just fine.’ Her manner was unusually facetious and fractious. ‘Oh,’ she added by way of afterthought, ‘I have been getting annoying little pains and they wake me up, so I’m sleeping badly.’

She could sense in herself that she was in a whiney mood and exerted herself to get out of it. She mentally straightened up, threw her shoulders back, smiled at the receiver and took on a look of British Bulldog resolve. This led her to become unnaturally animated and chatty and she diverted the conversation away from herself and back onto Steven.

He played along with his for a short time and then interjected, firmly and strongly. ‘I’m going to come up. I just have a few calls to make to defer some appointments, so I will be there in about two hours.’

She protested, but lamely. It was agreed that she could expect to see him in no more than two hours’ time.

After she put the phone down, Frances sat in her chair and voicelessly began to scold herself. *How dare you treat Steven so poorly! You usually look forward so much to his calls but if you respond in such a grim, lifeless manner, he’s going to get sick of it and you will never see him again. What right have you got to expect him to drive all that way, just to see you?*

No matter how hard she tried, the feelings of glumness which





had enveloped her did not completely disappear. However, she told it now, out loud and in a stern voice, 'Go away glum cloud. Get lost! Leave my mind forever and let the happy cloud come back in!' It at least receded to the periphery of her being.

This technique worked to the point that her thoughts turned to what she would wear. She endeavoured to create in her mind the scene of him entering the room and how she would feel when she saw him — the thought of this lifted her spirits.

Perhaps, sometimes, I just miss him too much, she mused to herself.

She bustled off to the bedroom to pick out her outfit. She settled on smart country as her theme, as opposed to other ideas that crossed her mind (including sultry, sexy and preppy). Thus, she morphed into the smart, sensible country lady in the Sloane Ranger style.

By the time she was ready for him, with afternoon tea set out and the house tidied up, she was in a much happier frame of mind. The thought of Steven appearing at her door had been the switch for her change of mood, from Miss Dull to Miss Almost Happy.

When she heard the familiar sound of his car, which now drove into her driveway in a much more confident manner than originally, she felt as if the cloud which had been hovering over her had lifted and departed. Even Eliyahu, who had been wandering around the house looking sad and nervous about his impending operation, became animated when he heard Uncle Steven's car enter the front gates.

Frances strolled down to greet him, with a gleam of anticipation in her eyes. She opened his door, bent over and brushed his lips with hers. The sense of her person, the aroma of her perfume mixed with her natural scent, brought life to the sterility of the car's interior.

'Well, I was driving up here expecting to find a distraught





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Frances, with a grey, sad face, weeping inconsolably on her couch ... and what do I find?’

‘Don’t be silly. I was flat but ... you ... my handsome, handsome ... friend.’ She hesitated, before picking that word. She was going to say *man* but thought that it may sound too possessive. ‘How could I be anything other than excited and uplifted by your presence?’ Spoken with mock servility.

In an action that was out of character with their normal behaviour he took her hand, in a gesture which conveyed to her his feelings of concern. The gesture was that of an older brother, looking after his much younger sister. She said nothing but it warmed her heart. Such a simple, empathic gesture, but she was appreciative of it and it infused her.

In her lounge room, looking out over the ghostly garden, which was now firmly in winter-sleep, they sat down together on the couch. She leaned back into his arms and willed him to hold her, which he seamlessly did. She felt wanted and loved, although love was a word neither of them used to each other. At that moment, he did not need to utter the word because she could feel it ooze from him and be absorbed into her.

Almost from the time their relationship had become intimate, Steven had shown a high degree of empathy and understanding of her. He seemed to be acutely conscious at most times of her feelings. Whether she was happy, sad or excited. He took this in and tended to respond, as required.

Right at the moment, despite her newly found lightness, he could still sense an underlying sadness within her which, although she had forcefully driven it away, was not entirely absent.

Their relationship was not one of co-dependence. She did not need him nor depend on him and he did not need her. However, as in any relationship carried out over a period of time, there were times when the needs of one outweighed the needs of the other.





If their needs were to be placed on scales and given weight, the scales would have tipped firmly in favour of Frances. The times when she was in need of being held and comforted far exceeded his need for her support and understanding. But he did not assess the relationship in those accounting terms. It was his pleasure to give to her when needed, and he gave generously and without thought of return.

Now was one of those times.

He reached over to her and began to remove her pink knitted top. She assisted, like a child co-operating in being undressed before bath time. She then lay back again and looked at him gratefully and with affection, as he began to unbutton her blouse. She did not reach out to him or speak. He was the doer and she was the recipient.

With her buttons undone and with an earnest, serious expression on his face, he dropped each of her bra straps down, with her full co-operation. She leaned back on the couch. He then moved his face over to her left breast and began licking her nipple with his tongue. Softly, but relentlessly. Around and around, beginning at the middle and then spreading out in ever-widening circles. He could feel it beginning to harden as her body responded.

Time slowed down. Her mind moved to the immediate present. To her lying there, with Steven gently licking her breasts. She did not speak and did not either encourage or discourage him from speaking. Rather, she absorbed the feelings of him comforting her.

She lowered herself on the couch, into a semi-lying position and he leaned over her further. She did not touch him and he did not expect to be touched. He was not seeking pleasure. He was expressing his feelings for her. Each lick sent a warm message to her. *Lay there. I know how to make you feel good. Let me pleasure you. Take it from me. My pleasure comes from knowing that I am pleasing you.*





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She slid down lower and he switched his attentions to her right breast. Slowly, surely and in a measured rhythm, he gently but persistently swirled around her awaiting nipple.

Frances felt no pressure, no sense of urgency. It was if she were home alone and soaking in a warm bath, allowing the soapy water to envelop her, with no need to go anywhere, to be anywhere, to do anything, to be anyone.

Her Empress Within would not have been pleased. Her commands to Frances's body were being flagrantly disobeyed. The Empress demanded deep touching but she did not receive it. What was going on was almost beyond sex. It was mesmeric, soothing, calming, like an infant being hugged and patted to sleep. It was not leading anywhere. It was an end in itself.

