

'A timely and poignant story about the
importance of loving and, ultimately, of living.'

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HAPPY



HOUR



JACQUIE
BYRON

HAPPY HOUR



JACQUIE BYRON grew up with wishing-chairs and Trixie Belden. Her love of reading morphed into a love of writing, leading her to study journalism while waitressing her way around various bars and tables in Melbourne and, for a short stint, the UK. Collecting and sharing stories has kept her busy professionally for more than twenty-five years, taking her from the Ogden Museum in New Orleans to an IDP camp in Uganda. Shocking herself as much as those around her, Jacquie has been a motoring writer, a jewellery editor, a fashion publicist and more. Today she writes for business and for pleasure. *Happy Hour* is her first novel. Whisky is her first cairn.

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JACQUIE
BYRON


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To all the wee doggies and magnificent bastards

1

FRANK TALKING

She wrapped a third ziplock bag around the dog droppings, placed the insulated pile inside a plastic express-post envelope, sealed that and placed the whole thing neatly on the bottom shelf of her refrigerator. Though confident contamination was not an issue, Franny decided a dose of bleach throughout her Fisher & Paykel the next day would not go astray. She made a mental note to do that, but not before she had shoved the whole fragrant bundle in a post box somewhere random, away from prying eyes. And nostrils.

Now her priority was a stiff Tanqueray. Eyes shifting to the clock above the fridge, she breathed out, seeing once again she had made it to six o'clock.

'Praise the Lord and pass the mustard!' She reached for her mobile phone, switched it to silent, then stashed it inside the cutlery draw. The last two days had been unexpectedly rough, her emotions in tumult since the arrival of a letter from The Evil Prick who had killed her Frank. Who wouldn't need a bloody gin?

Some people said the nights were the worst, but Franny disagreed. Almost daily she found herself watching the kitchen clock as it inched towards six, ready to exhale that guilty sigh.

People's thoughts turned inwards as the sun began to set. There was dinner to think of or grandkids to wrangle, night classes to pack for and mind-numbing amateur theatre to attend. Caring phone calls, sundry tender interference, would abate and Franny could crack open the gin and fire up the Netflix. Finally, and luxuriously, she could wallow in style.

'Alrighty you two, quit the carry-on. Dinner's just around the corner,' she said to her dogs, Whisky and Soda, a cairn terrier and golden retriever respectively, now both on their hind legs beside her, nails scraping against the kitchen cupboard. She sliced lemon for her drink then used her leg to heave both dogs sideways so she could reach across to place a glass tumbler beneath the ice maker in the refrigerator door. Four cubes descended with a reassuring clink.

'You know, if either of you could make a decent G and T, you'd have more sway,' she muttered to the dogs, topping up the glass with just a splash of tonic then taking a noisy, appreciative sip. 'See what I have to put up with, Frank?' she said, holding the glass up to the ceiling in a form of cheers. 'On top of everything else I have to make all the bloody drinks.'

Frank Calderwood, Franny's husband and fellow pre-prandial drinks aficionado, had been dead almost three years but Franny maintained a steady dialogue. Photos of the man populated various rooms of the largish house they once shared. Kitchen Frank, who she was chatting to now, in his frame atop the microwave, was in his thirties, armed with barbecue tongs, dressed in an apron festooned with pendulous breasts. Laundry Frank was a man in his fifties, hair thinning and brown legs stretched out on a sun lounge, his sleeping face covered by a delicately placed pair of women's underpants. Bedroom Frank was a pensive young chap. He gazed prettily through the window of a Tuscan pensione, pen in mouth,

a well-thumbed travel guide on the table beside him. There was no photo-Frank in the backyard where Franny loved to potter. Out there she just chatted to the open air.

Franny refused to consider the habit odd. It wasn't as if she was expecting an otherworldly response; even the idea of that made her arm hairs stand on end. No, it was just that she'd been speaking to Frank for over forty years. Why stop now? And, as she'd tell anyone who asked, not that there really was anyone to ask, 'It's not like he always responded when he was alive.'

Frank had been knocked off his bicycle one night while riding home from the supermarket. He was sixty-five and in robust health, especially for a man who used to smoke a packet a day and still fancied a cold beer in the shower. The Evil Prick, the only way Franny ever referred to the twenty-three-year-old driver who had killed Frank, was high on ice at the time. Yesterday morning, an apology letter had arrived in the mail, forwarded through a chain of case workers and solicitors. Christopher Pavlos was deeply, deeply sorry. As part of his jail sentence he was undergoing rehab. He had ruined his own life and that of his parents. An older cousin had introduced him to drugs while he'd been depressed and unemployed. His life had hit a downward spiral. Perhaps if she knew the steps leading up to that tragic night Mrs Calderwood could forgive him, or at least have some understanding.

Franny had understood just fine. Last night Whisky had been treated to a dollop of organic strawberry ice cream after an already generous dinner, then his owner waited for the moist and reeking results. When they arrived, the terrier's contributions far outweighed Franny's requirements. She had scooped them up and shoved them in a bag, along with The Evil Prick's original letter. Her plan involved allowing the fetid little parcel to firm up for the next twenty-four

hours, in readiness for its postal journey ahead. Sitting on her patio, writing out the address on the return envelope, she had sipped a glass of ice-cold Taittinger and quietly cried.

‘Tatt’ was Frank’s favourite champagne, occasionally accessible to his widow now because of the sizeable life insurance pay-out she had received, along with a small amount from the State. ‘The Crash Cash’ was her name for the money. Receiving it at age sixty-two, Franny had immediately retired from the gallery where she had worked part-time selling her and others’ artworks. She had given only a few days’ notice to poor Darrien Bromley, the man who was not just her employer but also a longstanding collaborator and friend.

‘No one cares about anything but themselves in the art world for God’s sake,’ she had claimed at the time. ‘It’s all air kissing and egos wrapped up with cheap white wine and warm cheese. They won’t even notice I’m gone.’

Of course, that had not quite been the case. Indeed, Franny had been taken by surprise by the number of bouquets, telephone calls and emails that had made their way to her home, her phone and her inbox in the weeks following her departure. But, in one of his final pleading calls, when Darrien muttered something about Franny ‘risking becoming irrelevant by just dropping out of the scene’ she had laughed sharply then said, ‘Does being irrelevant mean finally being left the hell alone?’ Unsurprisingly perhaps, that was the last time the gallerist had ever called.



That night was movie night and, as she stood sipping a second gin and waiting for the dogs’ dinner to warm in the microwave, Franny perused a list of film titles on her iPad. ‘You know what?’ she said to Breakfast Bar Frank, a photograph of her husband in

his late thirties, reclining on an armchair, ginger cat asleep on his knees. ‘My Cinema Decrepite seems to be expanding, not reducing. God knows how I ever had time to work.’

Cinema Decrepite and the Retirement Library were the names of two projects Franny had worked on assiduously since turning fifty. The first was a list of movies and, more recently, television shows she wanted to see before she died. That list kept growing. The second was a bookshelf of brand new, as yet unread, books. This collection was also multiplying, and two small piles had formed on the lounge-room floor. Franny would have liked a new place to store them but these days didn’t know where to buy furniture that didn’t require some degree of at-home construction.

‘I think I’m going to take *Poldark* off this list,’ she said as the microwave pinged. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever be so old that soft porn like this holds appeal.’

While the dogs wolfed their food, Franny inspected the kitchen cupboard, looking for something to eat. The business of the letter and the dog droppings had knocked her appetite for six. She was contemplating a bag of corn chips and a jar of hot salsa when the iPad started to ring.

‘Oh, bugger off,’ she muttered, rushing to tap the ignore button. For some reason, while her iPhone was easily tamed, the iPad had recently turned traitor, ringing when she didn’t even realise it knew how to.

‘Whisky,’ she said, pointing her finger at the dog, now licking his empty bowl and glancing at her sideways, ‘next time dear Elouise is here you have to remind me to ask her about this. It cannot go on!’

As well as being her honest-to-goodness goddaughter, Elouise Martini also served as Franny’s IT support in post-Frank life, thereby enjoying dramatically increased chances of accessing the house.

Few others made the cut and more than once the twenty-year-old had raised the possibility Franny was taking her isolationist policy a tad too far. The day she had arrived to find a new security gate installed, complete with an intercom system, ensuring visitors ignorant of the security code were now at Franny's mercy, she was particularly concerned.

'Crash Cash at work again, I assume,' Elouise had said with an air of exhaustion. 'Is this really necessary, Aunty Fran? What if there's an emergency? Like, is it even safe?'

'Now, Ellie, my dear, sweet girl,' Franny had said, handing her a scrap of paper with the security code printed on it and the words 'fire, flood and death only' added in Franny's handwriting, 'the other day two young men in suits came knocking, wondering if I'd like to read a copy of *The Watchtower*. *The Watchtower*, for God's sake. They wanted me to learn about Jehovah's Kingdom. I told them Old Kingdom, the Chinese on Cromwell Road, the place with the really good duck, was the only one of interest to me.'

Placing the note inside her wallet, Elouise did her best to look stern, but the upwards twitch of her lips was all the encouragement Franny needed.

'I also told them that Jehovah was make-believe, and I hoped no one was sodomising them back at the church. They didn't like it, Ellie, I won't lie. I think it's better for everyone that entry is by invitation only now. Besides, I was right in the middle of a particularly dirty martini and a great episode of *Breaking Bad*. I still cannot believe I didn't watch that show with your godfather when it first came out. He would have loved it.'

As well as Franny's strict border controls, Elouise was not overly enthusiastic about her godmother's evening communications curfew.

Early in the piece she had moaned, ‘For someone who likes a lot of after-hours tech support, you’d think you could be a bit more sympathetic to other people’s schedules.’

To this Franny had replied, ‘I’m a grieving widow, dear. I get the sympathy.’

The look that had passed over Elouise’s face at that moment was one of undisguised pain. Franny had said nothing but the next time her goddaughter popped over a department-store gift card was waiting for her.

Elouise belonged, as much as any grown child can, to Anthea Martini, Franny’s oldest friend from school. Anthea had long given up trying to include Franny in lunch trips to wineries or weekends away at her hobby farm. Instead she sent Elouise, her canary in the coal mine, to keep an eye on happenings at Chateau Calderwood. The system was a fragile, delicately constructed one. As an acknowledged ‘young person’ Elouise was useful to Franny in terms of keeping up with the modern, digital world. She was also a serene and capable individual whom Frank had famously adored. This combination afforded her a level of privilege she was careful not to abuse. It was Elouise’s phone number on the iPad just now.

‘I can’t answer you, darling, I don’t know how to use this thing,’ Franny said aloud to the tablet as she placed the device back in its spongey pouch and shoved it on the shelf beneath the coffee table. ‘Tomorrow will do.’

In her conscience a tiny needle, the kind reserved for particularly delicate embroidery, delivered a fleeting prick. Elouise was well aware of her godmother’s six o’clock shut-down rule but recently she had mentioned something about her mother needing a gallstone operation. Was there something wrong with Anthea?

‘No, this is how they try to get me,’ Franny concluded, slumping into her leather armchair and yanking the lever up so the footstool shot out. She glanced over at Lounge Room Frank, a man laughing out of a silver frame as a cairn terrier interrogated his ear with its tongue. ‘Oh, don’t look at me like that, Frank,’ she said and turned on the TV.

2

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Driving back from the nearest dog beach with Whisky and Soda the next day, Franny took a detour, pulling into the carpark of a bland constellation of mismatched budget retail outlets offering everything from pet supplies to tax services and manicures.

‘Hang on, mutts,’ she called back to the dogs, ‘your mistress needs to make a deposit.’

Franny looked over each shoulder in a poor impression of an ageing spy, grabbed the excrement-heavy express-post envelope from under the passenger seat and stepped out of the car. The day was warm. She cursed herself for having left the parcel in the car while walking the dogs. After all her drying and chilling efforts, the spongy heft now left her feeling nauseous.

Franny practically jogged to the nearby post box, despite the fact no one else was parked nearby, dropped in the parcel, then returned to the car and sped off. Flying over a speed hump near the exit in third gear, she looked at the rear-view mirror just as Soda’s furry blonde head came close to colliding with the car’s roof.

‘Sorry, old girl,’ she said.

Ten minutes later, turning into Ipswich Street, Franny noticed a moving van in the driveway of the newish townhouse next door.

‘What’s this, new neighbours?’ she said, glancing back at the bedraggled Whisky and Soda, both secured in the back seat. Their tails wagged in enthusiastic response. ‘Don’t go getting excited. They won’t be getting to know you.’

Frank and Franny had moved to the bayside suburb of Cheltenham close to twenty-five years ago. Too far from the city for office types and too far from the beach for ladies who lunched, it was home to a mixed bag of working, and sometimes not working, Anglo Australians, many with a caravan or boat in their driveways, some with cars up on bricks. Alongside them lived Greek and Italian families who filled their large gardens with fruit trees and white-stone lions and sometimes, to Frank’s delight, used their garages for salami- and wine-making days.

Back then the houses were unremarkable, old weatherboards beside yellow-brick stalwarts, all on spacious blocks with room for kids and dogs to play. Men had sheds and still mowed their own lawns, women had Hills Hoists and cleaned their own homes.

These days the suburb had changed. The definition of inner city in real-estate terms had expanded as the suburbs genuinely close to the CBD became unaffordable. Old houses were knocked down on what seemed to Franny a weekly basis, two new boxes popping up to replace them in the blink of an eye. Low-rise apartment blocks had sprung up near the train station and the highway. Cheltenham now attracted first-home buyers and renters alike, happy to find a modest townhouse they could, with careful budgeting, plywood furniture and the occasional bit of hot-bedding, only just afford.

What older houses survived were snapped up by double-income families or men with trades, those Franny considered the new

suburban gods. These incomers appreciated the scruffy surf club and public golf course within a ten-minute radius, plus the fact their kids could still walk to school. To Franny, these people's driveways looked like car commercials come to life, with gunmetal-grey four-wheel drives parked close to judiciously enclosed trampolines, six-thousand-dollar road bicycles balanced on porches, and collections of basketballs and Nike sneakers stacked beside security-framed front doors.

Franny and Frank had loved the place, even loved the changes. They'd bought their house using a combination of a small inherited windfall on Frank's side and hard-earned dollars on his wife's. The couple had soon divested themselves of their mortgage, settling into a life where money had gone on travel and entertainment, leaving flash cars and continuous home extensions to the neighbours.

Frank had liked roaming the golf course at night with the dogs, sometimes seeing foxes, often disturbing teenage lovers. Franny still loved the fact the shopping strip remained largely unmolested. Florists stubbornly added baby's breath to carnations. The Vietnamese bakery still charged five dollars for a very decent salad roll.

The neighbours across the road from the Calderwoods had been there forever, at least in Franny's mind. The house with its banged-up brick-and-iron fence was occupied by an elderly woman when she and Frank had first arrived. Gradually new faces had appeared: a grown son and his wife, one baby and then one more. For a few years they had all lived together then, according to Frank, the old woman developed dementia. Soon she disappeared. The son and his wife drifted closer to middle age. The kids shuffled out each morning to school.

Today this particular neighbour was standing in his driveway, can of beer in one hand, garden hose in the other. He was watching

intently as two men unpacked the removals van, his eyes darting from item to item as each was disgorged.

‘Trust Tarzan to have a front-row seat,’ said Franny, slowing the car to pull into the driveway.

It wasn’t so much that she disliked the man, she just generally liked to steer clear of anyone who might be tempted to drop in unexpectedly or enjoy conversations about sport. She knew her husband and this bloke had sometimes talked cricket. Franny also knew the wife’s name was Jane, which was enough for her to label the husband as Tarzan. He was a fan of perilously low-slung tracksuit pants and seemed to drink budget beer at a relentless pace while feigning work in his front yard. Even this wouldn’t have worried Franny who, after all, considered a cold beer while weeding one of the many joys of summer. No, the real problem was she never, ever saw him play with his two children. That seemed a cardinal sin. Then there was the other small fact that once, in recent times, he had tried giving her a thumb’s up when a delivery truck from one of the big bottle-shop chains had pulled up outside her house. She would like to have told him where to shove that thumb.

Right now, Franny felt rather than saw Tarzan trying to catch her eye. She glanced around, checking for cars and pedestrians, doggedly avoiding his gaze. ‘No way, buddy, we’re not on the same team,’ she muttered.

Inside her house Franny unloaded dog balls, poo bags and a packet of treats into a bowl by the back door then went to telephone Elouise.

‘You rang last night,’ she said after announcing herself. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’m sorry, Auntie Fran, I didn’t realise it was six till I was already dialling. You are as predictably punctual as you are unsociable.’

‘Yes, very amusing, Elouise. What can I do for you?’ Franny moved closer to the window overlooking the driveway next door.

With one freckled pinkie finger, she pulled back the sheer curtain slightly to achieve a better view.

On the other end of the line she heard the younger woman let out a breath. 'I'm going away for a few weeks. I have a work placement in Darwin. It's a writing therapy program with Larrakia teens. Getting great results.'

'Oh, Ellie, haven't those poor kids got enough problems without some do-gooding, well-groomed overachiever like you leaning in?'

Elouise laughed. 'Leaning in? I know for a fact you've never read a word of Sheryl Sandberg's book so don't go referencing it now.'

'I saw her crapping on to Ellen or someone else on telly,' Franny responded. 'I know she's the kind of blow-dried superwoman your generation worships.'

Elouise sighed again but did not take the bait. 'I thought you believed in writing therapy,' she said instead. 'You're helping pay for my course for God's sake. And you and Uncle Frank used to complain bitterly about illiteracy among First Nations people.'

'Well that was before it started inconveniencing the elderly and infirm, namely me. Anyway, when will you be back?'

'Last week of April. Mum has all the details and she's here if you need anything, need to get somewhere in the car or whatever. She'd just love to see you—naturally.'

'I have a car and well you know it,' said Franny, ignoring the last statement.

'Yes, but it's not a good idea you drive it . . . is it?' Elouise's concern over Franny driving while under the influence was a well-worn topic of conversation between the pair.

'I've told you at least a hundred times, young lady, I do not drink and drive. I only drive in the mornings. And I never drink during the day anyway.' Franny was fed up with this topic. She genuinely

did not drink during daylight hours, bar a few exceptions. These included Tuesdays at Bello Cielo, most weekends and, sometimes, during daylight savings. Often those summer days seemed unnecessarily long.

‘Okay, okay, whatever you say. But will you be all right? I leave the day after tomorrow so speak up now if you want something done. Or call Mum, of course.’

‘Ellie, you’re a good girl,’ said Franny, with genuine appreciation. ‘Those kids up north won’t know what’s coming. Do you have enough money? And what about something to scare off crocodiles?’

‘You know you’re horrible, right? But seriously, should I come over for dinner tomorrow?’

Franny generally declined these offers and today was no different. ‘No, no dear, the mutts and I will be fine. Besides, there are people moving in next door. Too many comings and goings in the first few days and they might think mine is the kind of house that welcomes visitors.’

‘God forbid,’ said Elouise.

‘Oh bugger, oh no,’ Franny suddenly moaned. ‘I have to go, Ellie. Safe travels. This is really bad. Bye.’ She could hear her goddaughter calling to her down the line, concern in her voice. ‘I have to go, Ellie, this is bad I tell you. They’ve unloaded a bloody basketball thingamajig.’ And with that Franny ended the call.



By four o'clock that afternoon Franny was in the room she used as her studio. Yes, she could see the street from there. No, she was not snooping. Her radio blared talkback from her favourite drive-time show, ‘Drive with Karl’. She loved that the audience was predominantly comprised of right-wing curmudgeons and paranoid

parents. They amused her no end. Franny could easily kill a very pleasant couple of hours shouting at the radio, belittling the callers and abusing the host. Occasionally, as a prank, and depending on what she had imbibed, she even phoned in.

Since Frank's death Franny had moved into the larger of her two spare rooms, transforming the original master bedroom at the front of the house to become her studio. Its floor had been stripped to bare polished boards and a wide wooden table now dominated the space. Just a stool on rollers and a bulky leather office chair lolled nearby. A large black-and-white photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe dominated one wall. The artist sat in the backseat of a car, staring through a hole in a piece of cheese. Pushed into a corner, its surface a kaleidoscope of paint splotches, stood an ancient easel, the kind you'd see in a 1960s classroom.

Franny was in the old en suite, ferreting through one of the dozen or so glass jars crowded around the sink. Most were crammed with paint brushes of different shapes and lengths; some held murky liquids in mud-like hues.

A brownish tint ringed the inside of the basin, testament to the many dyeing experiments and paintbrush-washings it had withstood. In the bathtub to the left was all of Franny's bulkier equipment, everything from tubs of paints and various chemicals to stacks of freshly washed but fatally stained towels and rags.

The studio was where Franny did all her paintings and illustrations. A small desk was shoehorned near the window so her laptop could evade the miscellaneous spills and smudges she insisted were part of her 'process'. It sat beside her digital radio, a landline telephone, one framed photograph and an overflowing tray of bills and other paperwork; filing had been Frank's domain.

Bookshelves covered two walls, built specifically to cope with lofty design and reference books. These shelves also showcased numerous awards and professional memorabilia belonging to both Franny and Frank, a mix of framed certificates and artsy glass and metal concoctions. Arguably the most surprising occupant in this collection, however, was a taxidermied ginger cat.

In death, Mr Marmalade sat in one of his favourite poses from life: two long, white-socked paws stretched out before him, head tilted coyly to one side. His mouth hung open slightly and his favourite toy mouse sat glued to the plinth beneath him.

The cat had been the first pet the newly married Calderwoods shared. He took on a legendary status in the household when his likeness became central to a series of ten wildly successful children's books, written and illustrated by Frances Calderwood. The whole thing began as a lark. Franny, honing her skills, using Mr Marmalade as her artist's model. On sunny afternoons he would lounge in beams of sunshine on the kitchen table where she worked in their small, inner-city apartment. Rather than scold the cat, Franny encouraged him to stay, entertaining him with morsels of cheese and tales of a brave ginger cat who solved crimes alongside a trusty nine-year-old sidekick called Timmy Tuggernaught.

Overhearing this cat-nattering one day, Frank suggested his wife put pen and paintbrush to paper in a more formal way, combining illustrations of Mr M with those ever-evolving stories. One thing led to another and, before she knew it, Franny was a children's author of some renown. For five years she kept the series going. The Adventures of Mr M and Timmy T eventually helped finance the house in Ipswich Street where Franny lived to this very day, plus at least three long-gone international holidays. By the time Mr Marmalade reached seventy on his cat clock, he contracted

feline leukaemia and died soon thereafter. Franny would not contemplate drawing his likeness when the real cat was gone so Timmy Tuggernaught's fictional exploits expired as well. Franny had already branched out to different works and other themes but both Calderwoods were forever grateful to Mr Marmalade for the financial contribution he had made to their home and lifestyle. They felt he deserved preservation.

'He'll lie in state, like our own little Lenin or Mao Zedong,' said Frank at the time. 'You know, just without all the genocide and general tyranny.'

And so, Mr Marmalade remained, guardian of the studio, observer of their life, similar to his original self yet undeniably creepy, fundamentally wrong.

'It's done now,' said Frank with a grimace the day he picked the cat up from the taxidermist.

One look at the object in his arms and Franny started to cry. 'Frank, he looks like one of those swivelling clown heads they have at carnivals, the ones with the painted eyes and gaping mouths.'

'He doesn't look great,' her husband conceded, 'but what can we do? Surely you can work a little magic on his eyes. Paint in some sparkle?'

Franny's efforts to improve the poor cat's visage failed spectacularly. After many frustrated tears, she admitted defeat. Instead, she sewed the deceased moggy a tiny black eye patch and attached it to his rock-hard head.

'At least he looks roguish now,' she said and chucked him under the chin. This action caused the late Mr Marmalade to slide sideways down the table.

Ever supportive, Frank chimed in. 'You've done a great job, honey. He looks primed for his next adventure.'

‘Stash him somewhere only we can see him?’ suggested Franny.
‘Most definitely,’ said Frank.



Today’s talkback topic was unwed teenage mothers. Franny’s senses were immediately tingling.

‘Get ready!’ she shouted to Mr Marmalade in lieu of other company. ‘Much bigotry and bullshit this way comes!’

‘Um hello, Karl, it’s Barry here. I wanted to say something about all those pregnant girls.’ As soon as she heard the caller’s plummy tones Franny’s mind formed a picture of a ruddy-faced, retired magistrate.

‘Yes, Barry, go ahead,’ said Karl in his characteristically impatient style.

‘Must they really have these children, Karl? I mean, we have the science to help them now.’

Even the host’s voice betrayed a little apprehension here. ‘Are you talking sterilisation, Barry?’

‘No, no, no,’ spluttered the caller. ‘I just mean birth control is easily enough obtained. There are injections that last a year and such like. Maybe these girls should be encouraged to . . . I mean, they don’t need to have these children. Especially when they’re in no position to support them.’

Franny stomped out from the en suite, a delicate fan-like paintbrush in one hand. ‘Right, that’s it,’ she said and picked up the phone. She knew the telephone number for ‘Drive with Karl’ by heart and keyed it in. Ten minutes later, after hold music and a quick vetting by the producer, Franny, using the nom de plume Judith, was on the air.

‘Men like your earlier caller, Barry I think it was, make a lot of sense to me,’ she said doing her best Dame Maggie Smith impersonation.

‘Does that mean you agree these kids-having-kids need to take more responsibility, Judith? That they can’t just be left to rut around like livestock and procreate willy-nilly? And we taxpayers can’t be expected to pay for it all?’ Karl was warming to this subject, encouraged by the sound of his own gravelly voice.

Franny turned to look out the window. She could see the driveway next door. She could see a teenage girl with short lilac hair staggering under a pyramid of assorted clothes.

‘I do indeed, Karl, but I’d go further than that. I think every couple even considering having children should sign legally binding documents requiring them to remain together till the children turn twenty-one. They should also be compelled to finance those children through to university as well. No excuses.’

Karl dialled his enthusiasm back a tad now. ‘That might be a bit too much to ask,’ he said.

‘Is it, Karl? Is it? I guess that’s why your face was splashed all over *New Idea* last month because you won’t pay your poor ex-wife the money you legally owe for your two little boys.’

Karl could be heard muttering, probably cursing his producer.

‘Maybe you should check out the finances of that new *Neighbours* actress you’re dating, quick smart, Karl,’ said Franny. ‘Make sure she can afford to support any of your spawn before she pops one out, hey?’

The phone line went dead. ‘Drive with Karl’ switched to an advertisement for funeral insurance.

Franny kissed the handset and chuckled loudly. *I deserve a bloody pinot*, she thought, just as her eyes caught movement in

the driveway once more. Clearly the young girl had lost the battle with the clothing pile because she was stomping around, picking up garment after garment and grunting like a US Open competitor. Franny took a step back from the window but not before being skewered by the young girl's glare.



That night, linguine with white truffle oil was on the menu. Franny liked to cook along with Nigella Lawson now and then so her iPad was perched on the kitchen bench, the toaster acting as its support. In the old days, especially on weekends or when it came to entertaining, Frank had been the star chef, Franny his scullery maid or *maitre d'*. Nevertheless, with a little help from her famous online friends, she liked to think she was maintaining standards.

'My romantic dinner for one,' she said to the framed version of Kitchen Frank, before touching the screen to resume the video. 'I'm not choosing an ingredient; I have a precious potion, in the form of white truffle oil,' she echoed the words of the TV chef while waving a small bottle of yellowish liquid about in the air.

On the screen, Nigella lit candles and popped an ice bucket on the table to accompany her pasta-for-one. This was where Franny drew the line.

'I'll take this as my prompt that it's time for a glass of wine, oh luscious one,' she said, opening the fridge door to grab a bottle of Arneis, 'but Ms Lawson, as my team of production assistants is currently on vacation, I might keep the set-decorating to a minimum.'

While grating parmesan into a bowl that already contained cream, egg and truffle oil, she became aware of a low, rumbling growl.

'What's wrong, Soda?'

The golden retriever was trying to fuse her nose with the glass door at the other end of the room, generating a foggy residue as a result. Whisky, who had until then been shadowing his owner around the kitchen, keen to help catch any dropped ingredients, shifted focus instantly, skidding across tiles in the rush to join his housemate. The terrier's small head tilted sideways at the sound of raised voices in the backyard next door.

'Bloody hell. I knew it,' said Franny, heading over to draw the curtains and block out the intrusion. 'Already pains in the arse and it's what?' She looked at her watch. 'All of seven hours since they moved in.'

Franny's kitchen was in the rear renovation of her 1950s yellow-brick house, the two bedrooms and the converted studio safely tucked up front, and it merged into a light, airy dining space attached to a casual sunroom-style lounge. Glass doors opened out onto the garden. All in all, it was a long, wide room and Franny had yet to light the lamps at the farthest end, focused as she had been on Nigella and her 'criminally indulgent lone linguini'.

As Franny raised her hand to close the curtains a few specific words from next door reached her ears. She shrugged her shoulders then stepped back into the shadows, quietly shushing the still-growing Soda.

'Why the hell are we stuck in this hole?' said one voice.

'Keep it down, Dakota, Joshie doesn't need to hear this,' said another.

'Joshie doesn't realise what a disaster this is yet,' said the first one and Franny immediately assigned it to the teenage girl with gaudy hair.

'This is a new start for us, honey. Why can't you see that?' The second voice, presumably Potty Mouth's mother, remained calm.

‘She’s a better woman than I am,’ Franny whispered to the dogs.

The mother’s voice continued. ‘Darling, once you’re settled into the new school you’ll feel different. It’s all just a bit scary now.’

‘Scary?’ said the girl, her voice rising a few more decibels. ‘Scary is how deluded you are. Deluded and pathetic. If you hadn’t married such a moron sixteen years ago, then stayed with him, I wouldn’t be living this shitty life now.’

‘If I hadn’t married your father, my sweet girl, you wouldn’t have been born. You wouldn’t be living any life now.’ The voice took on a tremulous shake.

‘Nice, Mum. Maybe we’d all be a lot bloody happier then, hey?’ The next sound was a slamming door, conversation clearly over.

Even without the approaching dusk, Franny couldn’t see much of her neighbours’ place because of the old fence that separated her driveway from their yard. Now, standing statue-still and peering through the gap beside the curtains, she released a long sigh. Through the slats in the fence a small red glow was just visible. Franny tiptoed back towards the kitchen bench, directing a whispered comment to Frank’s photo along the way.

‘Looks like Mum’s a sneaky smoker. Can’t say I blame her.’