

*Freeing  
Grace*

CHARITY NORMAN

  
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Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)

Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

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*For Bill and Beryl Norman*

# Prologue

Grace Serenity had a mother, once. A real, flesh and blood mother, who gave birth to Grace in a great, grey hospital. Her name was Cherie King, and she was sixteen.

There was no proud father pacing in the delivery room. No anxious grandparents stood vigil, hankies and champagne at the ready, by their telephone. Not one cardigan or pair of bootees had been knitted. The only witness to Grace's arrival, save for the midwives who delivered her, was a social worker called Imogen Christie; and she was only there by accident.

Dropping in on Cherie's foster carer to discuss the unborn child, Imogen had found Cherie circling the kitchen table, dark eyes wide with fright, hands taut over her swollen middle.

'Isn't Ellen here?' Imogen's eyes flickered around the room, as though the foster mother might be hiding behind the door.

'London,' gasped Cherie, gripping the table with strong fingers. She was a graceful girl, with ebony skin and long legs. 'Had to go and see her grandson. Should be back any—' She stopped in her tracks, listening fearfully to something deep inside her body. 'Oh, fucking hell, here we go again.' And she convulsed, with a muffled shriek.

Imogen had no children; she was newly engaged, and believed in allowing these things to happen in the right order. Still, she knew where this was going. After all—she reached for her mobile phone—it wasn't rocket science, even if the baby wasn't due for a fortnight.

'Just my luck,' she grumbled, swiftly punching numbers. 'Ambulance, please. Hold on, Cherie.'

CHARITY NORMAN

It was a relief to hand over responsibility to the ambulance crew. They exuded unflappable confidence, joking calmly with the frightened girl as they stowed her safely.

‘You’re the same age as my granddaughter,’ said the older man. He was heavily built—could have been a useful bouncer at one time—with almost no hair. A gold stud glinted in one ear. He sat next to Cherie during the journey, timing contractions and providing a steady stream of reassurance. The girl did her best, even laughing weakly at his sallies.

‘Haven’t you got a lovely smile?’ he remarked, offering oxygen. ‘D’you know what you’re having?’

‘A baby,’ panted Cherie.

He smacked himself on the forehead. ‘Ask a stupid question.’

‘It’s a girl,’ said Cherie, relenting. ‘They told me at the scan.’

It *would* have to happen on a Friday. Imogen had plans for the evening: a hens’ night for an old friend. Ten of them were getting together for the first time in years, and it was going to be a riot. Swaying in the back of the ambulance, she tried every number possible to contact the foster mother or Cherie’s own social worker. But one—Ellen Bayley—was stuck on the motorway, waiting for the AA; the other had already swanned off for the weekend; and the duty team were busy with some more pressing crisis.

A midwife met them in the ambulance bay, introducing herself as Jude and taking a brief history from the bald, gold-studded paramedic. He fondly patted Cherie’s hand, told her he was looking forward to hearing she’d had a bonny baby, then closed the doors of his ambulance and set off to the next emergency.

Jude was pushing fifty, Imogen reckoned, and had an air of solid experience. A square woman: square body, square shoes, square face.

‘Glad you’ve come to support her,’ she said pointedly, as they hurried behind Cherie’s wheelchair.

‘Um, I can’t actually stay,’ ventured Imogen.

‘I think you can.’

‘I’m not her social worker. I’m—’ Imogen dropped her voice. ‘I’m key worker for the unborn child. We’ve arranged a foster placement

## Freeing Grace

for both mother and baby, but if things don't work out we'll have to remove the child. So it's hardly appropriate for me to be the mother's birth partner.'

Halting abruptly, Jude regarded the social worker. She had the kind of mouth that turned down even when she was smiling. Right now, she wasn't smiling.

'You're not going to leave this kid to give birth *alone*, are you?'

Imogen hesitated, glancing into the delivery room. Someone was helping Cherie into a faded hospital gown. The girl stuck out her arms to be dressed, like a little child.

The midwife jerked her head at the lonely young figure. 'She's in care, right? So, *care* for her!'

Sighing, Imogen surrendered. 'Bang goes my night out.'

'Great. Welcome aboard. Sit here,' ordered Jude, patting the chair generally reserved for white-knuckled fathers. 'Just try to reassure her.'

What Imogen witnessed in that room, she would never forget. During eight years in her job she had seen much that was shocking and disturbing, and she often felt she had seen it all. But she had never come face to face with such raw pain, nor such stubborn courage. Through the agonising hours and into the night, Cherie barely screamed, although she made copious use of the gas. She seemed to accept the violent assault of it; seemed to withdraw into some private place in her own mind. But then, thought Imogen bleakly, Cherie King knew all about violence. Her mother and stepfather had taught her all too well.

Soon after midnight, Jude called in a student midwife. The two women worked smoothly together: preparing, checking. Imogen was fascinated.

'Head's there,' called Jude. 'You're doing brilliantly, Cherie.'

'Jesus, help me!' Cherie's voice rose high with panic. She was half sitting, her head thrown back. She dropped the gas mask. 'She's killing me!'

'Brave girl.' Jude was calm. 'One last time, darling. Here it comes . . .'

'I'm *dead*!' shrieked Cherie. On impulse, Imogen reached for her hand. The girl clutched blindly at her, squeezing with powerful, frantic fingertips. Imogen's eyes watered at the strength of her grip, but she held on.

Suddenly Cherie gave an inhuman cry, a wail of agony and triumph. And then the baby made its escape. Imogen saw a flash of glistening brown skin, and there was a new person in the world. A new, real person, who had been no more than a pale blue file in the cabinet in Imogen's office. The air seemed to vibrate with a thin bleating, like a lost lamb on a hillside. Something tightened in the social worker's throat.

'There we are.' Jude laid the baby—bloodied, slippery and still trailing its umbilical cord—on the young mother's stomach. Cherie's arms slid around the tiny body, and she held on as though she would never let go. She was sobbing convulsively.

'You've got a daughter!' Jude exulted, tucking a warm towel around the child. 'A beautiful, healthy little girl.'

'Well done,' breathed Imogen.

Still sobbing, Cherie pressed her lips onto the soft head.

The midwives began to bustle about, doing mysterious post-birth things. They took the baby briefly, 'to count the fingers and toes', and then returned her. They delivered the placenta without fuss and bore it away. Finally, the student brought tea and biscuits for the new mother before hurrying off to another delivery. But Cherie was oblivious. She seemed to be bewitched by the miraculous thing in her arms.

As the minutes passed, Imogen leaned closer to this brand-new human being, and closer still. Professionally, she often had to consider newborn babies. She could quote their needs, discuss their routines, reel off the symptoms of poor parenting. She'd sometimes arranged for their swift—and frequently permanent—removal from their mothers. But she had never actually seen such a new one before.

Cherie's baby, seeing for the first time, had shining eyes like pools of treacle. She had a mouth the size and shape of a polo mint, pouting at the strange air of the world. With awe, Imogen watched the rise and fall of a brave little chest that might breathe for the next hundred years.

'Are you going to try feeding her yourself, Cherie?' Jude smiled her encouragement. 'We can have a go right now, if you like. Be good for both of you, I promise.'

Cherie gaped at her. 'You mean . . . ? Gross!' She shuddered. 'She's gonna have a bottle.'

## Freeing Grace

‘Go on, give it a try,’ urged Jude, pulling up a tall stool and perching on it. ‘It’s much easier than a bottle, no sterilising, and the good news is you get your figure back quicker.’

Cherie’s heavy eyelids lowered defensively. ‘No way.’

‘It’s the best start in life you can give her,’ coaxed the midwife.

‘*Jesus*. You know nothing.’ Cherie sighed and stared up at the ceiling. ‘The best start I can give her is to dump her on Imogen’s doorstep in a cardboard box.’

‘Silly talk, Cherie,’ protested Imogen. ‘You’re going to bring her home to Ellen’s, remember?’

Cherie’s eyes overflowed. ‘How can I look after her?’ She wiped her face with the hospital gown.

‘You’re her mum, pet,’ said Jude, rubbing the teenager’s back in kind little circles. ‘A girl needs her mum.’

But Cherie’s face had grown blank, like an African princess carved in ebony. She gathered the baby closer, pressing the warm, downy head against her own cheek.

‘I don’t even *want* her to have me for a mother.’

Jude’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. ‘I think you’re scared, Cherie.’

The princess turned her head away.

Jude sighed, pulled a biro out of her breast pocket, and ticked something on a clipboard. ‘Bottle feed, then, if you’re sure. And after a good night’s sleep, you’ll see everything differently. Have you decided what you’ll be calling her?’

Cherie seemed ready, as though she had just this one gift for her child. She lifted her chin.

‘Yeah. Grace Serenity.’

Jude’s pen hovered over the page. ‘Grace . . . what?’

‘Serenity. S . . . E . . . R . . .’

The midwife nodded. ‘I’ve got it. Okay. Lovely.’ She scribbled, and then clicked her biro a couple of times. ‘Now, your surname is King? D’you mind me asking, Cherie, what the father’s name might be?’

Imogen’s ears began to flap. Cherie had steadfastly refused to name the father. It was a problem, legally.

‘Dickhead,’ spat Cherie without hesitation. ‘D . . . I . . . C . . .’

CHARITY NORMAN

Imogen smiled, despite herself.

Jude held up a hand. 'All right, all right.' Carefully, she wrote something on a miniature plastic bracelet and then reached out and snapped it around the baby's tiny wrist.

'There we go. She's official now. Grace Serenity King.'

'Oh my God,' yelled Cherie suddenly. She was staring, horrified, at a spreading dark patch where her right breast touched the hospital gown. 'I'm *leaking*!'

The midwife laughed. 'It's the milk, pet. That's colostrum, with everything your baby needs. Your body's got more sense than you have.'

'I can't handle this,' said Cherie. Without warning, as though a switch had been flicked, she seemed to panic. She struggled to stand up. 'Get her off me, for God's sake. Get her off me, right now!'

Defly, Jude lifted the baby. Cherie shuffled her legs over the edge of the bed and staggered, unsteady and distressed, crumpled in her hospital gown.

'I need a fucking shower . . . I'm filthy, look at me, it's disgusting, there's blood everywhere . . . I'm sticking to everything and there's . . . Oh my God, oh my God, I need to get out of here.'

'It's okay, Cherie,' said Imogen, getting up and laying a hand on the girl's shoulder. 'Calm down.'

But Cherie would not be calmed.

Jude settled Grace in a clear plastic crib. 'It's normal to feel grotty after what you've been through. Your body's in shock. I'll take you to the bathroom in a wheelchair.'

Wincing, weeping, Cherie stooped to pick up her overnight bag. 'I can walk,' she snapped, and hobbled painfully towards the door.

The baby seemed to sense her abandonment. She took several fast, furious breaths, filling her lungs. Then she cried out in a tremulous, lonely wail.

Cherie froze, as though she'd been slapped in the face. She turned, and Imogen saw that her cheeks were washed with tears. For a long moment her eyes rested on the helpless little figure in its plastic box.

Then she met Imogen's gaze.

'I need a shower, and a fucking *smoke*.'

## *Freeing Grace*

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Imogen gratefully accepted coffee in the nurses' room. She didn't feel like going on to join in the death throes of a wild hens' night. Not now.

'So.' Jude had wheeled Grace's crib into the room and was writing up her notes while Cherie had a shower. 'No idea about this baby's father?'

Imogen grabbed a biscuit from the tin. She felt odd, as though she'd had a glimpse of another universe. She thought it must be hunger.

'Cherie won't say. We think she might be protecting the guy because she was underage. She turned sixteen last November and—what's today?' Imogen glanced at her watch. 'First of August, but the baby's a couple of weeks early. You can do the sums yourself. It's a close run thing.'

'Who's your dad, little one?' Jude smiled down at the tiny girl who slept, snuffling and solemn, in her plastic crib. 'Maybe a married man. Wife, kids and a shiny BMW that he cleans on Sundays.' Her mouth twisted cynically. 'He won't want to know.'

After a thoughtful silence, Imogen sighed. 'I just hope Cherie can get herself together, you know? She's got the ability, but she's so erratic—fine one minute, off this planet the next.'

'Mm.' Jude nodded, fervently. 'As we saw.'

'She's damaged, poor kid. We all like her, but she's never known anything but abuse, neglect and a string of care homes. She's used every substance, messed with every kind of high-risk behaviour. The assessment was quite tentative . . . she might just cope, with a truckload of support.'

'I can see she's a handful. But my word, she's got guts.' Jude shook her head in admiration. 'What happens if she fails?'

'Well . . .' Imogen looked unhappy. 'We've got a Plan B.'

Jude bent over the sleeping baby, tucking the blanket more tightly around her. 'Adoption,' she murmured. 'Sad.'

When Jude went off to check on Cherie, Imogen leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Staff traipsed in and out, but she barely acknowledged them. She drifted, wondering what the future might hold for Cherie and her baby.

Jude seemed to be gone a long time. When she reappeared, she was

CHARITY NORMAN

in a hurry. Imogen heard the rapid footsteps and looked around as the midwife strode in.

‘Cherie’s gone,’ said Jude flatly.

‘What?’ Imogen leaped up, immediately alert. ‘She can’t have.’

‘Long gone.’

Imogen was thinking fast. ‘How? When?’

‘She told one of the orderlies she was nipping out for a smoke. She didn’t have an overnight bag or anything, just a packet of cigarettes. Janet thought she needed a bit of time to herself. Showed her how to get out. Then she legged it.’

‘She shouldn’t have been allowed out alone.’

Jude’s turned-down mouth made deep valleys in her chin. ‘Cherie may be in care, Imogen, but she’s not in custody.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Imogen half waved an apologetic hand. This was a mess. ‘Are you *sure* she isn’t still outside?’

‘Quite sure. There’s a patient down there, having a smoke, who saw her. Said she seemed heartbroken. She told him she’d just lost her baby. He watched her being picked up by a car.’

‘A car?’ Imogen was aghast. ‘How on earth . . .?’

‘Crafty young madam must’ve called someone when she went for her shower. I suppose she’s got a mobile phone?’

‘She has.’ Imogen glanced at her watch. One o’clock, give or take. ‘Was it a taxi?’ Perhaps they could trace the driver.

‘Not a taxi. A young maniac, doing handbrake turns and fishtailing all over the car park. Screaming at Cherie out of the window. A black car, the man said. All jazzed up, with a sound system to wake the dead.’

‘Oh God,’ moaned Imogen. ‘That sounds like Darcy Fox. He graduated straight out of the care system and into the criminal courts.’

‘Okay, that’s a start. D’you know where he lives?’ Jude crossed to a telephone. ‘Maybe we could send someone to pick her up.’

‘Darcy?’ Imogen gestured hopelessly. ‘Pillar to post.’

‘We have to get her back.’ Jude stood at the window, scanning the lights of the city. ‘She had a baby about an hour ago. It’s dangerous. She needs care.’

## *Freeing Grace*

Imogen dialled Cherie's mobile with fingers that were, unaccountably, shaking. No reply. She tried again. Then she sent a text.

'We *have* to get her back,' repeated Jude, urgently.

Imogen called Ellen Bayley, waking her up; she was home, but Cherie was not. She tried the police, who promised to look out for the car. Nobody had Darcy Fox's latest address. Perhaps he didn't have one.

The end of Jude's shift had long passed, but she made no move to leave. The two women stood together at the window, willing Cherie to return, listening out for a stereo to wake the dead.

In her crib, the new baby slept on, oblivious.

Shortly after one am, emergency services were called to an accident at a roundabout on the dual carriageway. A black Vauxhall Corsa had collided head-on with a lorry.

The police arrived first, sirens wailing, swiftly followed by the fire brigade and an ambulance. The Corsa was barely recognisable as a car. Its stereo was silent.

'Must have been going a hell of a lick,' remarked a fireman as the ambulance crew jumped out. He gestured through the shattered windscreen. 'There's nothing you can do for these two. Just kids.'

'We'll have to cut them out,' said his colleague. 'What a bloody mess.' And he strode off to organise the equipment.

The lorry had slewed sideways and was blocking the road. A couple of police officers stood talking to the shaken lorry driver; others were setting up cordons and directing traffic.

The older of the paramedics was a bruiser of a man, almost bald. A gold stud gleamed in one ear. He shook his head resignedly at the carnage and then leaned down to the driver's door, looking in. Street lighting and shadows swarmed across his face.

'Hang on,' he muttered, moving closer. 'That looks like . . .'

'What's up, mate?' asked his colleague.

The older man didn't answer. He straightened and ran around to the passenger side, squeezing himself between the lorry and what was left of the car's bonnet. The interior of the wreck was lit rhythmically

## CHARITY NORMAN

by the pulsating lights of emergency vehicles. He eased himself forward, peering through the contorted space that had once been a windscreen.

‘No,’ he said, suddenly. His voice was high and splintered. It sounded almost as though he was in tears. ‘Jesus Christ. No.’