

One

Standing on the edge of the cliff, Grace Elliott turned her face to the sky. Her heart beat hard against her chest. Sweat dripped down her brow. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. The air was cool; salt teased her tastebuds. Far beneath her the water flowed silently, at least from this far up. All she had to do was let go. Release the grip of pain and heartache that had smothered her for so long.

Opening her eyes, she looked down to the blue-black river that cut a deep scar from the Pacific Ocean in the east into the nearby mountains at the edge of the Great Dividing Range, then across to the grey rocks on the other side of the valley.

Grace knew the jagged stones and boulders below were far away, yet they seemed too close. Her hands began to tremble as she stepped further out on the metal platform. It swayed ever so slightly as she adjusted her weight, the clang of her boots on the perforated steel ringing in her ears.

'Just breathe,' the instructor said. Breathing was something Grace had mastered these past few years. She drew in the crisp,

fresh air, the faint taste of eucalyptus catching at the back of her throat.

Despite what people said, she wasn't brave. She simply hid her fear well, buried it under false smiles and fake words that others needed to hear. She wasn't sure false smiles would help her current predicament. A predicament she'd willingly got herself into. But today was it: her last stance. Pain and fear had taken so much from her. Until now. This was Grace Elliott's definitive line in the sand.

The soft voice of the instructor whispered in her ear. 'Are you ready?'

With a slight tilt of her head, she nodded. Then she threw her arms out to the side and flung herself into the autumn air's cool embrace.

Wind whooshed past her ears, ever so fast, blocking out all other sound. A kaleidoscope of tumbling colour rushed around her, a blur of green and brown and blue, speeding in and out of her vision. She tried to swallow but her mouth was dry. Bracing cold water kissed the top of her head just as she jolted up, her body flinging back in the other direction. Up, up, she flew. And back down.

The river red gums that liked to hug the waterways in this part of New South Wales came into focus first as her body slowed, though they were the wrong way up. Up then down.

Then the silver platform from which she'd hurled herself sharpened in her vision, the blue sky bright and clear above. Autumn skies were Grace's favourite.

The thick elastic rope biting into her ankles steadied and cheers reached her ears as she swung back and forth, water dripping from her close-cropped hair as she hung upside down above the river.

'Woo hoo!'

'Way to go!'

Blood charged through her veins and she screamed, joy rushing through her every pore.

For the first time in ever so long she felt alive.

Sitting on the riverbank, Grace ran her hands through the sun-warmed grass as she watched and cheered on the rest of the group as they bungee-jumped from the platform one at a time. As each jumper made it back to ground safely, they also sat along the bank, in twos or threes, chatting to each other in between jumps.

Other than Linh, who'd come with her, Grace didn't know any of their names, but she shouted for them anyway. As a newcomer to the group, they knew nothing about Grace and she hoped she could keep it that way. That was at least, she supposed, within her control, unlike so many other things. She could tell them what she wanted, should anyone bother to ask, and leave out anything she liked.

An old lady with short lilac curls was last on the rope and a cry of 'Cowabunga!' echoed down the valley as the woman threw herself off the platform, a streak of bright orange and navy velour hurtling towards the river, arms flailing in joyful abandon.

'How awesome is she?' Linh plonked herself down beside Grace, her jump now complete. She shook her long hair, spraying Grace with drops of river water. Lucky she was Grace's friend. 'And what do you reckon her story is?' Linh's dark eyes glinted.

This was a game they often played, making up life stories of strangers they observed.

Grace rubbed her chin. 'Hmm. Ex-French Foreign Legion, for sure. Or maybe a Cold War spy?'

Linh pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. 'Oh, yes. That's better. Her code name is Olga Romanov. She's retired now, of course.'

'Of course.'

'But she needs the occasional adrenaline fix after a life of excitement. So now she does crazy adventure sports. Her fake husband back on the farm has no idea.'

Grace smiled. 'She'd still be in the spy game today if it wasn't for an accident on her last job that robbed her of her hearing in her left ear. Pesky gramophone exploding at her fake niece's wedding.'

Linh hit Grace on the leg.

'Have you ever thought about writing books?' Grace asked.

'Linh Tran.' Linh spread her hands through the air as if her name were up in lights. 'First Vietnamese-Australian to win the Booker Prize.' She collapsed in laughter, falling into Grace.

Grace put her arm around her. She didn't know how she'd have got through the past few years without her best friend. Linh always managed to bring a smile to Grace's face, or keep her calm when she was nervous. Even this morning, on the bus trip from Port Maddison to the river location of their bungee jump, Linh's reassuring hand on Grace's shaking leg had been the only thing keeping her calm as she had stared out of the bus window at the Federation homes and Californian bungalows of her hometown melting into the green and brown shadows of the bush.

A cool breeze rippled over the water, reflecting fractured shards of soft light along the riverbank. From somewhere hidden in the tall gums, kookaburras laughed.

'So, what did you think?' Linh sat back up. 'Are you glad I talked you into coming today?'

'Ah, the other way around. I talked you into coming, remember?'

'Tomaytoes, tomahtoes.' Linh waved her hand in dismissal now. 'What's important is, did you enjoy the jump?'

Grace looked up to the clear blue sky. 'It was amazing. Without doubt the single most amazing thing I've done in a very long time.'

But then, that wasn't hard.

'Brilliant.' Linh put her arm around Grace's shoulder. 'You deserve to suck the marrow out of life.' She looked at Grace as she quoted the poem stuck to Grace's computer screen at work, a slight glistening in her eyes. 'Let's hurry up.' She cleared her throat and indicated the rest of the group, who were heading back to the minibus. She stood and held her hand out to help Grace up.

'Thank you.'

Arm in arm they joined the others.

A little way down the road from the bungee site, the bus pulled up outside the River Gum, a tiny pub in one of the forgotten towns dotted around the countryside. Located too far north of Sydney for a daytrip, many of these old colonial settlements had languished over the years. Only a few establishments, like the River Gum, had managed to adapt and survive, albeit a shadow of their former heyday.

Pristine baskets of yellow, pink, white and purple flowers hung from rusted iron beams that held a corrugated roof over a faded wooden veranda. Grace's mum would know the name of the pretty little flowers that looked out of place against their rustic backdrop. Impatiens? Pansies? Grace had never been interested in learning about her mother's favourite hobby. Perhaps she should add it to her current bucket list. Grace made a mental note to ask her mum about maybe starting a small garden in her front yard. What was one more task on Grace's ever-increasing list of dreams and wishes and activities?

She'd made her first bucket list when she was seven. Her Uncle Craig had put her up to it.

'Grace, it's good to have dreams. Big ones to chase your whole life. Little ones you can easily conquer. And if you write them down, it's more likely you'll catch them before you kick the bucket.'

Back then, Grace hadn't understood why anyone would want to kick a bucket and why you had to chase your dreams before you did. But she worshipped her Uncle Craig, and with yellow crayon on a piece of blue paper she took from her mum's craft stash, she wrote her very first bucket list.

Grace Elliott's Bucket List, age seven and one half:

- *Eat cupcakes for breakfast*
- *Join the Babysitters Club*
- *Paint hair pink*
- *Solve a mystery like Nancy Drew would*

On the morning of her eighth birthday, she'd sneaked into the kitchen and opened the Tupperware container full of chocolate cupcakes decorated with hundreds and thousands her mum had baked the night before, and scooped five of them for breakfast. She'd been so pleased with herself that she'd got so many down before her mum padded in to the room in her blue fluffy dressing gown. Her self-satisfied grin had soon turned green, though, as the cupcakes churned and then ejected themselves from her stomach.

After a lie-down and some dry toast for lunch, little Grace had felt better and she'd stomped into the laundry and kicked the red plastic bucket that lived there. Hard.

Stupid bucket and its stupid list.

But what if Uncle Craig was right? What if, once you kicked the bucket, the list of dreams disappeared? She'd raced back into her room and crawled under her bed where she'd kept her crayon list. Uncle Craig had said it was bad luck to show anyone your list and she'd hidden it there between the slats of her bed and the mattress.

She'd rested her head on the bed. Her list was still there. With a purple crayon she'd put a tick beside *eat cupcakes for breakfast*.

Just like the one she'd put next to *paint hair pink*, grimacing at the memory of her mum's loud screams when she'd found Grace in the bathroom a few months before the cupcake incident, the tube of pink paint in her hand, pink drips falling down her shoulders.

Studying her list, then eight years old, she'd realised she wasn't all that interested anymore in joining the Babysitters Club, but she still very much wanted to solve a mystery. The problem with that one was she couldn't find any. Not in Port Maddison. Maybe she'd need to move to River Heights and befriend Nancy to make that happen. Maybe that was one of those chase-your-whole-life-dreams Uncle Craig had always spoken about.

Having swapped her blue crayon for orange, Grace had made some changes.

Grace Elliott's Bucket List, age eight:

- *Eat pancakes on the roof (only one or two pancakes – she'd learned her lesson)*
- *Meet Cory from Boy Meets World*
- *Play netball for Australia*
- *Feed a panda*
- *Study how Nancy Drew solves mysteries and move to River Heights*

The memory of her early bucket lists brought a smile to Grace's lips as she got off the bus. Every couple of years since then she tweaked the list; changed it, added new items. Well, *nearly* every couple of years. Bungee jumping had been added two years ago and it had taken this long to build up the courage. Among other things.

As the rest of the group piled out of the bus, laughing, trying to outdo each other with tales of how hard their hearts had been beating as they flung themselves from the platform, Grace

held back and took out her phone. She snapped a photo of the pub's exterior, the bright mixed with the broken, and filed it in her album named 'life's little moments'. The album she never showed anyone. Her own little record of how beautiful and fragile life was.

Inside, the pub was in much better condition than the rusted exterior would lead passers-by to believe. The booths, with wooden tables and brown leather bench seats, were clean and appeared to have been refurbished recently. And the woodwork of the sash windows was well varnished. In the back corner was a wide bar wrapped in a patchwork of corrugated iron in various shades of distress that appeared to be deliberate. This was where the bungee group gathered, around a pop-up banner.

The MAW logo was emblazoned across the top in blue and white and aqua, its motto, 'Get MAW out of life', splashed across the left corner. Uncle Craig would have approved of that, if he were still around. And he would have approved of this revitalised go-getter Grace too. A list of MAW's activities spilled down the banner like a movie credit roll. Skydiving, rock climbing, kite surfing, spelunking – Grace would have to look that one up – and friendship.

Friendship. Well, she wasn't sure there was room for that in her new action-packed plan for life. She was here for the adrenaline. The surge of life that ran through her as she jumped off a metal platform tied to a rope. She was here for the chance to feel alive again. And besides, she had Linh.

She looked around the group. It was unlikely she'd find any new kindred spirits amongst the motley band of adventurers anyway. Romanov, her lilac-tinted hair standing on end in all directions was at the bar holding a champagne flute, her sun-spotted pinkie finger delicately poised mid-air. She was talking to a thick-set man perhaps in his seventies – the guy who'd jumped first – and Grace was fairly certain Romanov was flirting with him.

There were others there around Grace's age, talking loudly and taking selfies in a tight group close to the bar. A couple – maybe they were a couple, Grace wasn't sure; they could have been siblings, as they did look quite a bit alike – were arguing quietly at the edge of the group. No one else seemed to notice the tiff, but one thing life had taught Grace recently was the power of observation. It helped pass time during the long endless waits and uncertainty, and kept her amused when little else did.

One of the group leaders was handing out beers to anyone who didn't have one yet, his head bobbing happily. He handed one to Grace, but Linh intercepted it, passing Grace a sparkling water.

'Thanks.' Grace knew Linh always had her back.

In time gone by Grace would have loved nothing more than a glass of cold beer after an exciting day out like this. But she hadn't had a taste for beer, or any alcohol since well, since long enough that she didn't want to think about it. That was the old Grace. The new Grace found other joys in life now.

The rest of the group splintered into pairs and trios, sitting in booths, on stools, some ordering potato wedges, some talking about future adventures planned, some reminiscing about previous exploits. Grace sunk onto a stool at the bar, Linh beside her.

'So what about that guy?' Linh asked, pointing to a bald man in his sixties. 'What's his story?'

'A post-break-up refugee, desperately seeking something of the man that existed before his ex took his soul from him.'

'For sure.'

'And him?' Grace asked, indicating towards the man enthralled in Romanov's presence – broad shoulders, chiselled jaw, serious face.

'His name's Billy, but don't call him that. It's William. He hates Billy.' Linh's eyes narrowed. 'He's an ex-SAS from England. Those two have a lot in common.' She winked.

Grace nearly spat out her water, trying not to laugh. They continued imagining the lives of the MAW members, including one count of being fired from a job, one count of adultery, and one count of a gambling debt leading to financial ruin.

The whole time, though, Grace couldn't take her eyes off Romanov. 'Can you imagine us doing this sort of thing at her age?' Grace asked.

'How old do you reckon she is?'

If she had to guess, Grace would say the old duck was in her eighties. Not that her guess could be trusted. She was painfully aware of how life could sometimes swindle the years away from someone. 'I don't know.'

'Maybe we should ask her.'

'What? Go up and ask straight out? We couldn't. We're not that rude.'

There was a twinkle in Linh's eye. 'We can be anyone we like here. Even busybodies.'

Oh no she wouldn't.

'Excuse me?' Linh waved to Romanov to get her attention. 'My friend and I would like to ask you something.'

Oh yes she did!

'No, we wouldn't.' Grace slapped Linh's arms down.

'It's okay, dearie,' Romanov said. 'I'm an open book. Not too many secrets this lot have from one another.'

Grace really hoped that wasn't true. She didn't want this group knowing her secrets. She wanted to be normal. Plain old boring Grace, as normal as anyone else going. No baggage. No history. Simply living life.

As false a bravado as that might have been.

'Out with it.' Romanov raised her gnarled fingers, beckoning a response.

Oh to hell with it. Linh was right. Today Grace could be anyone she wanted. Even a busybody.

'Um, well, you were amazing today, and I was, well, wondering how old you are?'

She couldn't believe she'd come out and asked like that.

A look of serenity passed over Romanov's face. 'Dearie, I'm two husbands, three major wars, five great-grandchildren, three trips to England and one naked sunrise on a Hawaiian beach old. What about you?'

Grace had no response. None. She felt as small and useless as she ever had. And that was saying something.

Linh laughed and raised her glass in salute. 'Definitely a spy,' she whispered.

Grace shook her head. 'It puts one's life into perspective, doesn't it?'

Stark perspective.

Could Grace ever measure her life the way Romanov did? Of course not. She hadn't even had a first husband, let alone a second. She had no children and she'd never been overseas and had certainly never, ever, had a naked sunrise. Anywhere.

She'd measured the last few years of her life in specialist appointments and work commitments, not interesting destinations and exotic experiences. But wasn't that why she was here? Why she'd resurrected her bucket list after a few years of letting it slide? To fully experience life, like Uncle Craig had always encouraged her to. To put her past behind her, to close that chapter. To start counting moments instead of minutes. Long, wasted, painful minutes that stole her days and weeks. Her years.

The Maddison Adventure Warriors was Grace putting a little Romanov back into her life.

She sat up straighter.

'Cheers.' Linh clinked her glass with Grace.

'Cheers.'

Grace made a mental addition to her bucket list.

- *Naked sunrise on a beach*

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