

# Perfect on Paper

The (mis) adventures of  
Waverly Bryson

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PUBLISHED BY

amazon  

PRODUCED BY

 MELCHER  
MEDIA

## PROLOGUE

“I still can’t believe this is happening.” I leaned toward my reflection in the standing full-length mirror in my living room and knocked a piece of fuzz off my long white dress. Then I turned toward my friends McKenna and Andie, who were sitting on the sofa across the room. “I’m already so nervous. I don’t know how I’m going to make it down the aisle in front of all those people,” I said.

McKenna stood up and poured herself a glass of red wine. “Well, you’d better start believing it, because in two weeks about three hundred very well-dressed people are going to be expecting one fantastic party.”

I ran my hands over the long silk skirt, then rested them gently on my waist. My breath felt thin and cool as I exhaled. “I can’t believe I’m really getting married.”

Andie sighed. “I can’t believe the freak show is really closing.”

I pointed a finger at her and tried not to laugh. “Hey now, Miss Barnett, you know how much I hate it when you use that description, however accurate it may be.”

She pushed her short blonde hair behind her ears. “Yeah, yeah, but it’s like the end of an era, you know?”

McKenna nodded. “I know. It’s sort of hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“Thanks a lot, Mackie,” I said, pushing her shoulder. They were totally right though. My dating life at times *had* been borderline ridiculous, and while I certainly wasn’t going to miss living it, I was definitely going to miss laughing about it. How could one

person have so many romantic disasters? I'd clearly been making up for McKenna, who had been with her boyfriend for forever and a half. Andie was single and had her share of stories, but I was by far the queen.

"Remember that investment banker guy who asked the waiter to separate the alcohol and food on the bill so he could expense your date using his work per diem?" Andie said.

I nodded. "That would be the first date."

McKenna looked at me. "Didn't that guy also live with his parents?"

I nodded again. "That would be yes."

"Excellent," McKenna said, sipping her wine. "I loved cheap investment banker guy."

Knowing what was coming, I put a hand in the air. "Please tell me we're not having this conversation today, okay, ladies? Have you ever noticed that we have this conversation, like, all the time?"

"But it's so entertaining," McKenna said, putting her arm around me. "I love rehashing Waverly moments."

"Me too," Andie said as she grabbed my still-extended hand and squeezed. "There's just so much material there. Remember that date when you forgot to put a camisole on under your sweater and then took the sweater off at the restaurant?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Lovely memory there, oh so lovely," I said.

McKenna turned toward Andie. "Remember that time her calf totally cramped up when she was hooking up with that guy Tyler on the couch?" she said.

"That was the BEST," Andie said, chuckling. "I told everyone I know about that one." Then she looked at me. "Without using your name, of course."

I cringed and walked over to said couch, which at the moment was covered by a mound of bridal magazines that collectively weighed more than the couch itself. "Hey, I think it's bad luck to talk about this stuff while in a wedding dress," I said, sifting through the pile. "I'm pretty sure I read that in a magazine somewhere."

Ignoring me completely, Andie turned back to McKenna. “Remember that guy who showed up for their second date in a pair of sweatpants?” she said.

McKenna nearly spat out her wine. “Sweatpants guy! He was a classic. Or what about that time she was getting the calluses on her feet scrubbed off at the mani-pedi place down on Chestnut Street and the guy she was going out with that night walked by with three of his friends?”

“Ah, yes, the huge hottie Nate Miller,” I said, wincing. “That was the day of our first date.” It was the day of our last date, too. Shocking.

Andie was tearing up now. “I think my favorite Waverly moment might have been when that guy she met at an Oktoberfest party got her contact information but never asked her out, then put her on a mass e-mail to his ‘closest friends’ asking to borrow fifteen hundred dollars for an LSAT class.”

McKenna nodded and laughed. “Oh my God, I’d forgotten about LSAT guy. So excellent. I think *my* favorite Waverly moment was that time she put on too much self-tanner for that guy Mike’s company holiday party, then tried to act like she was naturally that tan in the middle of December.”

“Oh God, please don’t mention that ever again,” I said, closing my eyes and briefly reliving the unfortunate Oompa-Loompa imitation.

“Oh, we will, my dear,” Andie said. “We definitely will.”

As they regaled themselves with some of my legendary dating mishaps, I turned away to look back at the mirror, then became lost in my own thoughts. It was late on a Saturday afternoon in November, a little over a year since I’d met Aaron at a black-tie fundraiser for the San Francisco hospital where McKenna’s boyfriend had just started his residency. Aaron was a partner at a major law firm downtown, following in the footsteps of his parents, who were both big-time corporate attorneys.

When I first met him I didn’t think much of it because, well, why would I? He was rich, smart, good-looking, and several years

older than I was. He owned a two-story Victorian up on Nob Hill and a brand new cabin in Lake Tahoe. I didn't even have a parking spot. He'd grown up in the affluent hills of Tiburon, just north of San Francisco, and his parents were regular fixtures at the opera. I'd grown up in a middle-class neighborhood near Sacramento, but my dad was currently living in what I called the Valley Pines "garden community," although most people would call it the Valley Pines "trailer park."

Aaron was one of San Francisco's most eligible bachelors. I was, well, I was standing next to him at the buffet table.

We knocked elbows while reaching for the jumbo shrimp, or—better said—in a Waverly moment, I knocked into him while reaching for the jumbo shrimp and spilled cocktail sauce all over his arm. I apologized, and before I knew it we were talking. My proclivity for senseless chatter went into hyperdrive like it tends to do when I get nervous, but he was funny, and he was nice, and I really enjoyed talking to him. To be honest, I kept waiting for the *It was nice to meet you* as he headed back to the supermodel with a Ph.D. who I assumed was waiting for him. But he wasn't there with a date. He was there talking to me.

When he asked me for my phone number, I nearly choked.

Our first date was a casual drink at a tiny wine bar in North Beach. Our second was a walk along the ocean followed by a late lunch at the Cliff House. Our third was a romantic dinner at Aqua, and after that there was no looking back. Within two weeks we were a real couple.

Seven months later, at the top of Coit Tower, he asked me to marry him. It seemed a bit fast, but it was all so exciting and romantic, I jumped into his arms and said yes. I couldn't believe it. Aaron Vaughn III wanted *me*, Waverly Bryson I, and he was going to sign legal documents to prove it. After twenty-eight years of *What if I never find that perfect person?* I had finally found him.

"Hellooo . . . Waverly?"

McKenna's voice snapped me out of my daydream.

I looked at her and blinked. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

She handed me a glass of wine. “I said, how are things going with your dad now that the wedding is so close?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. It’s better, I guess, but I still, well, I still think he thinks Aaron’s out of my league. And are you really handing me a glass of red wine right now?”

“Oops, my bad.” She laughed and turned back toward the kitchen. “I’ll get you some white.”

Andie picked up my wedding invitation sitting on the coffee table. “Man, getting hitched at the Ritz-Carlton in Half Moon Bay. You know, once you’re officially part of the illustrious Vaughn family, you’re going to have to get used to having to rough it like that.” The Ritz was just a thirty-minute drive from my San Francisco apartment but about thirty light-years away from my bank account.

McKenna handed me a glass of stain-free wine and pulled the ponytail holder out of her hair. “I’m sure she’ll manage. So, do you think I should wear my hair up or down for the wedding?”

“You’ll induce a rash of neck sprains either way, Miss *Hi I’m Six Feet Tall with Naturally Blonde Hair*,” I said. “And besides, no one is supposed to be looking at you anyway, right?”

McKenna nodded. “This is true.”

“Are they allowed to look at the five-two bridesmaid with unnaturally blonde hair?” Andie said, pointing to her highlighted locks. “I could use a good hookup.”

I laughed. “If it leads to a good hookup, then okay, it’s all good. So should we go over the rules?”

Andie nodded. “Rule number one for being Waverly Bryson’s bridesmaid is: Don’t get sappy and make her cry off her makeup before the pictures.”

I nodded with her. “Exactly. And the second rule is?”

McKenna pointed at Andie. “Don’t bring up any Waverly moments at the wedding.”

“Right,” I said, laughing. I had a big mouth, but Andie’s was at times truly unbelievable. “And rule number three?”

Andie took a sip of her wine. “Don’t hit on the father of the groom?”

"Andie!" I said. Case in point.

"Okay, I'm kidding. But you've got to admit that Aaron's dad is pretty pretty. Now *that* would be a sweet wedding hookup," she said.

I looked over at McKenna. "Mackie, can you help me out here? Sometimes I swear you two are like an angel and a devil sitting on my shoulders."

"Ooh, I like that," Andie said, nodding and rubbing her hands together.

"Be nice now," McKenna said to her.

"So what's the third rule again?" Andie said. "I'm blanking here."

"I am too," McKenna said.

"You two are killing me," I said. "Rule number three, my dear friends, is DO NOT let me hold a bottle of any kind. Wine glasses and champagne flutes only, okay?"

"Ah, that's right," McKenna said, looking back at Andie. "Remember how mortified Whitney was when she saw all those photos of herself drinking out of a bottle in a four-thousand-dollar wedding dress?"

"I'd be mortified too if it looked like my wedding had been sponsored by Bud Light," Andie said.

I turned back to my reflection in the mirror and bit my lip. "Does this dress scream *I didn't go to private school?*"

McKenna put her arm around me and squeezed. "Wave, it doesn't matter what Aaron's last name is. That man is in love with you because you're incredibly loveable, and you two are going to have a great life together."

I sighed. "I wish my dad agreed with you."

The ring of the doorbell made us all turn our heads.

McKenna walked over and pressed the intercom. "Who is it?" she said.

A deep voice filled the room. "It's Aaron. Can I talk to Waverly?" Aaron? Now? I jumped behind the mirror.

McKenna looked at me. "Were you expecting him?" she said.

I shook my head. "I told him I was doing wedding stuff all afternoon and then having dinner with you two. Can you ask him what he wants?"

“Do you mind if I ask what this is about? The bride is, um, rehearsing at the moment,” McKenna said.

Aaron’s voice echoed through the apartment. “I just need to talk to her, okay? It’s important.” He didn’t sound amused.

McKenna looked at me again and raised her eyebrows. I motioned for her to buzz him into the building.

I lived on the first floor, so Aaron walked through the door about ten seconds later.

“This is highly unusual, Aaron, highly unusual,” Andie said, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

He walked right by her and didn’t say anything, which *was* highly unusual. His footsteps seemed too heavy for my delicate hardwood floors, as if they knew bad news was coming. Andie looked at me and made a *What the hell?* expression.

McKenna gathered their stuff in a hurry and shoved Andie out the door. “Call us later?” she whispered.

I nodded as she quietly closed the door behind them, and then I looked at Aaron. “Hi, honey, what’s up?” I was still poking my head out from behind the mirror. “You know this is bad luck, right?”

He sat down on the couch and looked up at me. When I saw his red and swollen eyes, I forgot all about superstition and hurried out from behind the mirror.

“Hey, is everything okay? Did something happen?” I sat down next to him and put my hand on his cheek.

He nodded slowly. “I didn’t really sleep last night.”

My mind began to race. “Is it your dad?” Aaron’s father had a heart condition. “Is he all right?”

He continued to nod. “He’s fine.”

I took his hands in mine. They were cold and clammy. His hazel eyes seemed focused on something that wasn’t in the room with us.

“Aaron, what’s going on? Are you all right?”

The nod of his head slowly turned into a shake.

“Aaron, honey, talk to me.”

His eyes finally cleared, and he looked straight at me. But he didn’t say anything.

"Honey?" I said.

Still nothing.

"Aaron?" I squeezed his hands.

"I . . . I . . ." It was barely a whisper.

I waited several seconds for him to speak again.

"I . . . I don't think I can marry you," he finally said.

Time froze. I did too. My insides turned to ice, and it hurt to breathe.

He was silent for a few seconds. Then he took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I think we rushed into this, and I know I was the one who pushed for it, but . . . I think it was a mistake."

I let go of his hands. The room began to spin, and I started to shake. I reached for the wall to hold myself up, even though I was already sitting down.

"A mistake? Wh- . . . why do you think it was a mistake?"

My question hung in the air. One small word, awaiting what a thousand more couldn't make me understand.

After what seemed like forever, he finally looked at me. "I just don't think we're right for each other."

I held his gaze. We both knew I needed, deserved, a better answer than that.

He looked away and put his hands on his knees.

And I waited.

And waited.

Finally, he turned and looked me right in the eye. "I'm not in love with you, Waverly."

The tears that had welled up in the back of my eyes started to push their way out. Little beads of pain that made my head throb.

"Oh . . . oh . . ." My mouth was open, but the words I wanted to say stayed somewhere deep inside me. In their place came tears, which quietly streamed down my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry. I never should have let it get to this point. . . ."

One by one my tears turned into sobs.

His voice was nearly a whisper. "It's just that it seemed so perfect in the beginning . . . and I got caught up in it . . ."

His voice trailed off, and we sat there for a long time.

Him not saying anything, me sobbing.

Side by side, for the last time.

When he finally stood up to leave, it was dark everywhere. He walked slowly to the door, the cloud of guilt surrounding him nearly visible.

He turned back to look at me.

“I never meant to hurt you, Waverly,” he whispered.

And then he quietly closed the door on what I had thought was my happily ever after.