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Freeing Grace

Written by Charity Norman

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Freeing Grace

CHARITY NORMAN



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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.'

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

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.'

'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 . . .'

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,' yelped 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!'

Deftly, 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.*'

*

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

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.'

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

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.'

Chapter One

I never asked for any of this.

The day started out pretty routine. You'd never guess my life was about to spin off the track and smash into the barriers. The radio alarm began making a racket, I dragged myself upright with my eyes glued shut, and Friday morning was off to a flying start.

I was brushing my teeth when out of nowhere there was Anna, standing beside me, all blow-dried and high-heeled and little-black-suited. She was watching me in the mirror. I didn't even have my lenses in yet, and I'd nothing on but a pair of boxers. You feel at a bit of a disadvantage when the world's all fuzzy and your mouth's overflowing with white froth. I saw her taking a long, sad look at my reflection, and wished I could fit down the plughole.

'My clock's ticking, Jake.'

I didn't like the sound of that, but I couldn't reply. Not without spitting first, and that really would have upset her.

She had layers of reddish hair and a pale, wistful face. Sometimes I thought she looked as if she'd stepped out of an elfin kingdom. She drew her eyebrows together as though I was one of her more difficult clients.

'My biological clock. Also my emotional and financial clocks. In fact, their alarms have gone off.' She reached across and pulled the toothbrush from my mouth, and I spat into the basin with as much dignity as I could manage, which wasn't a hell of a lot.

'Can't you just press the snooze button?' I suggested hopefully.

'I already have, Jake. Several times.' She rubbed her hand across her eyes. 'I've spent an entire night sitting in the kitchen, thinking. And

I need to know, right now. Are you, or are you not, going to show me some commitment?'

I turned off the tap. I was thinking fast.

'Probably. In the end,' I mumbled grumpily, like a teenager caught smoking. The fact was, I knew I'd wasted enough of her time.

She smiled miserably. She was wearing a touch of lipstick for the occasion. 'After four years, we both know you never will. I'm running out of time, and so are you, if you could only face up to it. You're not immortal, for all your blarney. Your half-time whistle's blowing, same as mine.'

'Look, you don't *want* kids, Anna,' I protested. 'You work about eighty hours a week. Where do kids fit in?'

She was a solicitor, a partner in a city firm, and there were weeks when I was lucky to see her before midnight.

She was staring directly at me now, not at my reflection, and her eyes were unnaturally bright. 'I'm sorry, Jake. I've tried and *tried* to discuss this, and it's got me nowhere. I want to have a family, I've never pretended anything else. I hoped we might talk about it last night, on the boat.'

I couldn't seriously deny it. Trouble had been brewing for months. Over the past year, recession had forced her firm to get rid of staff—people with families and mortgages. Guilt weighed on Anna, made her re-evaluate her life. And finally, yesterday had been her thirty-fifth birthday, and that seemed to have an awful significance for her. I'd thrown money at the problem, got her some pearl earrings and—on the advice of Lucy from work—booked a river cruise for dinner.

It was a sound enough idea, bobbing romantically along the Thames among the ripples and reflections, but it was all a bit of a disaster. Anna was moody and quiet, waiting for me to ask what was the matter. I hate that. Makes me feel guilty. So I didn't ask. I got canned instead, rolled home and fell asleep with my shoes and socks on.

'You've got another thirty seconds,' she said now, still watching me.

'Don't do this, Anna,' I said. 'Please don't do this.'

It was a long thirty seconds. Finally, with me busily drying my face and looking anywhere but at her, I heard her sigh. It was a long-suffering sort of a sigh, like your mother makes when you've forgotten to tidy your room again.

'Okay. I hoped I'd never have to say this.' She took a long breath. 'I want you to go.'

I stopped drying my face. Looked at her.

'I know you'd carry on as we are for another four years. But I can't,' she insisted, blinking fiercely. 'I have to move on.'

'When?' It was a staggeringly feeble response, I know. But it all seemed a bit unreal.

'I'll be away for the weekend. That'll give you enough time, won't it?'

'Anna,' I said, taking a step towards her. 'Wait.'

'How much longer should I wait?' She watched me hesitate. Then she shook her head. 'It's no good, is it?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. Funny thing: even when you expect some kind of a showdown—even when you've brought it on yourself—it still comes as a bit of a kick in the ribs.

'Thank you for everything, Jake Kelly. Thanks for all the fun. And . . . everything.' Slipping one warm hand around my neck, she kissed me on the mouth. I found I'd wrapped my arms around her, and she leaned against me, her face against mine.

''Bye,' she whispered, and I felt her breath graze my ear.

Then she walked out of the bathroom. Her footsteps paused in the hall; I'd like to think she was waiting for me to call her back, but perhaps she was just looking for her keys.

I didn't call her back. It wouldn't have been honest.

Eventually I heard the front door slam and her footsteps on the pavement, fading away. It wasn't a cheerful sound.

''Bye,' I said.

The flat seemed to hold its breath. I sat down on the edge of the bath. I could still smell her scent. By now she'd be halfway to the tube station, stopping to buy a newspaper. She'd be getting wet, rain plastering down her hair, undoing all the blow-drying. I could easily grab some clothes and catch her up, but then I'd have to ask her to marry me.

I seriously considered this option. It was a perfectly valid one. She was a fantastic girl, Anna. Clever, confident and vivacious. Far too good

for me. I could almost see the church doors flying open and my bride gliding radiantly through them with about five of her clumsiest and ugliest friends trailing along behind her, wearing shiny purple dresses and looking like fat fairies on a tree. I could actually hear the thunder of the organ. I'd fly my mum over, and she'd wear her best dress and sob happily in the front row.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. The very thought of spending the rest of my life tied irrevocably to Anna—or anyone else, for that matter—made me feel claustrophobic. Perhaps I was a fool, because I gave up a hell of a chance that day.

I got dressed, turned on breakfast television and made some coffee. Then I began to wander around the flat in my socks, lobbing things into cardboard boxes, feeling lousy, trying not to dwell on what I'd just lost. She wanted me out, she'd have me out. Today. This was her place, after all.

I was pretty decent about it, if I do say so myself. I left the stereo and most of the CDs, although I couldn't resist the Van Morrison collection. It was odd to see just how entangled our lives had become. Depressing, really. We'd surrounded ourselves with objects and memories that belonged to us both. Who actually forked out for that Moroccan rug by the bed? Who owned the Balinese statue we'd brought back in our hand luggage? It had fallen out of the overhead locker and floored that air hostie. Served her right, stroppy sow.

I spent all morning packing up, and in that time I made some decisions. Rather monumental decisions, actually.

Life in the City was changing, fast and furiously. The financial world was barely recognisable; it wasn't a fun place to be any more, and I reckoned it could get a whole lot worse. I'd been thinking about getting out for a while. Anna just gave me that final shove.

I left a note, a short one, just saying thanks. It was pathetic. Then I piled the stuff into my car and let myself out—for the last time—into the rain, which put on a special performance to mark the solemnity of the occasion. I stood on the doorstep for a minute or two, jingling the keys to the flat from one hand to the other and wondering where the hell I was going to be sleeping that night. It felt a bit odd,

after four years, to be posting my own door keys back through the letterbox and hearing them thud onto the hall carpet. Final. Not my home any more.

I didn't cry, though.

Obviously.

The rain paused for breath as I arrived in the City. I left the car in an underground car park and walked the rest of the way. I've never quite got used to wearing the suit and tie and shiny shoes; makes me feel like a confidence trickster—which is more or less accurate, I suppose. They were digging up Moorgate again, and I inhaled the life-giving tang of burning tarmac and exhaust fumes as I marched in through the mirrored doors of Stanton's.

I headed straight up to Delaney's office. My boss was pretty friendly, in his slithery Californian way.

'Jake! Pull up a chair. What can I do for you?'

'I'm afraid I've come to tell you that I'm leaving, Barney.' Jeez, I enjoyed those words more than you can possibly imagine. I still smirk at the memory.

He looked vaguely impatient, turning in his swivel chair, peering at me like a hungry lizard. Then he crossed his legs and switched on his reptilian smile.

'So, Jake. How much?'

'No, really,' I protested. 'This isn't a device to lever more money out of you.'

He sighed cynically. 'C'mon, Jake, I wasn't born yesterday. Let's cut to the chase. What's the figure we've got to match?'

'No, no, Barney.' He's gone mad, I thought. Does he seriously believe I'm here to make demands, in the middle of a financial meltdown? 'I'm really leaving.' I dragged a slightly scruffy letter out of my pocket, scribbled in the car park. 'Here it is in writing.'

I pushed the paper across his desk. He stared vacantly at it, his smile fixed. Then he flicked his tongue. I'm sure it was forked. 'Perhaps you'd care to tell me why, Jake? I presume you're going elsewhere.'

I laughed out loud. 'Else*where*? You think I'm jumping ship? Barney, wake up! Everyone's getting fired, for God's sake!'

I could tell he didn't believe me. He didn't live in the real world. 'Sure you don't just need a holiday?' He was going through the motions now. We both knew it.

'Quite sure.'

He tossed his head, huffily. 'Well. I'm afraid I can't rule out the possibility that you're defecting. So you'd better clear your desk immediately.'

It didn't look as though he was going to thank me for the years of loyal service.

I arrived at my corner three seconds before Kenneth, the security man, fetched up to escort me from the building. That's the Stanton's way, although I'd expected to be given a bit longer. It's the same in most investment banks, I should think. You've become a spy, potentially, for the competition. So once you're out, you're out, before you start stealing secrets. Kenneth planted himself beside my desk, raised his eyebrows at me, and then turned his uniformed back.

I opened the drawers and took out my things: half a packet of glacier mints, and a fluffy kiwi sent by Mum as a hint because she wanted me to come home. It lived zipped up snugly in a miniature felt rugby ball, and many a happy hour we'd spent with it in the office, practising drop kicks and passes. Only last month, Len Harvey broke a tooth after a truly spectacular tackle on my part landed him face down in the wastepaper bin. Mum would have been proud.

Len glanced up briefly from his screen and nodded at me. Like most of my ex-colleagues he was in his shirtsleeves, hair tousled, looking wild and desperate like someone in a casualty ward.

By contrast, at the next desk Lucy Harrison was yakking enthusiastically on the phone. It was as though she'd been filmed in colour against a black-and-white background. She'd been away earlier in the week, dealing with some family crisis; then straight on to Oslo for work. I was pleased to see her before I left. I'd finished my packing, but I waited to speak to her.

'Jake.' She glanced up at the clock as she finished her call. 'How good of you to put in an appearance.'

'Hi, Luce. All good at home?'

She flapped a hand, dismissively. 'Mad as hatters.'

'How about Oslo?'

'Waste of time.'

She began dialling again, but then spotted the security guy. He was standing still, legs apart, waiting with the patience of a very bored person.

'Is Ken your new bodyguard?' she asked.

'No. I'm out of here. Barney's sent him to stop me walking out with the desktop stuffed down my pants.'

She dropped her phone, rage in the bottle-green eyes. 'They haven't given *you* the push?'

'Nope. I jumped first, but it was only a matter of time.'

'But you're better than everybody else.'

'No, just more expensive.'

Her gaze fell forlornly onto the little black rugby ball I was holding. I lobbed it over, and she reached out and caught it with one hand.

'You can't slink off without buying me lunch,' she insisted, standing up and grabbing her jacket from the back of her chair. 'Shall we ask the others?'

I looked around at the familiar faces. I'd probably never see them again. And you know what? I didn't care. I shook my head, and she shook hers, too.

As we left, both our desk phones were ringing.

We had lunch in a wine bar on Finsbury Circus. I bought a bottle of something that cost enough to feed a Sudanese refugee family for a year, and drank most of it myself. Lucy seemed a bit distracted, and I wasn't on top form either. She was a very deflating audience, drumming her long fingers on the table and scowling at the crowd mobbing the bar. Normally she's engaged, lively, cheerily flirtatious.

The waitress arrived with Lucy's minestrone, my steak sandwich, and the largest pepper grinder in the world. It made me feel inadequate. When she'd gone, Lucy leaned towards me.

'Now. Tell me why you're going.'

I didn't need to feel guilty. I'd done right by the girl. Been her manager until twelve o'clock that day. In fact, I'd interviewed her for the job in the first place. She was clearly outstanding. The boys leered, said she was *outstanding*, all right. But it honestly wasn't about her Wonderbra bust—she wore little green blouses that matched her eyes—or her spectacular legs, or the nifty boy's haircut that showed the nape of her neck. No. It was the way she looked at the world. She seemed to find it all rather funny. She was bright too, complete with a scary degree and three languages. Next to her, I felt like a hillbilly, which of course is exactly what I am.

Lucy and I had one of those entertaining friendships with an edge. But I'd never laid a finger on her, honest. It would have been harassment.

Anyway, I'd been proved right. She was one of the best, and she didn't need me any more. I told her so.

She had quite a pronounced nose, but I always thought it was her best feature. It gave her face sophistication. She looked down it now, raised one graceful eyebrow and dunked her bread into her soup.

'Of course I don't *need* you, dickhead. Bloody ridiculous. I don't need a feckless drunken colonial like you, no matter how sexy your smile.' She gazed at my mouth for a few seconds, allowing herself a sinful little smirk. 'What I want to know is why you're going, *when* you decided to go, and why you didn't tell me? And what's the brilliant new career you're heading for, and should I be hanging onto your coat-tails? Because—whatever it is—I'll be better at it than you are.'

'I'm going to open a massage parlour.'

'Oh, good. Can I be the receptionist? Together, we could go far.'

'No. You're too indiscreet. Actually, I'm going to be a bum. Look at them.' I pointed to the yelling, sweating scrum at the bar. 'Flooded with adrenaline. They're ready to fight to the death even now, in the half-hour they've got away from their desks. And for what?'

She glanced at the killer mob. 'Money.'

'Lucy, the system's on the verge of collapse. There *is* no money any more. And anyway, I've made enough of the stuff. It's time I got out.'

'When did you decide this?'

'Six o'clock this morning.'

She blinked innocently. 'Oh, yes? You had a midlife crisis at six o'clock this morning?'

'Anna threw me out.'

'Ah.' She nodded calmly. 'Well, that was inevitable. A woman like that wasn't going to wait forever. Did you try to change her mind?'

I shrugged.

She leaned closer, raking me with searchlight eyes. 'Do you love her at all, Jake?'

'I don't know,' I said helplessly. Everyone knows I don't answer that kind of question. 'What does that *mean*, really?'

'Honestly! You've all the emotional acuity of a dishwasher. Haven't you ever been in love?'

'Not since I was ten years old.'

'Who was the lucky girl?'

'I had a Jack Russell. Sala. Means Princess. She was neat.'

She slapped my wrist. 'Idiot! I was serious.'

I was, too. But I laughed it off. Always do.

'Look,' I told her, 'it feels like a reprieve. My neck was on the block. The drums were rolling and a messenger came galloping up, waving the king's pardon.'

She was gazing at me shrewdly. 'I don't believe you for one minute.'

'No. Well.' I sighed. 'Anna wants kids.'

'That's pretty normal. Doesn't make her a psychopath.'

'Bloody hell, Luce, I'm too young to be a father. I'm not *ready*.'

She snorted. 'Jake, you're forty! You're wearing it well, I'll admit that. You're revoltingly fit, and you've a luscious mouth and wicked brown eyes that make women want to mother you, poor tarts. And there's that lazy antipodean accent.' She smiled, stretched across and tugged at my hair. 'But one day soon you'll find a steely strand in here, glinting treacherously.' She leaned a little closer, focusing intently on my forehead. 'Actually, do you *dye* your hair?'

'Certainly not.'

'What do they call that shade? Mahogany?'

I didn't like the way this was going. 'Well, anyway. I *do* feel reprieved. And I intend to make good use of it because, as my mother always says, life isn't a dress rehearsal.'

'Really? Does your mother treat her life as the final performance?'

I picked up the bottle and waved it at her, but she stretched a hand over her glass.

'Well.' I poured myself another. 'She made the mistake of marrying my father, and she might as well have thrown in her lot with the devil himself. Every day's been the same for the last forty-five years. She gets up at five. Then she bakes and cleans and sews and feeds the calves and does the garden and the washing and the accounts, while he roars around on a quad bike with a pack of dogs sprinting ahead and a dead sheep slung across the back with its tongue hanging out. Every so often he stomps into the kitchen, swears, scoffs all the food, and messes everything up again.'

I paused, tasting the hatred. Knocked back half the glass, but it didn't take the taste away. Never would.

'They're reckoned to be a real success story in the district. People say, "That Connie Kelly, she doesn't waste a minute of her life." ' I shuddered. 'And they're right. She hasn't wasted a minute. She's wasted the whole bloody lot.'

'How far are they from a town?' asked Lucy.

'They're in the middle of nowhere, Luce. And I mean that absolutely literally. It's an hour sliding down a gravel track to a tar-sealed road, and you're still another hour from the nearest traffic light.'

'You're joking.'

'Wish I was.'

'Why haven't they been over here? You could pay.'

'Dad won't come, and I wouldn't see him if he did.'

'Why not?'

I scowled, and Lucy raised her eyebrows.

'Well, it all sounds very childish.' She poured herself some fizzy water. 'Still, I suppose now that you're single and unemployed you'll be heading home.'

'I can't. My place has long-term tenants.'

'Not home to Clapham Common, you idiot. Home to New Zealand.'

I shook my head madly, holding up both hands. 'Oh, no, no, no. No way!'

'I don't believe you. I've seen you sniffling away when the All Blacks do the haka.'

'Bollocks.' I took a bite of steak sandwich.

'It's *not* bollocks. You go all misty-eyed when Kiri Te Kanawa comes on the radio, too. I think it's time you went home, Jake. You *need* to. Make peace with yourself, and with your family, and buy a vineyard or something. I might even visit you.'

'Never. I couldn't live without the Northern Line at rush hour.' I paused, pointing at my cheek. The steak was a bit chewy. 'Mind you, I'm the only one left. When I first arrived there were sixteen of us flatting in three rooms.'

'How revolting.'

'They all went home in the end. All except me.'

She looked at me with a new interest. 'Seriously. What *are* you planning on doing? You must have a plan.'

'I don't. I know you can't imagine that, Luce, but I don't. In fact, that's the plan. Not to have one. I'm going to drift around the world, sitting outside cafés in a Panama hat like a pommy toff, reading thrillers.'

Lucy tipped back her chair, head on one side. She does that when she's thinking. In fact she was plotting, as it turned out.

'So. You're a free man, and you're no longer my boss.'

'Yeah. Your place or mine, darlin'?'

'In your dreams.' She regarded me steadily for a little time and then seemed to come to a decision. 'When does Anna want you out?'

I shrugged. 'I'm out already. My life is all packed up in the boot of a flashy car I never had time to drive and can no longer afford.'

'Where are you going to stay?'

'Not sure. Most of my mates are mutual friends. You know. I expect they all think I've strung Anna along.'

She nodded. 'Yes, well. No comment.' She reached over and pulled a bit of loose cotton off my sleeve. 'Look. I don't like to think of you sleeping in Lincoln's Inn Fields under a copy of *The Sun.* Might get

bullied, pretty boy like you. I'm heading home again tonight, for the weekend—I mean *home* home, to Suffolk. You can come too.'

'I can't just—'

She waved an airy hand. 'No, shut up. My father will welcome you with open arms. There's only him and my brother there at the moment. In fact I'll phone right now and tell him.' She started rummaging in her handbag.

'Hasn't there been some drama, though? They won't want me clattering around the place.'

She smiled indulgently. 'It's just my brother, as usual. Little Matt's been getting himself into a bit of bother.'

'Off the rails?'

'Well, slightly. But he's a bright wee sod, he'll be fine. We've taken him out of boarding school and he's finishing his education locally, where Dad can keep an eye on him.' She drew breath to say more, but then she shut her mouth again, and I didn't ask. None of my business.

That's one of the bits of baggage I've inherited from my parents. They obsessively practised what they called 'minding their own business', to the point of insanity. The neighbour could have cut his own leg clean off with a chainsaw and be writhing on the ground, screaming, the lifeblood hosing out of his femoral artery, but they wouldn't take a look across the fence because it would be none of their business what he was doing on his own property. Seriously. The next time they saw him, hopping down the street on his one remaining leg, they'd pretend nothing had happened. All interest in other people, as far as my parents were concerned, was just nosy gossip. I could never quite throw that off.

Good old Lucy, I thought fuzzily, as she got out her phone. I was quite touched. We're great mates at work, but I hadn't expected her to invite me into her family home. It all sounded quite tempting. I imagined a freezer full of decent food from the local deli, and Old Man Harrison throwing open the drinks cabinet. I was curious, too. I wanted to see where Lucy came from. I should have known better—after all, we know what curiosity did to the cat. But I said thanks, and let her phone her dad.

And I suppose if I hadn't, none of this would have happened.