

FRANCIS SMITH - LUCID



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Some people lead troubled lives, some for too long, some for less time. Francis is one of those hard, gritty, determined people. She's now ready to rock and roll. This story is dedicated to every feisty girl I've met and those I wished I had...

Chapter One

Francis Smith, now thirty five, Born into a troubled family, mother wanting to better herself with units of study through an online university course. Intro to tertiary studies, She had won a scholarship. Francis's father was a 'sometimes' drunk, his anger could hit high notes in an instant after a few too many beers.

Francis knew to stay clear of him, and as a youngster, she would shield herself behind her mother.

He could burst in the door and fall flat on his face, the kids knew not to laugh. His wife would roll her eyes, thinking, 'Well there goes a chunk of the housekeeping money.' She

would grab his wallet and empty out what was left, never taking any more than she was allowed to, but at times, there was less than she needed.

She gained the skill of not arguing with him, she just knew to hold things together, and that she would love the guy when he was sober and let 'whatever demons ruled his persona,' left alone.

Two brothers, Harry and Jim, were younger than Francis, she was eleven at this stage, Harry was a year younger and Jim a year beyond that.

Francis knew that hand-me-downs from the op shop or family were the norm, and any school kid that gave her 'lip' about it, was soon punched senseless. It didn't take long, here was a scrawny, wiry kid with the hitting power well beyond her age. On a rare occasion she would slap people but mostly she punched. No talking, no argument, just walk up, and bang, people got the message fast.

A video she had seen online of Bruce Lee demonstrating a 'one inch punch' stuck with her, she soon discovered that it worked a treat. Up close to the person of interest and bang, she would hit them in the sternum with a short punch, so close up they never expected it.

Francis watched more online videos on self defence, ducking and weaving, watching out for someone to 'leave themselves open.' then bang, she would hit. Having two younger brothers who could be rough and tumble, meant she got to practice a 'few moves.' Her mother would say 'You don't know your own strength girl.'

High school soon had her sorting out who would support her and who wouldn't, those who wouldn't soon learnt not to say a mean word, or cop the consequences.

Occasionally a new student would arrive, make some comment about her badly scuffed shoes or raggedy school bag and, bang, they felt the full force of Francis' punch. In some cases she would end up with some harsh words. 'I'm Francis Smith, shut your mouth next time, I'm not here to like you, you start the fight, I will end it.'

Teachers knew that she wasn't to be tackled, she would simply go quiet and not admit to anything. In retribution for being 'dobbed in' by the new student she would go to their house and stand out the front. She would generally just follow them home at the end of the day and walk just close enough for the new student to realise they were being followed.

Nothing said, nothing done other than staring and waiting. Sometimes up to twenty minutes, making sure the 'newbie' would know they were there. One time a mother came out to chat to Francis, she would simply walk away, not with any sense of fear or redemption, but just ease away. Nothing said, just a brief stern look.

One parent threatened to chat to Francis' mother, Francis followed the student home the next day and pelted a stone at them. The student ran, Francis picked up the stone again and managed to hit the child again. Word soon spread, there was no chat with her Mother.

One of the teachers even said, 'That girl will end up being big trouble, drugs, hard boyfriends, jump from garbage job to garbage job and every step will be an argument, albeit a silent argument at that.'

They were right, to some degree, at the end of year ten, Francis was out of school, even though she had good marks. She held a cashiers job at a discount fruit and veg store. But, Francis had a plan, sick of seeing her drunk father make a mess of things, she was determined to make a better life for herself. She noted that people with big qualifications often had a rich family to support them and give them what they needed until they were qualified.

Then there were others who got out early, set goals, did the hard yards and got on with life. To Francis, that made sense. Make money, build up a nest egg, don't waste money on drinks and partying too much.

The job at the fruit shop was walking distance from home. Twenty minutes to get there and twenty minutes back, she had two aprons given to her for the job, each one would last a week, her mother would then scoop up the used one, wash it and return it to her bedroom.

Francis never asked for this to happen, her mother just sensed it needed to happen.

The job was okay, Francis did all that was asked of her and then some. She learnt to remember the regular customers' names and had a 'rather direct' way of dealing with rude customers. They soon got the message, the boss had to say a few things about her approach, Francis just said, 'I like the nice people, the mean ones don't deserve our time.'

At nearly sixteen years old, Francis had built up enough vile energy to tackle her father head on. 'Drunk again, you old bastard!' He would swing a fist at her, she would duck and he would miss. Mother would turn away, not saying a thing.

At the end of dinner, where mum always made the family eat together, Francis would bail her father up if he was drunk, letting him know he was a disgrace. She had a way of whispering loud enough for him to hear and the others who would now be doing the dishes wouldn't. He would tell her to shut up. He referred to having his own demons. She suggested that he ditch his demons and join the real world.

His big drinking day was Friday, after work Francis wandered down to the pub and in front of the barmaid and his friends she stood and stared, he would say 'What?' she would say, 'Drunk again.' He shrugged his shoulders.

Francis turned to the barmaid and said, 'Thanks for all this, it's just great, hope you're satisfied...' She would then walk out.

On turning eighteen Francis rocked up to the pub and stood next to her Father, signalled to the barmaid, ordered a beer and paid for it in cash. She turned to her Father and said 'I'm having a drink with the old man, fancy that you old bastard.' Her Father had no idea what to say, he just looked at her and finally said, 'Oh yeah you turned eighteen, go you.'

Francis sipped that one beer and then headed home, saying nothing more to her Father that day.

Chapter Two

Francis had gained her drivers licence, saved up for the fee, paid to have some lessons and then let the kindly next door neighbour help her build her driving time up, she paid for the petrol. Francis' father vowed he wouldn't take her driving. Her Mother would take her occasionally but mainly said she was too busy and father would not be amused.

Licence in hand, Francis felt proud of her achievement.

A friend suggested to Francis that her 'pent up energy and anger issues' which had shown up in the past could readily surface again and then she would have to deal with that. Had she thought of doing something like Karate, or a self defence course, or Yoga? Francis took some self-defence classes and enjoyed getting physical, grappling, punching and kicking her way out of challenging situations. Yoga was not something she felt would be useful at this stage.

A night out with friends Francis had a few drinks, and was thankfully a happy drinker. They were watching a local band play at a small pub. The guys in the band were a few years ahead of her at school and now played anywhere they could, Francis thought 'Ah garage rock is alive and well!'

They chatted during the break, and the girls she was with were amused. One of the songs Francis knew most of the words to and could sing it fairly well.

A few weeks later they watched the boys play, their singer had a rough voice that night, and Francis said she could help out with one song. She had had enough drinks to build up some 'dutch courage.' The crowd was small and she was egged on by her mates.

She gave it a shot and only messed up on a few words, the band were pleased, most of them could barely hear her anyway and were glad to be able to not have to pull out of the gig. She was handed the words to the next song and did okay following them, and did alright with her pitch. Her friends said 'Mate, you're a natural!'

After that she practiced at home on a few other songs and would fill in and do harmonies with the main singer. If anyone gave the band ‘grief’ she would stare at them, get up close and tell them to ‘feck off.’ People who knew her would let the heckler know she could be a mean girl and would sort out anyone who thought otherwise.

The band started to gain a bigger crowd of followers and the pub owner liked that he sold more beer.

It would be two years later that Francis was able to move out with a friend, Angie, Angie didn’t last long, the flat they lived in was too small and she missed her family, Francis wanted to stay, so she did and it wasn’t long after that that a friend of the band offered to move in, Chris.

The pair got on okay, Chris had helped Francis to buy her first car a while back, a small station wagon, it meant that she could cart some of the band gear about. She loved the sense of independence.

Chris occasionally did drugs, it didn’t bother Francis much, she simply said, ‘keep it out of the flat and do it elsewhere.’ He complied, he knew if she had that steely look in her eyes that she meant it.

The job at the fruit and veg was wearing thin, the guys that ran the place were shutting down a few of their stores and hers was next in line. Now what? Her customer service skills were good, she had to learn from the boss to smile more often but that was okay. She now had a solid reference.

A local shoe shop wanted a girl nine to five, five days a week, Francis heard about it through a friend. Francis thought that was perfect. Despite one tattoo on her arm. Jean Fennelly, the owner of the shop, didn’t mind, she simply said. ‘As long as you are willing to learn. That’s all I ask.’ Francis didn’t know it, but Jean had found it difficult to get someone to be in the store, and work steadily, most people found it too boring and didn’t stay long.

Jean was a good mentor for Francis and gave her tips on how to present more effectively, Francis, to everyone's surprise complied. The shoe shop was much better than the cold or hot fruit shop. She and Jean got on well.

It turned out that Francis was a natural with most of the customers, she would have a laugh with kids and had a good idea about how to win people over if they weren't too sure about a choice between two or more pairs of shoes.

In a way, the ensuing years were not overly kind to Francis, it didn't help that she was in a band and spending late nights out with 'the boys'. Nor the fact that she had now entered into a relationship with Chris. They had moments of being the best of mates, then at each other's throats.

It was nothing for them to get back to the flat at 4 am to have a chat or an argument. Chris thought that he had figured out how to 'tame' Francis, she often proved him wrong her biting quips and fast humour often caught him off guard. The pair could stand 'toe to toe' and argue a point.

Bitter, strong, loving, heated, and torrid, often came within a few minutes of a verbal exchange. Occasionally sealed with a kiss if the rage had faded and a warmer approach was being developed.

A friend suggested one time that Francis had some form of trauma that kept her fiery and determined, but when she showed a softer side she was more endearing. Francis added, yep, trauma let's see, a drunk old man, a dismissive at times Mother, and the heckling from kids because we were poor. YEP trauma.

Her friend suggested that she consider counselling, having heard that trauma from the past could be diminished and have less of an effect on a person. Francis listened carefully and considered what was said. She felt that it would be useful to have less angst in her life. Francis pointed out her self-defence training, she decided to do some more of that as a top up to her skills.

Francis didn't want to lose her fiery edge and ability to handle hecklers in an audience for instance. But less anger could be good, it could certainly alter things with her and Chris.

Online research, a few things showed up, some ideas on how to alter your memory of the experience/s. The simple visualisations certainly made sense. It worked to some degree but it wasn't long before she went further and got a local counsellor to help out. They listened and explored the things she had done so far.

There was agreement with some of what she had done, and then some extra exercises to tweak the situation. A few sessions later, she had come to terms with her situation and was wanting to see if she could talk to her father.

Chapter Three

They caught up at home, dinner was shared and this night he was sober. She asked him about the trauma/s that caused him to drink so much. It turned out that he had a lot going on as a kid, an abusive family situation, along with a few challenging jobs that he didn't last long in.

He settled down as he met his future wife, then it wasn't long after their marriage that things flared up again, old memories that caused pain and had not been dealt with, well back then it was seen as a weakness to see a 'shrink', but the drink blurred things for a short while.

Francis mentioned how she handled his drinking and apologised, as she didn't know how to handle the situation. Her mother was surprised at how open Francis was and how much calmer she was with things in general.

There was a period of silence at the table after the discussion, then her mother said 'It was as if a switch was flipped, you both connected quite well and were rational. Good to see.'

Things were good here, but Francis' relationship with Chris was having its moments. Things would flare up about Chris and drugs, Chris could no longer blame her anger issues, they had faded to a large degree. A few late nights and Francis decided they were finished

and she asked Chris to leave, their relationship had worn thin and it was time for him to move on.

Chris wasn't happy but knew she was right, they had a few heated discussions and then he started to look for a place to move to.

One Rainy cold Saturday afternoon Francis sat in a melancholy mood and decided to put pen to paper, she came up with some words that fitted to their situation.

The kitchen is a cage of clinical light, the air between us hardening into a wall. At the table, you dissect the past like an old wound until it bleeds across the timber of the table top. The silence is feral, a coiled spring waiting to snap.

You say 'You're being passive again,' A jagged provocation, a drowning person reaching for an anchor to pull the world down with them.

I turn, weary and stone-eyed. There is no defense left, only the raw tension of trust stretched to its breaking point. 'I don't want to control you, I just want to know you're still in there.'

For a moment, the ghost of our former warmth flickers. You reached out with a trembling touch, a plea for help disguised as a strike. I don't pull away; the respect for the wreckage remains, even as the intimacy turns to poison.

We remain locked in our ritual: hold, hurt, release. We stay because the fire of our mutual destruction is the only thing keeping the winter at bay, two soldiers standing in the rubble, too exhausted to leave and too prideful to fall.

But here we are, worn to the bone, I have asked and you are complying. Time to move on, me thinks.

Francis pins the words to the door of the fridge. Re reads it, and stands content that her heart has now laid bare some of its contents.

Two weeks later and Chris is gone, it took a while for him to find a place, and then a bit longer for him to organise for a mate to help him move his things, albeit that there wasn't much to move.

That flat was quiet and it would take some time for Francis to reconcile the loss, the sense of moving on, and the sense of relief that she had been able to break the cycle of their sometimes oppressive relationship. Free at last, even though the silence in the flat was sometimes a little unnerving.

Life would soon develop its own sense of normality, coupled with the band and their sometimes frantic goings on. The occasional drunk 'groupie', the occasional guy wanting a grope, a few kisses and a notch on his belt. Then the funny moments, musicians recalling dancing fools, bizarre song requests, and the hecklers, 'If you don't like it, move on...'

The boys in the band were there at the end of the night to see that Francis got away okay, but in the end they knew that Francis could look after herself quite well. A way with words, and the ability to physically render some big idiot useless if need be. But they never let on that she had those skills, but watching how she handled herself was often quite amusing.

Francis without Chris was at times, at a loss. It took a while to reconcile his departure but things settled down.

The quietness of the flat eventually stopped sounding like emptiness and started sounding like peace. Francis found herself spending Sunday mornings drinking coffee out of her favourite cracked mug, listening to the rain without waiting for the other shoe to drop. There was no coiled spring in the kitchen anymore. Just clinical light on clean benchtops.

The text message from Chris came on a Tuesday: 'I left my blue hoodie. Can I drop by?'

Francis looked at the phone. A year ago, that text would have triggered a three-day storm of adrenaline. Now, she just smiled, her fingers flying across the screen. ‘Gave it to a charity shop, mate. It matches someone else’s baggage now. Best of luck.’ She hit send and blocked the number. It wasn’t malicious; it was just efficient boundary management.

That Friday night, the band played a packed-out gig at The Iron Horse pub. The energy was electric, the bass thumping right through the floorboards. Halfway through their second set, a bloke in the front row, built like a brick outhouse and clearly three pints past his limit, decided it was his ‘civic duty’ to heckle.

‘Oi! Leave the singing to someone with nicer legs, darlin’!’ he bellowed, slurring his words.

The bass player paused, shooting a concerned glance at Francis. The drummer held his sticks mid-air, bracing for the old Francis explosion.

Instead, Francis just lowered the microphone, leaned forward, and beamed a blinding, sweet smile directly at him. ‘Mate,’ she purred, her voice carrying beautifully over the crowd. ‘I’d agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong. And honestly, judging by that haircut, you’ve suffered enough bad decisions for one lifetime.’

The pub erupted into roars of laughter. The heckler turned a vibrant shade of beetroot, looked down at his shoes, and quietly shuffled off toward the back of the pub by the bar.

Behind her, the drummer let out a low whistle. ‘Damn, Fran. Your soft skills are lethal.’

‘Upgraded the software, boys,’ Francis laughed, tapping her temple. ‘Same hardware, better operating system.’

After the gig, she packed her guitar case and headed out the door. She stepped out into the cool midnight air, her muscles aching in that good, honest way that comes from hard work. Her mother had called earlier to invite her to Sunday roast, with her father, who was still attending his meetings and staying dry. The family switch was still flipped to ‘rational’.

Francis walked toward her car, her boots clicking firmly against the pavement. The future stretched out ahead of her, unwritten and entirely her own. She still had her fire, she still had her edge, but some of the heavy armor was gone. She was lighter, sharper, and completely intact.

As she unlocked her car, a stray cat darted across the alleyway. Francis watched it disappear into the shadows, took a deep breath of the crisp night air, and smiled.

Time to move on, methinks, and the view from here looks spectacular.