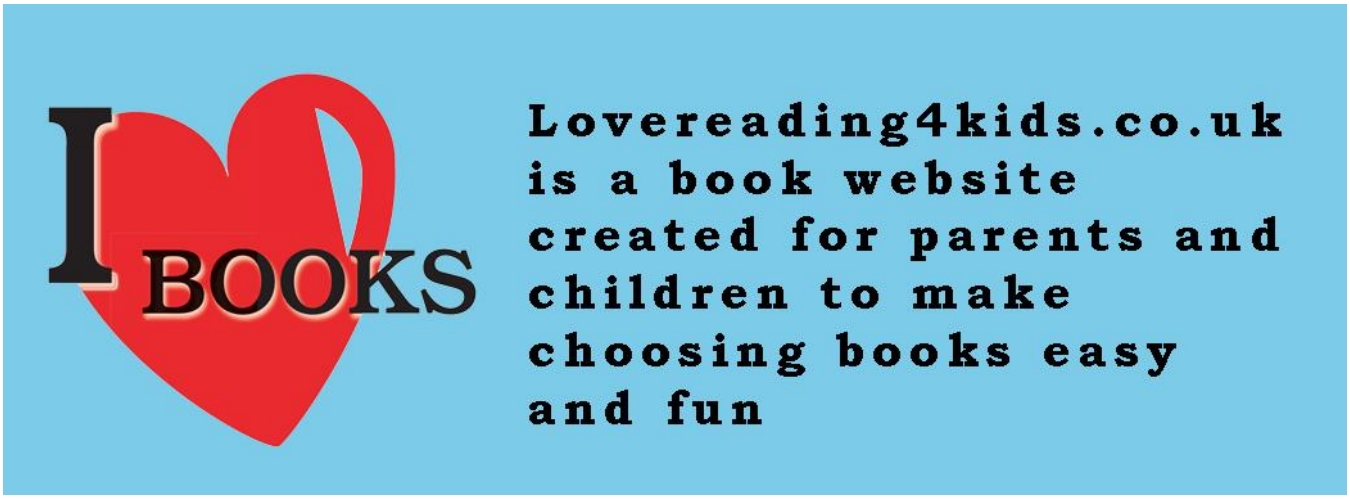


Opening extract from

The State of Grace

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Rachael Lucas

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CHAPTER ONE

Being a human is a complicated game – like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do. Or like walking in step, but with someone trying to trip you up – and you're juggling at the same time, with people pelting more and more balls at you. Then, just when you get the hang of it, someone starts flashing a torch in your eyes and then yelling in your ear.

I'll be mid conversation and listening and responding in all the right places, then someone will say something on the other side of the room – a snatch of something that my brain will pick up. I'll lose the thread for a second, and when I tune back in I've lost my way. And then the other person might – for a split second – look at me oddly or scratch their nose and I'll start thinking, *No, Grace, you've lost it*, and by then I've fallen even further behind, and I remember that my face has probably stopped making the appropriate shapes (interested, listening, concerned, thoughtful – I have a full repertoire, as long as I don't get distracted) and then I panic.

And that's where it starts. We're in Geography and Mrs Dawes is talking about tectonic plates and Sarah's sitting

next to me and she won't stop breathing and the clock on the wall is ticking slightly out of time with the clock that she's got on her desk and I'm trying to focus on what she's saying but it feels like the walls are collapsing in on me.

And I'm sitting there thinking – I could just walk out. Like people do in films or on television. You see it all the time. They just get up and they walk out of the door and there's a slam and they just keep on walking and the rest of the pupils all look at each other in surprise and there are raised eyebrows and the teacher pushes back her chair with a screech of metal on tiled floor and a sigh of resignation and . . .

'*Obviously* we're doing everything we can for Grace. But we have the interests of the other pupils to think of and – well – behaviour like this could set an unfortunate precedent.'

I'm not supposed to be able to hear Mrs Miller through the door of her office, but she's got a voice like a strangled crow, even with discretion mode activated.

The rough material covering the chair in the school foyer prickles at the back of my knees. I run my hand across the wooden arm, tracing the shape of the heart etched into the varnish by another waiting student, some time in the past. I've watched it fade over the years from a bright scar in the wood to a faded memory of a moment. I run my finger round and round it as I listen.

'Yes, of *course*. I appreciate your position, obviously.' Mum is echoing her words carefully, using the reflective listening skills she's been working on, and that's her oh-

yes-I-completely-understand tone, the one she saves for teachers, counsellors, support-group workers, doctors, educational psychologists . . .

'I'll have a word with Grace.' I hear her pausing for a moment. 'The thing is, her father is away.'

There's a pause and a clattering of fingernails on laptop keyboard.

'If you *could* keep us up to date with information like this, it really would help.'

I can feel the atmosphere crackle. I can imagine Mum in that second. Hands balling into fists under the table, back straightening defensively, chin raising.

'Well, I did *try* to call, Mrs Miller.' Her words sound spiky now. 'But it's virtually impossible to get past the school secretary. I'm *more* than aware that change unsettles my daughter.'

When Mum gets angry, she gets more clipped and posh. There's another pause before she carries on. I can imagine them glaring at each other across the desk.

'He's gone for a – Well, he's . . .'

There's another beat of silence before she finishes. 'He's on another contract shoot.'

(Dad's not a hired killer, incidentally. He's a wildlife cameraman.)

More silence.

'We've been very busy with end-of-term reports, and we have had *quite* a bit of contact already this half-term regarding Grace and we're only seven weeks into the year.' Defensive reply.

I know they've had meetings without me there, as well as the awkward ones where I'm dragged out of class and forced to sit in Mrs Miller's office staring at the wall and trying to nod in all the right places. And then there's *this* kind, where I'm waiting outside, the problem they need to solve.

I curl my knees up towards my chest. It makes me feel sick when the adults start snarling at each other. I take a breath in, but it shudders through me. I can hear my heart thumping in my ears. The smell of the chair fabric is causing a headachy throb behind my eyes.

'I think it'd be best if you take her home this afternoon, have a chat. We've got the exams coming up next term, and you need to stress to her how important it is that she's focused in class. There's only another week left until the holidays.'

There's a silence before she adds an afterthought – and she sounds half surprised as she says it.

'Grace is a very bright girl, you know.'

I slouch down at the click of the door handle opening, making sure I look as if I'm staring absently into space, and definitely *not* eavesdropping on the whole conversation with my super-bat-hearing powers.

'Mrs Miller and I have had a little chat.'

I look at them as if I'd forgotten they existed. They fall for it and explain that under the circumstances, Grace, it's best if we just remember that we don't just walk out of the classroom, Grace, even if we are feeling a little overwhelmed. And don't forget, Grace, you can always tell

the teacher if you need some time out.

It's not that easy. It's like there's a wall that stops me from saying the words, even if I need to. And that's before the whole everyone-else-looking-at-me thing, because we all know school is basically just a socially acceptable version of the Lord of the Bloody Flies. But there's something that makes saying the words 'I am a bit stressed – can I please go outside to the carefully constructed Quiet Room?' just a tiny bit completely impossible.

Oh, and then there's the fact that the Quiet Room is a) next to the canteen so it smells of hot metal and thin, pointy headaches and b) is opposite the Gym Hall so the *thud thud thud* of basketballs makes me want to scream. But I suppose they tried. It's a shame they didn't actually consult anyone who'd want to use it, and that's why it ends up being a glorified store cupboard with a wall stacked with props from the end-of-term performance and a stack of leftover copies of *Of Mice and Men* beside the ergonomic beanbag (hissing noise, weird smell) and a token lava lamp and some inspirational posters. And a dying plant.

Anyway. None of that matters because we're in the car now and it's one more week until half-term and that means a) I can be at the stables all week and b) oh my God, the party. A tiny little bubble of fizzy excitement flirrups through my stomach. And yes I know 'flirrup' isn't a word, but it is in my head. In fact, that's one of the things my best friend, Anna, likes best about me. My words always make her laugh. I like her because she's nice and she makes me

laugh and she's kind and funny and she doesn't mind that I'm a bit –

'Grace, if you don't like Geography, it's not too late to drop it as a subject, concentrate on the ones you like. We're only six weeks into Year Eleven.'

Mum, who's been driving in silence, turns to look at me as she pauses at the junction. I'm tapping thumb against fingers, one after another, in time to the clicking noise of the indicator light.

'Grace?'

I close my eyes so I can concentrate. I hear her sigh in irritation.

'Grace, you're just being bloody *rude* and that's not OK. I've told you before if someone asks you a question you have to answer them.'

We turn on to our road and the ticking stops. I open my eyes again, staring ahead. I'm counting the road signs down. No Left Turns. One-way Street. 20. It reminds me of being four and coming home from Reception class.

'GRACE, I am sick to death of this.'

After a few moments, I find my voice.

'I don't dislike Geography.'

We're pulling into the driveway now and I can tell she's seriously pissed off. She gets out of the car, hefting her brown bag on to her shoulder with a huff of air and slamming the door. She's marching up to the porch, not waiting for me. I climb out, deliberately slowly. The second I close the car door she blips the car locked without looking back, and heads into the hall, leaving

the front door open for me.

Withnail is there, snaking round my ankles, tail a hopeful question mark. I scoop her up and carry her through to the kitchen where I place her on the table while I tip out a sachet of disgusting dead-animal food for her. She chirrups with delight and hops down precisely, meeting the bowl on the cold tiles of the kitchen floor.

'Mum says you're in trouble?'

There's a *clonk* as my little sister throws her bag down on the table. Her school finished early today, and she's not going to be impressed that her Netflix time has been eaten into by me returning unannounced.

Mum reappears. 'Leah, I said nothing of the sort.' She shoots Leah an eyebrows-down, shut-up sort of look.

She's already tied her hair back in a ponytail, swapped her contact lenses for glasses and replaced her shirt and posh coat with a sweatshirt.

'I don't know why you get dressed up to see Mrs Miller. It's not like *she* makes an effort.'

Mum fills the kettle and flicks it on before turning to face me. I catch a waft of Bach Rescue Remedy on her breath – if you ask me, it's just a socially acceptable way of drinking in the middle of the afternoon. The amount she goes through, she'd be better off making her own remedies by shoving a bunch of flowers in a bottle of brandy.

'I don't have to explain what I'm wearing to you, Grace. For your information,' she continues, and I look at her, wondering if she realizes that's exactly what she's doing, 'I happened to feel like making an effort to wear something

nice because I don't have to spend every day in a shirt and a pair of leggings. I've done that for long enough. And because it's important the school recognizes I'm taking the – situation – seriously.'

Leah looks up from the overflowing bowl of Coco Pops she's just poured herself. She raises her eyebrows and looks at me sideways. 'You're a *situation* now?'

I shrug. 'Apparently.'

She shovels in a spoonful of cereal and crunches it noisily, which makes me feel a bit sick.

Basically, if Leah's not doing some kind of sporting thing, she's eating. She's like a one-person training montage, and I guess it uses up a lot of energy. Right now she's in her PE kit. I can see the tangle of her blazer and school uniform balled up in her bag. (I predict that Mum will complain about that within the next half hour, once she's finished with me.)

'What've you done?' She looks at me and then I catch her glancing at Mum. For a split second I feel like I'm on the outside of some unspoken conversation – but then I often feel like that. I think it's probably how it feels when you're really fluent in a language but you're with native speakers. I speak human as a second language, and there's always a subtext that I miss.

Mum shakes her head slightly.

'Leah, leave it.'

She leans back against the kitchen counter, and looks directly at me in a way that makes me feel distinctly uncomfortable. I stare at the floor, but I can feel her eyes

burning into me. It doesn't matter how many books she reads – and, believe me, she's read them *all* – she just. doesn't. get. it. It's physically painful to have someone staring at me like that. Her eyes burn into me and I can feel my skin prickling. Trying to escape, I step backwards towards the door.

'Grace got a bit upset today. That's all. Anyway,' Mum says, in the cheerful voice that always indicates that she's gathered herself and decided not to make a fuss about whatever I've done wrong, 'how about dinner in front of the TV and hot chocolate and PJs?'

'Can we have those biscuits?' Leah knows we've got Mum over a barrel this week. 'The chocolate ones you hid in the garage?'

'How did you know about them?'

I raise my eyes in time to see Leah pull a face. 'We know everything, Mother. It's our job.'

The truth is Mum went on a major comfort-food shopping trip the night that Dad left for Greenland. She came home loaded with chocolate-caramel-covered everything, about fifty-seven tubs of Häagen-Dazs and a crate of red wine, which she locked in the garage where the freezer and all the food worth eating lives. She keeps the key on her at all times. She's been even stressier than usual for some reason since Dad went this time, and she keeps snapping.

Anyway, I'm happy to watch whatever she wants on television (even if I'll be reading my book at the same time) if it means chocolate.

*

Where were you? Waited at the flagpole until ten past.

My phone's on silent because we're supposed to be having Quality Family Time, which means no contact with the outside world, but I catch it glowing sideways through the cushion where I've stuffed it out of sight. It's Anna. Oh God. When Mum took me home, I completely forgot to tell her I wasn't going to be there. My stomach gives a glurp of anxiety and I hold my breath as I reply.

Got picked up. REALLY sorry.

I don't want to go into the whole walking-out-of-class thing, and she's not in my Geography set. I don't want to think about it at all, actually, because when I do I get that weird swooping horrible feeling in my stomach and my skin goes all fizzy just thinking about it. And I'm gnawing on my thumbnail waiting for her to reply. I'm worried that she might just think sod it, because, honestly, she could. Any time. I have no idea why she's friends with me because Anna's *lovely*. She's sort of accepted by the populars and the swots and the geeks *and* the funny in-betweeny ones – and even with all that she still chooses to be my best friend, even though I must bring her down about fifty nerd points in the universal school scale of social acceptability.

No stress. But . . . party crisis. WTF are we going to wear?

And with one sentence the prickly-skin feeling is gone and my heart settles down with a little thump, like a stone landing at the bottom of a pond.

Mum's fallen asleep on the sofa where Leah's lying

beside her with her thumb in her mouth (even though she's thirteen, don't ask) staring at an old episode of *Friends* like she's about to take a GCSE in it. I get up, unplugging my charger, and slip out of the room as Anna messages again.

You doing anything tomorrow? Come round to mine and we can try some stuff on. I'll do your hair?