

STATE OF GRACE

by Vivien Santana Hughes



Her TV kids on *Grace Under Fire* "are so terrific. I feel fortunate to have kids on the show whose parents work very hard to ensure that they have a childhood," says Brett Butler, soothing Libby's (Kaitlin Cullum) boo-boo. The crocodile tears are just an act: "[Cullum] gets a kick out of breaking me up."

She's not a single mom, but she plays one on TV—a conversation with 'Grace Under Fire's' Brett Butler

It took weeks of cajoling to get her to talk. And then it was on her terms. Brett Butler, star of ABC's *Grace Under Fire* has rocketed to the top in just over a year. In case you haven't noticed, her one-year-old show is king, er, queen of the sitcom mountain, sometimes watched by more people than any other show. Her character—smart, strong single mom of three, Grace Kelly—has apparently struck a chord with single parents. But you get the feeling being a celebrity is not what makes her, well, authoritative.

She enters the room and commands respect. And it's not just

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because she's tall. Her attitude says, accept me for who I am or I don't care to deal with you. Wearing gray sweats and denim, blond-out-of-a-bottle locks pulled haphazardly into a barrette (she's not dressed that way because she plays a mom, she says, this is just her), Butler goes from a charming smile to a terse, "That's no one's business" and back—in seconds. Her straightforward honesty extends to her performance too. At a recent taping, we were told a scene was being shot a third time due to camera difficulties. Butler yelled over, "We're doing it again because I sucked!" (She didn't.).

She has been described as "ballsy" on more than one occasion. A true statement, I ask? "If you ascribe assertiveness and possibly creative aggressiveness to that, yes," says Butler, 37 this month. "I don't find [being an ingenue] appealing—after the age of 16 anyway. I pretty much say what I think—it's a shame people attribute that to having enough testosterone."

No chance of anyone calling her a wimp. But there is a chink in the armor: her much publicized abusive marriage that she doesn't want to talk about anymore. (Enough has been written, she says.) Although she stayed for three hellish years, she eventually had the guts, at 22, to leave. A few years later—after a stint as a wisecracking waitress led to jobs doing stand-up—she loaded up her 1969 Grand Prix and headed, alone, to New York with all of \$200 in her pocket. "I'm as proud of that as of anything I've ever accomplished," she says. Born in Alabama, raised in Georgia, she had never been north of the Mason-Dixon line.

What sort of upbringing engendered so much self-confidence?

Even when pressed, Butler refuses to give advice to parents on raising their girls to be strong. "Parenting is the hardest job in the world. I admire anyone who can do it," Butler says. But she's fast

to recount what her mother—a twice-divorced single mom—did right. Starting with laughing a lot. "All the women in my family are pretty funny," says Butler, the eldest of five sisters.

"But what my mother did that I think is so sublime is that no matter what was going on in her day, she wanted to know about ours. She encouraged our uniqueness in every conceivable strata, and for that I'm eternally grateful."

Butler's mother urged her to speak up for herself. "There are ways to have manners (so people like and respect you) and at the same time not succumb to the myth that not saying what you need and not being who you are somehow makes you more ladylike. I refute that notion entirely."

With all this forthrightness, was it hard to fit into Hollywood? Quite the contrary—it's what has made her a success. "Hollywood likes candor. If people find it refreshing, that's good because I don't intend to change that. . . I'm pretty good at stridently evolving at all times, but I don't do it so that I fit in—if I wouldn't do it

to bend to the Georgia mold of what a lady should be, why in the world should I do it [now]?"

The fact is that moms everywhere relate to Butler's Grace Kelly, described by the comedic actor as proletariat, literate and free of Southern belle stereotypes. But reality sometimes stings. Grace and her boyfriend broke up this season, which highlighted in a painfully realistic manner the minefield that is dating for single parents. Why the break-up? Butler quips, "It's *Grace Under Fire* not *Grace Happily Ever After*.' It's just easier to put out the flames if you can laugh about it too.

