

Grace

Why does he have to go and spoil it? I was actually starting to feel a tiny bit comfortable with him – could sit and hang out with him without feeling like a panic attack was going to swell inside me at any moment. Even the slightest bit safe. And then he has to go and say something stupid like that. My flight or fight response kicks in big time and I am out of the car before I can form the thought. I feel more than a little melodramatic as I stride away but I can't stop. The thought of being trapped in the car with him – and all those feelings – has my heart beating out an erratic rhythm that has nothing to do with excitement and my throat is constricting so much it's a wonder I can breathe.

I can't go there again. I won't.

Because if I am being totally truthful with myself, I do like Nick. Just the smallest amount, but it's there. I like him against my better judgement. He seems nice and honest and hardworking – and Lillie is right, he is cute. Those eyes I can't stop thinking about, the dimple I look for every time he smiles . . . even though I tell myself to stop doing it. But I am definitely, one hundred per cent *not* getting into any sort of relationship, no matter what my grandmother says or what she wants for me. Because this is all too similar to what I used to think about Ben. Well, not that he was hardworking or even necessarily that honest, but definitely that he was cute and charming and . . . I struggle to remember what else I used to think about him, back at the beginning. I know what I think about him now, though.

And it's because of Ben that I am putting distance between Nick and myself. Why it's important that I do before he even starts to think that something might be possible. I don't want his compliments, I don't want a date – I don't want anything from him. Especially not

now he's said something like that. I just want to be left alone. That doesn't seem like a lot to ask . . . not after what I've been through.

I hear a car door slam behind me and know he's following me. Part of me wishes he wouldn't but there is another part of me – and I don't know if it's desperate or brave but it should shut up and go away – that is glad he is. That is almost happy that he is. Which sounds like the Grace who existed before Ben. The trusting Grace who made such bad decisions. I am a mess of conflicting emotions all fighting for dominance. Lillie was wrong, I decide; this place is definitely *not* good for me.

'Grace,' I hear him call but I refuse to turn.

Go away, I say in my head. But he doesn't. He keeps on walking towards me.

'Grace, look I'm sorry. That was a really stupid thing to say.'

'Then why did you say it?'

I don't even turn to look at him. I watch the waves crash onto the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, angry and determined, smashing against the stone and then pulling away for another assault, over and over, never giving up, determined to wear the rock away.

'I don't know.' I hear him hesitate. 'I guess I just like you, but I'm not sure how to approach you. I don't know what to say or how to act around you. You're not like any other girl I've known before.'

I turn to face him now. He has his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans and he looks upset. Like I'm the bad one here that's been mean to him. Like I should worry about how he feels. For a second, I'm almost pulled in by the sincerity on his face, by those eyes that look like he really cares how I feel. Then, I can feel a hard layer go over my heart, protecting it. I don't want this. I didn't ask for it.

'Look, do both of us a favour and don't like me, okay? Because the feeling's not going to be returned. Ever.' My voice is unforgiving, whipping out at him, and I see his shock in the

face of such a blunt statement of rejection. Good. Maybe he's finally getting it. 'And it's got nothing to do with you. It's me.'

He laughs, the harshness of it matching my voice. 'Geez, you could've at least come up with something a little more original. "It's not you, it's me."'

I frown at him. 'I'm just not into relationships, okay?'

He stares at me, a confused expression on his face. And then his eyes widen slightly, as if he's just figured something out. 'Are you . . .? I mean . . . do you like girls?'

I jerk my head back, shocked that he's gone straight to that line of thinking. God, how up yourself can you get? 'What? No! Like that could be the only possible reason I'm not falling over myself to be with you. God! I'm just not interested in having a relationship. With anyone.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm not.' I can feel my anger rising, like a fire following a line of fuel, starting in my stomach and trailing up my throat, wanting to roar out of my mouth. Why can't he just shut up? It's none of his business. I want to lash out and make him hurt. 'Because relationships don't work. They just fill your life with pain and lies and . . . and before you know it, you have no control. And I'm not going to let that happen to me again!'

'Grace,' he says and his hands come out of his pockets and reach towards me, as if he wants to hug me. I can see the pain in his eyes – pain for me. Like he thinks I have a problem. Which just makes me even angrier. How dare he judge me when he doesn't even know me?

'Don't you dare feel sorry for me,' I say, and he's lucky that I'm only scowling at him rather than lashing out, which is what I feel like doing. 'It's my choice; it's my life. And that's what I choose.'

'I won't hurt you,' he says softly, like he is trying to calm a skittish animal. 'I'd never hurt you.'

I snort.

‘Yeah, right. Believe me, I’ve heard all the promises before. *I’m only doing this because I love you. I just want to be with you all the time. I’d never hurt you. I’ll always protect you. I’ll never do that to you again – I love you too much.*’ I take a deep breath. ‘Just do yourself a favour and shut up before you embarrass either of us any more.’

‘Look, we can just be friends. Nothing more, okay? Just friends.’

But I shake my head, taking a step backwards to put some physical space between us again. I know how he feels now and there is no way I can take the risk that he’s not going to try again. I can’t do it. It’s not worth it.

‘Please, Grace.’

I take another step back, away from his pleading expression. Away from him. That’s when I stumble, find myself desperately trying to get my balance at the edge of the cliff as the earth beneath me disintegrates under my feet. I look up and see Nick frantically trying to grab hold of me and I reach out for his hands. But we are too late.

I am falling.

My hair ripples past my face as I plummet.

I scream – it rips out of me, terror filled, my brain shouting at me to do something.

Anything!

But there is nothing I can do.

My hands scrabble at the air and I twist, trying, some way, somehow, not to die.

It can’t end like this! How is that possible?

Images of Lillie fill my head. This will kill her. Thoughts of her and her grief overwhelm me, crash over me, smashing into my body.

Realisation hits me, full strength. There are things that I still want to do – a million things I haven’t yet experienced. A million songs I haven’t yet played. A million places I haven’t

visited. Maybe even relationships I haven't had . . . sometime in the future . . . when my heart
heals . . .

I don't want to die.

But I have no way of stopping it.

Something slams into my body, so hard I think for a split second that it's the rocky
bottom. And yet, there is no pain. Shouldn't there be pain? As the blackness closes around
me, all I know is I am not falling any more.

Extract from Aquila © Random House and Sue-Ellen Pashley

Nick

I don't even have time to get undressed. I just react with as much speed as I can, desperately grabbing at her, trying frantically to halt her plummet before she reaches the unforgiving rocks that litter the bottom of the cliff.

I have her. Straining, pulling her back up. And then, I'm laying her on the grass, her face even paler than usual.

But alive. Not dead. *She's not dead.* I keep saying it to myself, like a mantra. And I had to make the decision to do it. I didn't have a choice. There was no way I could just stand back and let her die. It was the right thing to do.

I curl up next to her, not caring that the ground under me is cold, so exhausted that I can't think any further.

Extract from Aquila © Random House and Sue-Ellen Pashley

Grace

The first thing I feel is how cold it is. Really cold. I open my eyes to a greying sky. Storm clouds are closing in over the top of me, billowing up on themselves, fighting for the front. I frown in confusion, trying to work out what's going on. And then it comes flooding back and I sit up, disoriented for a second as to where I am and how on earth I've got here. Because I am on top of the cliffs again – back where I was before the fall . . .

Nick is lying in a huddled ball beside me, his eyes closed, his body shivering in the wind that has come with the approaching storm. His *naked* body!

I back away in shock, scooting along the grass as fast as I can, heart racing and my breath coming in short, shallow gasps like my lungs have forgotten how to work properly. What the hell . . .?

I look around, desperately hoping that someone else is here to tell me what's going on, but it's just us. Alone. Me and my naked next-door neighbour.

Jesus!

I'm tempted, right at this moment, to turn around and start towards home, however I can – to just leave him here. But I can't. He's obviously in no fit state to find his own way home and I'm not the sort of person that could leave him here like this. Although I wish I was.

I stand up and move over towards him hesitantly, shoving at the top of his arm with my hand, before stepping back quickly again, trying not to look further than his broad shoulders.

'Grace,' he mutters and I frown, trying to put all the pieces together. The fact that I'm not dead, smashed on the rocks, that I am, in fact, back on top of the cliff, and that Nick is lying here naked, still shivering in the cold. And that I'm sore. I raise my shirt up at the side of my waist. There are scratch marks – long thin ones that make my skin sting. None of it makes

any sense in my head. I feel like I have lost a large chunk of time – and that time holds all the answers. Like I've entered the twilight zone or something. I look around me, trying to look for any clues that might tell me what's happened.

I notice a pile of fabric that looks like it's been strewn haphazardly at the edge of the cliff. His clothes, obviously. I walk over and pick them up between my thumb and one finger. They're torn, like they were ripped off. His jacket, though, while ripped at the arms, appears to be okay, so I go back over to lay it across him, trying not to look at . . . well, at his nakedness. At his tanned skin or his strong arms or the way his chest is smooth and well-muscled . . .

I shake my head, looking away, feeling my cheeks turn red even though there's no one here to see my embarrassment.

My brain is beginning to hurt, trying to work out what the hell happened between falling and waking up on the grass – not dead. I stand back up and sigh in frustration at the fact that Nick is still shivering. Just leaving his coat on top of him isn't going to work – he's still lying unprotected on the cold bare ground, and everything's about to get even worse when it starts to rain.

God!

I kneel down beside him again and shake his shoulder. It's a little easier to be near him now that he is actually covered.

'Nick, wake up. Nick? Nick!'

He opens his eyes for a mere second, slowly dragging them open as if that takes all the energy he has, and he smiles at me as though everything is now right with the world. Except it's not. It is so *not* good and I am hoping now that no one comes to the cliff and catches us – me – in this situation.

‘Grace,’ Nick murmurs again, his voice caressing my name this time. My heart does a little flip-flop, like it has a mind of its own. Which only makes me more frustrated – though I’m not sure who with – me or him.

‘Yep, I’m Grace. And I’m here. So get up.’

I push him again, rougher this time, probably rougher than I need to. ‘Come on, Nick. You can’t stay here. You have to get up and get into the car. Come on!’

I pull at his arm, forcing him into a sitting position with great difficulty and hastily adjusting the coat as I do so.

‘Nick, come on, you have to get up. Please.’

‘Okay, Grace. Okay, I’ll get up for you.’ The words slur out of his mouth.

I pull his arm again and he stands, but he’s weak and wobbly, like a newborn foal. I put myself under his arm, my own arm around his back, my hand on his bare skin, taking his weight to help keep him up. He is big . . . and heavy . . . and naked. Again. I can’t hold him up and get the jacket at the same time so I try not to look, even though his side is pressed right up against mine.

Eyes straight ahead, Grace, I tell myself firmly.

‘Now walk,’ I demand and he moves his feet in some semblance of a walk. Finally, thank God, we are at the car. I pull the door open and shuffle around until I have him near the seat. And then I let him fall.

He gives a muffled huff as his upper body lands sideways on the seat. The lower half will need some help. I shut my eyes as I contemplate what I am going to have to do. This *cannot* be happening. I didn’t even want to come and have this stupid talk on top of a stupid cliff, for God’s sake! I could be home, right this minute, having a nice warm cup of coffee and playing with Casper, instead of wondering how the hell I am going to lever this naked boy into a car.

Hoping he won't fall when I let go, I run back to get his coat and drape it around him again, grateful that at least I no longer have to keep my eyes averted. I push, being very careful where I place my hands, and at last, he is in the car. Not neatly. Certainly not comfortably. But he is in. I run around to the driver's seat and jump in. Then hit my hands on the wheel. The keys. Crap!

The wind is beginning to come on full force as I jump back out and run over to the pile of clothes, trying to keep my hair out of my eyes long enough to see. I'm pleading with which ever God seems to have it in for me this afternoon that things haven't started to blow away yet. I nearly laugh out loud when I fall to my knees, searching through the pile, and my hands connect with something more solid. The keys.

I sigh, the relief so strong it could probably run the car all on its own.

Pumping up the heater, blasting us with blissfully warm air, I back the car out carefully. It is so much bigger than I am used to and I am paranoid that I will have an accident and be found with a still pretty much naked, unconscious Nick in the passenger seat. Which would be more than a little difficult to explain . . . especially since I don't even know how to explain it to myself.

I drive the whole way home at forty kilometres an hour and finally, thank God, I park the car in his driveway and wonder what the hell I should do next. I know I won't be able to get him back out and into his house unless he wakes up more. And the car will get cold really quickly if I turn it off – too cold for someone with no clothes on, which is the whole reason I didn't leave him on the damn cliff in the first place. And anyway, I'm not sure how safe it is to leave him on his own in the car. What if he's sick and chokes or what if he has concussion and needs to go to the hospital?

My mind flicks from one possible disaster to the next and I shake my head angrily, trying to clear it. He isn't supposed to be my responsibility, for God's sake, and yet here I am, being responsible. How the hell did I get stuck with this?

Despite my anger, I stay put, leaving the car running, and I sigh loudly into the cabin, slumping down in the seat and looking over at Nick. He looks really uncomfortable, squashed half on the seat and half on the floor like that. His arm, lying along the seats towards me and no longer covered by the jacket, is strong and muscular, tanned from all his time spent on the boat, I guess. His skin looks smooth, his hairs golden in the light. For just a second I have the almost irresistible urge to touch him – to run my fingers down his arm, my skin only just touching his, to see how smooth it actually is. I put my hands in fists beside me, overwhelmed by the desire that's filling my body in a sudden flood of heat. But that is not going to be happening – now or ever. I won't let it. Even if I contemplated it – just for a moment – when I thought I was going to die . . .

As if he can read my mind, Nick shifts slightly from his cramped position and reaches out, his hand seeking mine to wrap his fingers tightly around my fist.

'Grace,' he sighs, without even opening his eyes.

I hold myself rigid but he doesn't say anything else. He doesn't remove his hand either. It's warm against my skin and my heart beats faster at his touch. I grimace – mad at myself – actually, mad at my response. Like I am an infatuated schoolgirl who can't control herself when the object of her affection is near. Which is so not what this is about. It can't be.

And yet here I am, stuck in a car with my almost naked next-door neighbour and my heart is racing at his touch . . .

Fan-bloody-tastic.

Nick

I can hear the sound of the heater in the car but it still takes a moment to remember what's happened.

Grace!

My eyes snap open. She's there beside me, looking out the window, pale and rigid as I've ever seen her. That's when I realise my hand is wrapped around hers and I pull it back quickly. She still doesn't look at me as she moves her hand and flexes her long, slender fingers on her lap, in and out. I stare at their movement, almost mesmerised by it as my mind comes into focus.

Then, in a moment of extreme, unadulterated horror, worse than I've ever felt in my whole life, I realise I am basically naked.

I hurriedly push myself up on the seat, wrapping the remains of my jacket around me as much as possible, trying to achieve some level of decency. I look at her, panicked as to what her reaction is going to be.

'Jesus, Grace. I'm sorry.'

She finally looks at me and nods, her face unreadable. I realise that we're at my house and that she must have put me in the car somehow and driven us here. Put me in here with absolutely nothing on. Not a stitch. Naked. Dangly bits everywhere.

Crap.

I can feel myself go red and close my eyes, wanting to be anywhere else but here. Christ, what must she be thinking? I'm amazed that she's still in the car or that she didn't leave me on the cliff thinking I'm some sort of pervert. I can't look at her.

'Right, well. Thanks for getting me home. I'm all good now. You can go if you want.'

‘Don’t you think you owe me an explanation?’

I hesitate, unable to work out what her tone of voice means. Is she angry or embarrassed or what? Finally, I nod.

‘I just thought . . . you know . . . ’ I gesture to my undressed state, hoping that will say everything, but she just continues to look at me with her eyebrows raised and I clear my throat. ‘I just thought maybe you’d want to do that when I’m dressed.’

A blush spreads over her cheeks, but she thrusts her chin out, as if she’s accepting some sort of challenge. I wish she wouldn’t. I wish she’d just accept that she’s not dead and go home and not need any sort of explanation. Because I don’t know how to lie about it this time and if I tell her the truth, I’m in deep shit.

‘If we go inside, you can get dressed and then tell me what the hell happened out there. Back at the cliff.’

Panic bites into me at that suggestion, until I realise that Dad will probably still be out at the boat. We’ll have the place to ourselves. Maybe in the time it takes me to get inside and get dressed my mind will come up with some sort of plausible lie.

‘Okay. Come on.’ I shuffle awkwardly along the path to our front door, trying to keep everything covered up. I’ve done enough flashing for one day. My feet are freezing on the cold cement and, for a split second, I’m really bummed about my clothes. That had been my favourite shirt – a classic Dr Who and the Daleks. Probably irreplaceable. But it doesn’t really matter. It was worth the sacrifice – *Grace* was worth the sacrifice.

She follows me inside and I can see her checking out our house, which makes me look around with new eyes. It really is a bachelor pad. Big TV in front of two recliners and a sofa that hardly ever gets used, the newspaper spread all over the table, each section read and discarded without thought, breakfast dishes left in the sink ready to be washed up that night.

No feminine touches at all. It's as if all Mum's influences have been wiped out in the past six years. It's sort of sad.

'Sorry about the mess. Why don't you make yourself comfortable and I'll be back in a minute.'

I hurry to get dressed, pulling on whatever's in the cupboard. I'm so nervous, I'm rushing to get my clothes on and it takes me three attempts to get my jeans up without falling over.

Grace is looking at one of our family photos when I come back out.

'She was beautiful,' she says. 'Your mum.'

'Yeah.'

She puts the photo back down on the shelf and sits on one of the recliners, tucking her legs underneath her. 'Okay. Spill it.'

I hesitate, still not sure what to say or how to actually say it. Christ, am I going to tell her the truth? Is that what I'm left with? Because I can't think of anything that'd make sense. My stomach ties itself in knots, twisting tighter and tighter until I think I'm going to throw up.

Shit.

Shit! It's the only thought my brain can connect with.

But I don't want her to go. The thought of that is worse than the thought of telling her the truth. Much worse – heart-getting-dragged-over-a-grater worse.

Maybe I can get away with it. Maybe if we're careful, make sure that no one finds out that she knows, maybe we'll be okay. Maybe . . .

But I'm not sure of the best way to explain it in a way that doesn't sound . . . totally unbelievable. And while my brain's dicking around, trying to think about what I should do, she obviously thinks I'm not going to answer her because I see a hard expression settle on her face.

‘How am I not dead on the rocks at the bottom of that cliff, Nick? How did I end up back on the top? And why were you . . . naked?’

The word makes her blush again and I can feel myself turning red in sympathy. I run my fingers through my hair, trying to buy time, and then realise it’s probably all sticking up in the air and flatten it down again. In the end, I figure if I’m going to do it, I’m better off just getting on with it. ‘I saved you.’

‘How? I was falling. To all intents and purposes, I should be a splattered mess on the rocks. So unless you can turn back time or something . . . ’

I rub my hands over my face, my heart thumping in my chest at the thought of what I’m about to do. I don’t want to even think about what Dad’s reaction will be if he finds out. The danger of telling someone what it is we can do has been drummed into me so many times I know I shouldn’t even be thinking about it. I should just tell her that it doesn’t matter how I saved her and that she should go home.

I shake my head, refusing to think any more about it, and take a deep breath. It’s unsteady, like the adrenalin’s acting as a speed bump in my throat. More than anything, I want Grace in my life. It’s as simple as that. So I don’t have much of a choice. It’s truth time, obviously.

I grab the blanket off the side of the couch.

‘All right, I’m going to show you something . . . something to help you understand how I saved you, but I don’t want you to freak out, okay?’

Grace

When he starts to take his clothes off again, I jerk out of the chair, mind in a whirl of half-completed thoughts, ready to leave. *Don't freak out* – you have got to be kidding me.

‘Grace, it’s okay, I promise,’ he says, and I can hear the pleading in his voice. ‘I just don’t want to wreck any more of my clothes. My wardrobe’s been depleted enough today.’

I stop, thinking about the pile of clothes on the grass at the edge of the cliff, and sink back into the chair again, looking down at my lap, not knowing where else to look. It seems like such an intimate thing to watch him undress, even though I had to manhandle him naked into the car only hours ago. But he had been basically unconscious then, and besides, that was something I’d had to do. It wasn’t like I had a choice.

God, what have I got myself into?

‘Okay. You need to look now.’

I look up and he is standing there with the blanket wrapped around his waist. My breath catches in my throat. Looking at him, I have to acknowledge that he is beautiful – if that’s a word you can use for a guy. Toned, strong, tanned. My heart feels like it has skipped a beat and all I can think about is how much I wanted to touch him in the car. I try not to let my reaction show on my face. But I’m finding that harder than I would have expected.

He is watching me, as if he’s trying to work out if I am still going to run.

‘What is it?’ I say, trying to keep my voice calm, as if this is something that happens to me every day, like I’m taking it all in my stride. Sitting in a strange lounge room with my next-door neighbour, who’s stripped to almost naked in front of me for the second time today – sure, doesn’t faze me at all! No big deal. No weirdness here . . . panic well under control . . .

‘Okay, truly, Grace, don’t freak out with what I’m going to do now. Remember it’s just me. Okay? Promise me.’

I nod, my mind already in a whirl at the thought of something stranger than watching him get undressed. But I’m starting to get impatient with him, too. I’m not some flighty, easily scared girl, for God’s sake, despite the panic attacks that have been with me for the past year – they come from a different place, though. Underneath that I am strong – it’s somewhere in there still. It has to be.

And then Nick shows me how he saved me.

And if I hadn’t seen it myself, I would never have believed it was possible.

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