

A nighttime photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The building is brightly lit, with its iconic dome and neoclassical architecture clearly visible. In the foreground, a stone bridge with several arches spans across the frame, its lights reflecting on the water below. The overall scene is dark, with the artificial lights of the building and bridge providing the primary illumination.

THE  
FRANKLIN  
CONSPIRACY

GORDON COLLIS

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# CHAPTER 1

It was just after sun-up and the hills in and around the Dandenong ranges echoed with the sound of birds chirping and kookaburras calling in the distance. The pre-dawn symphony was joined by a rooster cock-a-doodle-dooing to the morning, which soon became a free-for-all; every rooster in every hen house tried to out-do the others' calls.

Then suddenly, all outside noises were drowned out by the ear-piercing squeal of William Stirling's alarm clock, which sat on the bedside table next to his ear. Bill woke up and slapped his hand across the alarm's "off" control to stop the noise. He moved carefully, so as not to disturb his beloved wife, Louise, from her sleep.

Carefully, Bill lifted himself from their bed and gently returned the feather doona over his motionless wife. He leaned over the bed and kissed her softly on the forehead.

"Good morning," he whispered, checking to see if Louise was awake. There was no response and Bill pushed himself back to put on his slippers.

Bill usually woke up in a good mood and today was no exception. He stood up and his wife stirred. She lifted her head from the pillow and squinted.

"Hello," she said and tried to focus on the brightness of the morning. Her long mousy brown hair looked wild and messy, and

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her beautiful oval face was partially covered by the bed sheet. Bill leaned back over and kissed her again.

“Good morning,” he repeated, “Can I make you some coffee?”

Louise smiled and nodded. She knew this time of day belonged to Bill. He had always enjoyed the morning, ever since their days at university when they were both studying for their business degrees. This would eventually lead Bill into real estate, while Louise’s forte was accounting and bookkeeping. She had a head for numbers.

The Stirling’s now had enough money behind them to live comfortably, but they were by no means rich. They owned a nice home in a good area, with landscaped gardens and manicured lawns. It was not an ostentatious home, but it was large and tastefully decorated. It was what you would call a classic professional residence. Bill took great pleasure in maintaining it and Louise graced it with her feminine touch.

Louise drove a relatively new Holden Commodore sedan and Bill drove a Mercedes-Benz. “It’s essential, for the right impression,” He told his wife. Bill had had a very humble upbringing and was proud with what they’d accomplished.

They had now been married eight years and were as much in love now as they were when their eyes first met at university. Bill impressed Louise with his solid build and broad shoulders, and his blond hair and blue eyes were things Louise loved from the first minute she’d seen him. At around 5 feet 11 inches, Louise was tall for a woman, and had long hair and a pretty face. Bill stood about 6 feet tall, which was another thing that she loved about him. He had a kind nature and cheerful personality. It helped him get along well with others and he was a real” people person.”

They had no children, but a child was on the agenda in the near future. They’d promised themselves that they wouldn’t have children until the conditions were right. This meant no kids until they were comfortable enough to support a child without both of them working. Louise thought she must stay at home at least until their baby was old enough to fend for itself.

“That could be forever,” Bill had once joked.

Louise works casually as a pay administrator in the city and maintains the cashbooks for her employer, Bernard, Collins & Associates, a prominent accounting firm in Melbourne that concerns

itself mainly with taxation. Louise was computer literate, and so she was tasked with translating information into the company's database. She was very ambitious, with plenty of experience for the age of 26 years. Bill was 32

Bill stood up from the bed and picked up his dressing gown. He made his way out of the bedroom and headed towards the kitchen, while Louise lay motionless in bed staring at the ceiling.

Not long after that Bill returned with two steaming mugs. "Can I interest you in some coffee?" He stepped around the bed to stand over his wife.

Louise enjoyed this morning ritual and regarded it as a kind of game. Bill placed one of the mugs down on Louise's bedside table and walked back around to his side of the bed next to the door. He placed his mug down on his bedside table and sat on the bed next to his wife.

Louise groaned, as she rolled over to face him, and she said "thank you" for the coffee. She sat up and reached for her mug. "What have you got on for today?"

"I've an inspection at one site and a mountain of paperwork after that." Bill screwed up his nose and looked unimpressed. Louise could tell by his voice that Bill's enthusiasm was non-existent. He hated writing contracts, as he found dealing with solicitors tiresome. They were not his kind of people: Bill thought most solicitors were very pedantic and not very easy to work with.

He finished his coffee and, after placing the empty mug down on the table next to the bed, leaned over to Louise and kissed her on the lips. "And what have you got on?"

Louise screwed up her nose. "My daily ritual...Housework!"

Bill smiled. "You should stay there and relax."

Louise had, for the time being, finished her part-time work with Bernard, Collins & Associates, and was taking some time off before returning in two weeks to do their quarterly reports. Although Louise had her usual routine of domestic duties, she was not going to waste a minute of her vacation. She had her weeks' schedule organised and was very keen about fulfilling it.

Louise sat up straighter in bed and took a sip from her mug. She gently rubbed her husband's back. "I've got to pick up some things at the supermarket. Then I'm going to have a cuppa with mum."

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Bill nodded in acknowledgement. Louise's mother, Jane Keally, lived quite close, about half an hour's drive away, and enjoyed going out with her daughter. She was in her late sixties and lived on her own in Fern Tree Gully; a nice little suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne. Louise's father passed away 18 months ago and her mother was still missing him terribly. Loneliness had taken over a great part of her life and Louise did whatever she could to help her cope. Jane loved going out and Louise was always there for her. It helped her feel wanted and needed.

The morning's events were typical for the Stirlings. Bill and Louise usually discussed the day's events. It was not as a question of being nosy, but more that they cared about each other and were interested in the other's lives.

Bill gave Louise a kiss and stood up from their bed before picking up his empty cup and walking out of the room to get ready for work. He showered and then dressed, and was ready to go after about 30 minutes.

While Bill was getting ready, Louise searched in the top drawer of her bedside table to find something to write a shopping list on. She was nibbling on some fruit that Bill had brought in earlier, and was thinking about her shopping list when Bill returned to say "goodbye." He handed Louise his wallet and then straightened his suit and tie in mirror on the wall next to the window.

Louise took out some money and pushed back the covers to get out of bed. She walked around the bed to cuddle Bill before handing him back his wallet.

They said their goodbyes and Bill left for work. For all intents and purposes, it was an ordinary day.

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