

## Advance Praise for *Not That Kind of Proposal*

“Full of hilarious banter and sizzling tension, *Not That Kind of Proposal* weaves laugh-out-loud scenes with quiet, thoughtful moments of reflection on grief and self-discovery in a poignant, beautiful, and tender way. . . . Victoria Lavine is at the top of her game, and I adore everything she writes!”

—Chelsea Curto, *USA Today* bestselling author  
of the D.C. Stars series and *In Stormy Weather*

“Full of charm, wit, and heart-squeezing moments, *Not That Kind of Proposal* is everything you can ask for in a romcom. . . . This book will make you laugh, cry, swoon, and blush past your bedtime—I know I did!”

—Lana Ferguson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Nanny*  
“*Not That Kind of Proposal* is touching, heartwarming, and HOT! Victoria Lavine wrote a sparkling love story that every romance reader will adore.”

—Joss Richard, internationally bestselling author  
of *It’s Different This Time*

“Victoria Lavine has done it again! Heartwarming and sweet with full, well-rounded characters, I loved following Gracie and Jude’s journey!”

—Naina Kumar, author of *Say You’ll Be Mine*

“I adore everything about this book. . . . The perfect read for inextinguishably hopeful romantics (like me), *Not That Kind of Proposal* is a knockout. Gracie and Jude have a permanent home in my heart.”

—Ellen O’Clover, author of *The Heartbreak Hotel*

“I fell in love with this book the moment Jude put on that party hat. . . . A romantic comedy that’s tender and hilarious and gorgeously felt. I loved it.”

—Georgia Clark, author of *It Had to Be You* and *Play It Again*

“Clear your schedule, throw out your TBR—this book is charming and funny, clever and crazy hot, and soulful in a way that grips your heart and won’t let go long after you reach *The End*. If Victoria Lavine writes it, I’m reading it, I’m underlining whole passages, I’m making it my entire damn personality. I love this book!”

—Laura Piper Lee, author of *Pot Shot* and *Doomsdate*

“These pages are infused with everything I need and love in a book—comedy, complex human emotions, and a ubiquitous sense of hope. Get ready for Victoria Lavine to be your new favorite romance author.”

—Tarah DeWitt, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Left of Forever*



**NOT  
THAT  
KIND  
OF** *A Novel*  
**PROPOSAL**

*Victoria  
Lavine*

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1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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This Atria Paperback edition July 2026

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Interior design by Davina Mock-Maniscalco

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.



ISBN 978-1-6680-8329-1 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-6680-8330-7 (ebook)

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*To Eden.  
If I included all the reasons why,  
I'd have to cut the whole book for word count purposes.  
Thank you for loving me, friend.*



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

**D**ear Readers. This story, while categorically a rom-com, also explores heavier themes that some readers may be sensitive to, including discussion of domestic abuse. While no abuse happens on page, the long-term effects and memories of growing up in an unsafe environment are discussed by adult characters, particularly in chapter 24. Please read with care.

While it will always be my goal to make you laugh and swoon, it's also my hope to shed light on issues that are close to my heart. Like so many, my life and the lives of some of my nearest and dearest have been impacted by domestic abuse in its various forms. By telling this story, it's my sincerest hope that those of you who have been through this experience (no matter what form it took or continues to take) feel less alone. A detailed list of content warnings can be found on my website, [www.victorialavine.com](http://www.victorialavine.com).



# 1



## GRACIE

Some unsolicited advice: when choosing your team for the zombie apocalypse, consider enlisting a wedding planner. I know, I know—at first glance, the two seem completely unrelated. But as both a wedding planner *and* zombie film aficionado, hear me out. Weddings, much like the zombie apocalypse, are extremely high stakes.

On the big day, every moment has the potential to be a cherished, lifelong memory or a disaster that's rehashed at every Thanksgiving in perpetuity. I mean, technically, no one's going to have to fend off the undead during cocktail hour, but I can name at least three of my brides (including the one about to walk down the aisle) who'd probably choose a fight with a zombie over the stress hives I had to cover up before their first-look photos. But thanks to Kit, it wasn't a problem.

Like a reflex, I rest my hand on the black leather satchel that may as well be an extension of my body. Inside are critical emergency essentials: a sewing kit. Eye drops. Boob tape. A nip of whiskey. Staple gun. Antinausea *and* antidiarrheal pills. There's a lot more, of course, all neatly organized into a color-coded warren of zippered pockets, but my point is that a good wedding planner is prepared for *anything* (just ask me how many uses there are for extra-strength hemorrhoid cream—I dare you).

From my hidden position under an ornate stone portico, I look

out at the large crowd seated for this outdoor wedding ceremony and quickly glance at my watch. *Seven till. You're still early.* My earpiece is silent, which means my two assistants, Mark and Phoebe, aren't dealing with any emergencies inside. I let out a breath and force my shoulders down from where they're trying to get cozy with my ears. At this point, I'm usually like one of those overeager helper fish that cling to more majestic marine life, ready to clean up anything that might annoy my client. But my bride, Jasmine, asked for a moment alone with her mom, so I stepped outside.

I'm considering going back in to check on them when a flash of white catches my eye. I turn to see Jasmine striding toward me, her gown flowing like a Renaissance painter's dream. Golden hour sunlight streams through the rambling rose garden to kiss her skin and upswept hair. It's a moment dying to be put on the glossy cover of a New England bridal magazine, and it very well might be.

Larkwood Estate—where I both live in a tiny guest cottage and work—is a blend of architectural styles that I would personally classify as “Fairy Tale.” Vines of ivy and climbing roses tangle in a romantic battle over the creamy-gray limestone walls, while turrets and leaded windows seem to guarantee the existence of a secret library.

It's the kind of place you dream of living in when you're six years old and *Beauty and the Beast* has been permanently burned into your retinas. Or, when you're thirty years old, still reeling from the worst breakup of your life, and desperate for a place to live out your dissociative Romantasy dreams. Not that I'm speaking from personal experience or anything.

“*Gracie!*” Jasmine calls to me in a half-whisper as she approaches. I shove down my souring thoughts and return her beaming smile.

“You look radiant,” I whisper back, glancing at the seated crowd as she grasps my hands in hers. “How are you feeling?” I ask, pulling her deeper into the shadowed portico. “Ready to go?”

“Of course. Sorry I came outside—I just needed some air. I can't believe the moment is here.” Jasmine's eyes well up, threatening to overflow, and my hands are already leaving hers to open Kit.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Here,” I say, once I've found a dainty white handkerchief. “Dab—don't rub.”

“Gracie, you think of everything.” She chokes back a laugh, delicately dabbing at the corners of her eyes.

“That’s my job,” I reply with a smile, even as my regularly scheduled wave of sadness begins to swell. Jasmine tries handing back the handkerchief, but I shake my head. “Keep it. You’ll probably need it again.”

While Jasmine tucks it into the bodice of her gown, I press a button on my earpiece.

“Hey, Mark, we’re nearly ready. Could you bring out the wedding party? I have Jasmine with me.”

“You got it, on our way.”

The next few minutes feel like the backstage of a Broadway show if all the actors were emotional wrecks, but with Mark’s help, I can handle it. This is only my third year of coordinating weddings, but I’m a fast learner. I’ve had to be, ever since I planned my stepsister’s wedding here, and the owner of Larkwood decided to bring me on permanently.

Her offer couldn’t have come at a more desperate hour, and my gratitude—the undying, eternal variety—is why every single “big day” I’ve been entrusted with *has* to be perfect.

After directing the wedding party into formation, I send Mark to check in with the wedding band. As he rushes away, I make eye contact with Kyle, the lead violinist of the string quartet I always hire, despite his firm stance on not brushing his hair (“Bridesmaids love it, Gracie!”). I hold up a one-minute warning finger and press the button on my earpiece to check in with Sofia, my childhood best friend and lead photographer.

“We’ve got walkers,” I say softly, knowing only she’ll get my *Walking Dead* reference. “I repeat, we’ve got walkers.”

“Roger that, Ring-Slinger,” comes her familiar voice. “In position.”

My palms begin to sweat, despite the perfect, June-in-Rhode Island weather. Have I mentioned weddings are high stakes? At any moment, the maid of honor’s secret flame for the groom could combust. The four-year-old ring bearer could mistake his precious cargo for shiny Cheerios. The groom’s questionable choice to pound a beer

with his groomsmen right before the ceremony could manifest in an ill-timed burp.

But so far, everyone is holding it together. I take a breath. Giving Kyle the thumbs-up at last, I dart behind a pillar so I'm not in the photos as the first notes of Canon in D rise from the quartet. The crowd turns in unison toward the portico, and I signal for Jasmine's mother to start walking. The procession unfolds until it's time for the big moment. The crowd gasps as they catch sight of Jasmine and her father for the first time, perfectly framed within the carved stone archway covered in ivy. Right on cue, my eyes close.

After months of planning a wedding that would give Martha Stewart herself the warm and fuzzies, this moment should make me feel triumphant. But instead, it only reminds me of everything I've lost. The music swells, and my tear ducts launch a stinging Pavlovian response. It's not something I can control—trust me, as a double Virgo, I've tried. So instead, I hug Kit to my chest like it might be able to mend the ripped seam in my heart—sadly, the one thing it doesn't carry a remedy for.

There was a time, before Larkwood became my postbreakup fallout shelter, when the only wedding I thought I'd be planning was my own. Back then, I was starting a bridal wear line, ignoring my ever-growing mountain of debt, and happily hoping for *him* to pop the question.

So much has changed since those naive days. Now, as a single, debt-riddled, cottage-dwelling hermit who lives a hundred yards away from where she works, securing my own Happily Ever After seems about as likely as this particular groom not sweating through another shirt (he's on his third).

Before I'm too tempted to slide down this pillar and directly into the fetal position, I hear a voice I can only describe as crisp and crinkly (much like its owner).

"You better be reminiscing about the ménage à trois you had with that carpenter and acrobat and not moping over Kevin again."

A reluctant smile tugs at my lips as I look at my boss, Agatha. I'm fairly tall myself, but Agatha is taller. At a sprightly eighty-four years old, she's all sharp angles and long limbs, perpetually draped in

eye-wateringly bright colors. Today, she's in a head-to-toe fuchsia ensemble that was probably shipped directly from Paris. Paired with poker-straight silver hair and her signature "just try me" expression, I'd probably be terrified of her if I didn't love her like a grandmother.

"It's Calvin, not Kevin," I remind her, even though saying his name feels like unzipping the contents of my chest and watching them plop onto the cold stone floor. "And I'm definitely not reminiscing about a *ménage à trois* I never had."

She squints an eye at me. "Are you sure you didn't? I swear you gave me the most *lurid* details about the acrobat's—"

"No, Agatha, I didn't," I whisper nervously, taking a quick peek at the wedding guests. Thankfully, they're too enraptured by the bride to hear her. Agatha isn't exactly in the habit of lowering her voice. Ever.

"Hmm. Must be a memory of my own. Forgive me, dear. Going senile," she says with a wink.

"Agatha, if you're senile, then the rest of us are hopeless," I say distractedly. Jasmine and her dad are halfway to the spectacular Victorian arbor covered in white roses, and no one has vomited or started sobbing uncontrollably. *We're almost in the clear.*

"I never get tired of this," Agatha comments softly, pulling my attention from the ceremony. "Seeing my home become the starting point of someone's Happily Ever After." She pauses before saying, almost to herself, "Larkwood was meant to be a place of *hope*. Of new beginnings."

My heart squeezes. A new beginning is exactly what Larkwood and this woman have given me.

The night of my stepsister's wedding, she found me crying in a corner of the ballroom while my whole family cha-cha'd real smooth across the dance floor—fully unaware that I was in the middle of a quarter-life crisis. Between my breakup with Calvin and the swift death of my business, which followed, the bottom of my life had officially fallen out and caught fire.

But after confiding in Agatha—a sympathetic stranger I had no expectation of ever meeting again—she offered me a job on the spot. And even though she isn't in touch with modern costs of living and

nearly every precious cent I earn is swallowed by the black maw of my debt, Agatha is the only reason I'm not still sleeping on the lumpy pullout in my mom's basement.

"It really is," I agree, trying not to let the sigh that escapes sound too woe-is-me. Reflexively, I slide my thumb down my unadorned ring finger.

Agatha's eyes cut to mine, and the look she gives me is too all-knowing for my comfort. "He was never going to be your happy ending, sweetheart," she says, like it's a simple fact. "That's something you'll need to make for yourself."

The tightness in my throat turns into a full-fledged lump. Our relationship has always been this way—she might be my employer, but there are times when I suspect she wanted a granddaughter more than a wedding planner when she hired me. Maybe she knew I needed her, too.

"I know that," I say gently. "But sometimes I just . . ."

Her features soften with understanding. "Want to get laid?"

I can't fully repress my surprised laugh, and the cellist nervously glances in my direction.

"No, Agatha," I whisper once I've composed myself. "I was going to say that sometimes I wish I could find my person, too."

Admitting this to anyone feels humiliating, but Agatha has already seen me in my rock-bottom sweatpants and helped me remedy my DIY bangs decision, so it's only up from here.

"The only way you're going to do *that* is by forgetting about Kevin and meeting someone new," she says.

I don't mean to snort, but my nose does it anyway. Unless my meet-cute happens in the Sad Food for Wishful Singles aisle at the local Stop & Shop, meeting someone new seems highly unlikely. "I'm not like you, Agatha." I look down at the simple black dress and blazer I wore specifically to fade into the background. "I don't emit a homing signal for the single and fabulous."

"Oh, tosh. You look like Audrey Hepburn with an ass," she says succinctly. "Who doesn't love an Audrey with an ass? Nobody *I'd* associate with." She sniffs. "You're smart, hardworking, and far too kind for your own good. Kevin has no idea what he's missing."

“His name is Calvin, but . . . thank you, Agatha,” I say, more than a little touched. “He definitely doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

I say this with confidence because we haven’t had any form of contact since we split. Not unless you count the one—fine, *three* times—I’ve snuck onto his Instagram to torture myself with photos of him bonding with his fellow finance bros over happy hour drinks.

“That’s the spirit, honey,” Agatha says, rubbing my back. “You know, come to think of it, my grandson is outrageously handsome and single . . .” She trails off, like this thought is occurring to her for the first time, and not the five-hundredth time since I’ve known her. “He lives—”

“In Providence and doesn’t visit nearly enough,” I finish for her, thinking of the few glimpses I’ve caught of him from behind my cottage windows. I know he’s tall. That he has carefully schooled, dark wavy hair. He’s also always in a suit, he always brings her peonies, and Agatha flat-out refuses to introduce us until I ask her to. Which will be exactly never.

She gives me a wicked grin like she can tell I’m replaying every look I’ve ever gotten of him. “I’m not pushing,” she pushes. “But just say the word and I’ll accidentally bring him over while you’re scantily clad.”

It’s not . . . the worst idea. Not the scantily clad part—that *is* terrible. But maybe meeting him. The truth is, I haven’t tried dating anyone since Calvin, and yes, I’m *well* aware of how pathetic that sounds.

My phone starts vibrating, and quickly, I peek around the column to see Jasmine and her fiancé clasping hands while the officiant speaks. “Sorry, Agatha, I’m getting a call.”

I take my phone out of my pocket but immediately drop it onto the cold flagstones after seeing the caller. Because it’s not Mark or Phoebe. It’s a video call . . . from *Calvin*?

“Oh my god,” I say, crouching down and gingerly picking the phone up like it might detonate. My heart becomes a helicopter in my chest. *Calvin* is video calling me. *Why*? Is this the world’s most tragic butt-dial? Or is my secret hope—that he’d grow up a little and realize he let go of the one person who loved him best—about to come true?

Remnants of our last conversation come back to me like darts to the chest. *We're just in different places right now, babe. I'm not ready for the picket fence. Maybe when we're older . . . who knows?*

"Well, are you going to pick it up and give him the finger, or should I?"

Agatha's voice is crisp and businesslike, yanking me back into reality. I try swallowing nonexistent saliva. "I'm going to pick up. Please, Agatha. Keep an eye on the ceremony and let me know if something, I don't know"—I flap a hand—"catches fire."

She harrumphs something about what she'd *like* to see catch fire as I speed walk farther into the shadowed portico. With a last anxious ruffle of my short bangs, I take a deep breath and accept the call.

## 2



# GRACIE

Gracie!” Calvin’s handsome face fills the screen, and ten thousand memories I’ve tried to keep buried claw their way to the surface. He’s smiling, his dark blond hair slightly damp, like he’s just showered. I inhale and swear I can almost smell his scent of sandalwood and mint. “It’s been forever, how are you?”

Speaking. Words. Conversation. The last three decades of experience in these fields are suddenly insufficient. “Cal, hi,” I say eventually. “This is unexpected.”

He pulls an apologetic face, eyebrows pinching above deep-set blue eyes. “I know, I’m sorry—I didn’t catch you at a bad time, did I?”

I glance toward the wedding ceremony I’ve been hired to ensure goes perfectly, and then to where Agatha is blatantly eavesdropping, looking every inch like a bad-tempered flamingo.

“Um, it’s fine! Great, I mean. I’m coordinating a wedding right now, but I have a minute. Is everything okay?” And by that, I clearly mean, *Are you calling to reveal the unwavering torch you’ve carried for me all this time?*

His grin is back, this time wider than before. I’d forgotten the way it gives him those smile lines around his eyes and—

“Everything’s good, good! I’m calling about a wedding, actually. I know we fell out of touch—totally my fault, you know how bad I am at that stuff—but I pop onto your socials once in a while and know you’re planning weddings these days. You look fantastic, by the way.”

At his completely unembarrassed admission to some light social media stalking, sparkling possibilities spring into my mind like foregone conclusions. I imagine him telling me his sister is getting married, and would I be interested in planning it? Maybe discussing it over dinner and a bottle of red?

“Thanks, Cal, you look really great, too,” I say a little too earnestly. “Whose wedding are you calling about?”

His grin slides into something sheepish, and he rubs the back of his damp hair in a gesture I remember all too well. “The thing is . . . well, believe it or not, it’s mine.” He looses a nervous laugh, as though he can hardly believe it himself.

For a long moment, all I can do is stare, hoping I’ve misheard him or that this is some kind of punishment nightmare for finding finance bro vests remotely attractive. Absently, I realize my jaw has dropped, right along with what feels like a bowling ball, into my stomach. I’m pretty sure it’s my heart.

“I know.” He chuckles, oblivious. “I’m the last person anyone expected to get engaged, but I guess when you find the right person . . .” He lets out a sigh, and I swear his eyes go heart-shaped. “You’re done for.”

“Right person,” I repeat through numb lips. All this time, I told myself I was letting go and moving on. But now, all I can think of is the single sentence I’ve been grasping onto since he ended things. *Maybe when we’re older . . . who knows?* Six words. Six words that have fueled my most pathetic fantasies. I’ve never felt so fucking embarrassed. I begin to shake, and suddenly, getting off this call is more important than my next breath. “Congratulations, Cal. I . . . I’m happy for you,” I manage. Barely. “But listen, I have to go. The ceremony is finishing up and—”

Calvin sits up, his relaxed posture disappearing. “Gracie, wait. I haven’t even gotten to why I’m calling. The thing is, Brooke and I are in a pickle.”

*Brooke.* Suddenly, my worst nightmare has a name. *Why couldn’t it be Mildred?*

“The thing is,” he goes on, “we’re looking to get married in early August. Maybe even at the end of July, if possible.”

My wedding planner brain auto-calculates how long he'd have to plan. "That seems doable," I say. "Fifteen months is more than enough time."

"No, not next August," he corrects me. "*This* August. As in, a little over two months from now."

I blink. "Cal, that's . . ."

"Aggressive?" He chuckles. "I know. But the venue you work at is stunning, and I swear we'd be the easiest clients. Brooke and I don't have time to plan this anyway, so you'd have complete creative control."

"*Me?*" I ask, tempted to look around in case there's another wedding planner hiding in the rosebushes. Until now, it was plausible that he was calling for advice or a recommendation. But at the revelation that he thinks *I'm* the woman for the job, my body temperature quickly begins to climb.

"Look. I wouldn't have asked you, but we *have* to get married in August, and I don't know anyone else who can, or *would*, help us."

For one unthinking millisecond, my traitorous heart has the urge to swoop in and save the day, just to have him back in my life. Just to get the approval I've always craved from him. But the indignity of this task quickly smothers the feeling and then whacks it with a hammer.

"But why the rush?" I ask, redirecting the conversation away from me and the outrageous suggestion that I'm going to help him with this. If he were to set a reasonable date, then he could have his pick of venues and planners—specifically, anyone but *me*. His *ex-girlfriend*. "Surely you both want to enjoy your—" I pause, getting control of the sudden urge to vomit. Or rev a chainsaw. "Engagement," I finish.

This time, I'm not the only one who looks a little queasy. "Ah, well, the thing is . . ." He pauses, looking down at his knees before meeting my gaze again. "I'm going to be a dad." He lets out that disbelieving laugh again, his face turning pink with wonder and nervous joy.

A rogue tear escapes down my face. "Oh my god," I say faintly. I blink down at myself, trying to clear my eyes and half expecting to see a well-aimed spear sticking out of my chest. "A baby. C-congratulations."

The words are automated. A knee-jerk nicety, as all my thoughts are shot down midflight.

“Aw, Gracie! Look at you getting all choked up. That means a lot,” he says, like he has no recollection of my own dreams of having kids with him someday. To create the stable, affectionate family I never had myself. He smiles, and the first spark of anger in my chest feels like a flame trying to catch in a drizzle.

“Brookey is only a few weeks along,” he goes on, “but she wants to tie the knot before she pops. She’s got a *really* conservative family.” He grimaces, and I consider ending the call in protest to that nauseating nickname alone. “A big wedding is important to her, so . . .” His voice softens. “It’s important to me, too.”

It’s too much. His audacity is beyond the pale, and before I can stop myself, the words slip past my defenses in a quiet tremor of hurt and disbelief. “Is this some kind of cruel joke?”

He looks aghast. “Gracie, no. God, of course not. I didn’t mean to—” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

“You didn’t mean to what?” I demand as anger begins to burn through my shock. “Ask the ex you completely ghosted to *plan your wedding?*”

To his credit, he looks appropriately ashamed.

“Gracie, please,” he implores. “I’m sorry. I know you’re the last person I should be asking, but I’ve never met anyone as organized or creative as you. You’re the only person I know who could pull this off, and I’m desperate.”

At his flattery, the old, familiar urge to please him rears its head again like a Whac-A-Mole dummy I’m too slow for. This time, it takes more effort to remember that he *knows* I’ve never been able to say no to him. But even I can recognize that what he’s asking is ridiculous to the point of absurd. There isn’t a wedding planner in the universe who’d be willing to take on a two-month timeline.

Patience finally snapping, I say, “Why don’t you just elope? I’m sure there’s an Elvis out there more than happy to do the job.”

Calvin shakes his head. “Absolutely not. Brooke’s parents would never forgive us, and I won’t have them shaming my wife.”

*My wife.* It's another spear to the chest, but at this point, I'm basically an Edible Arrangement sans the fruit. What's one more barren skewer to the heart?

"I can't do this," I whisper, half to Calvin, half to myself.

He shakes his head and leans forward. "Listen," he says desperately. "I know I fucked things up between you and me. I ran away when I shouldn't have, and you didn't deserve it. But neither does Brooke, and neither . . . neither does my kid." He stares deep into my eyes, vulnerable in a way he's never been with me before, and my heart turns over like an engine failing to start. "I love her, Gracie. I love them both, and I want to do this right. *Please*, help me get it right this time. You're my only hope."

I swallow around the softball lodged at the back of my throat as misguided sympathy renders me speechless. He's asking too much. I have enough on my plate as it is without the added trauma of helping him marry the woman I'd hoped to be one day. Of course I'll say no. I have to.

But at his desperate face, careful compliments, and the first hint of an apology I've ever gotten from him, I'm somehow *not* mashing the End Call button when I know I should. Instead, I'm biting my lip, losing a desperate fight against the ingrained urge to avoid disappointing anyone—including Calvin and his pregnant fiancée, who only want the same things I've always wanted. *Safety. Security. Happily Ever After.*

Already, justifications for my bad decision are swirling in my mind. Haven't romance novels taught me that everyone deserves a happy ending, even if they've made mistakes? Calvin and Brooke are never going to find another wedding planner or venue willing to work with this timeline. I honestly don't even know if I'd be able to pull it off. I let out a caged breath. I need to say no, and yet—

"Can you give me a few days to think about it?"

His blond head pops up like a meerkat's. "Yes! Of course! Gracie, you have no idea what this—"

"I haven't said yes," I tell him. "I need to check my calendar and . . . things." And by *things*, I mean my sanity.

“That’s fine, take all the time you need. I mean, don’t take too long.” He laughs nervously. “But thank you, Gracie. From Brookey, too.”

I repress the urge to gag. “Goodbye, Calvin.”

I end the call and promptly collapse against the cold stone wall. I close my eyes and hear a cheer go up, like 150 people are applauding my idiocy. *The ceremony is over.* From pure muscle memory, I press my earpiece and check in with Mark and Phoebe. When they give me confirmation that they’re ready, I know I’ve got approximately two minutes to pull myself together before I need to make a thousand carefully timed details flow seamlessly together.

I crack open my tear-stung eyes, telling myself to stand up straight, only to find Agatha striding toward me in a fury of pink. I expect a reprimand. Maybe a small slap to the face. But instead, she pulls me from the wall herself and hugs me. The scent of Chanel No. 5 engulfs me, and I let out a small sob.

When she whispers into my hair, her voice is soft. “That man deserves castration.”

I gulp down a small laugh. “Agatha, don’t—”

She pulls back to hold me at arm’s length. Her dark eyes scan my face as she purses her bright red lips together. “But you’re still going to help him, aren’t you?”

When I don’t confirm or deny it, her face softens. “Well, he was right about one thing. You *are* kind. A little too kind for your own good sometimes.”

“I could tell him no if you’re against it. I could tell him we’re completely booked,” I say, even as the guilt I know I shouldn’t feel begins slinking through me.

“The decision is yours, Gracie. Larkwood is open to them, but only because I think this might give you the closure you need. If you do this, you *have* to promise me you’ll try to move on.”

*Closure.* The elusive word that’s been outrunning me for the last three years. Maybe this is the way I find it at last. “I promise,” I tell her.

She smiles and pats my cheek. “That’s my girl. Now dry your tears and go after that bride and groom before they trample my rosebushes. I’m going up to drink champagne in my bathtub.”

I can't help my smile. "Of course you are."

The look she gives me is long and tender. "You're going to be okay, sweetheart. You took it on the chin today, but getting back up is what's going to make you stronger."

"Do you think I'll find it, Agatha?" I ask in a quiet voice. "My own Happily Ever After?"

She smiles. "You'll find your great love, Gracie. Something tells me he'll be the *last* person you suspect. But remember what I said earlier. Your Happily Ever After is up to you. Not me, not the future love of your life, and certainly not *Kevin*."

I nod shakily, feeling an almost irrepressible urge to tell this woman, who has been more nurturing to me than my own family, that I love her. But then she's gone, striding off in a twinkle of jewels before disappearing behind the heavy wooden door.

I'm . . . not okay. I'm whatever the opposite of okay is to the power of infinite *Brookies*. But I wasn't okay the night Calvin left me either, and I managed, didn't I? I built a new life for myself, and right now, Jasmine and her family are depending on me. I wipe my tear-streaked face and straighten my back with the confidence of someone who knows that—at the very, *very* least—her day couldn't possibly get worse.

And that's when one of the beautiful white doves released at the ceremony flies beneath the portico, becomes confused, and shits directly on my black blazer.

# 3



## GRACIE

They say when you think things couldn't possibly get worse, that's when they do. Actually, I have no idea if "they" say that at all, but it's the waking nightmare I'm currently living in, so I guess it must be true. Because Agatha . . . is gone.

I blink rapidly, trying not to cry again as the third funeral speaker drones on about Agatha's generous charitable donations. Nearly everyone here is a politician, since Agatha's daughter is the attorney general of Rhode Island. But in this sea of sensible pantsuits and manufactured condolences, grief is a fist slowly crushing my rib cage. Nobody mentions the way she would throw her head back when she cackled or how Elizabeth Taylor used to call *her* for dating advice. None of them know how much she meant to me.

She was found in her bathtub last week, the day after Jasmine's wedding. Heart failure, of all things. Even now, it seems ludicrous to the point of impossible that the woman I knew—with her zero-tolerance policy for bullshit and unflappable belief in the power of love—would succumb to failure of the heart. In the wake of her loss, the organ beating in my own chest feels enfeebled. As though it's suddenly wondering what chance it stands against the battering ram of life if *Agatha Larkwood's* could simply give out? I suck in a calming breath, smoothing out my handmade dress.

In the last week, I put aside all the complicated feelings sewing

brings me and re-created the only black dress Agatha would have approved of. It felt like a way to honor her, since she continually asked to see my work from Grace & Veil—my failed bridal wear design business that cheerfully lowered me into the ninth circle of hell (also known as high-interest debt repayment). Sewing after so long had been cathartic, and even though I couldn't afford the genuine satin of the original design, I think I did it justice. I think . . . I think Agatha would have loved it.

The politician steps away from the podium, and I'm hoping it's the last colorless speech I have to sit through when someone from the front pew stands up. Immediately I recognize the hair. The height. The perfectly tailored suit. *Agatha's grandson*.

He walks slowly up to the podium, head bowed. In the cool, dim light of the church, his carefully tamed waves are nearly as dark as his suit. An irrepressible curiosity to finally see his face, and perhaps a hint of Agatha's, has my stomach muscles clenching.

He turns, facing the room at last, and the hinge of my jaw goes slack. The first look I get is of his pale profile. Dark brows, ruler-straight nose, and a soft mouth. His clean-shaven jaw looks like it was designed with a T square and blueprints. The words *outrageously handsome* float back to me in Agatha's voice, and that's before he even turns to face us completely. When he does, I lose any pretense of gazing politely and segue neatly into ogling.

Without looking at anyone, he places a wooden box on the podium and raises the mic by about a foot. He opens the box, and for a wild moment, I think I'm about to see Agatha's ashes. But then he pulls out . . . *a party hat?*

I lean forward, sure I'm mistaken, but no—it's a metallic gold paper cone with a pink pom-pom on top. The church goes silent. No rustle of fabric, no covered coughs, *nothing*, as with complete seriousness, this solemn man in his solemn suit stretches the elastic band and carefully positions the hat on his head at a jaunty angle. He follows this spectacle by reaching back into the box and pulling out a shocking pink feather boa, which he loops precisely behind his neck and over one shoulder.

Then he looks up. His eyes are startling, but not just because they're the color of burnt caramel. It's the way he's glaring at all of us with distinct disapproval while wearing a children's party hat and matching feather boa. Like *we're* the ones acting inappropriately.

"Good afternoon," he says in a voice that's deep and serious. "My name is Jude Larkwood, and I was lucky enough to be Agatha's grandson." Emotion briefly tightens the muscles around his eyes, and he visibly swallows. *Jude*. I turn his name over in my mind like a ruby, realizing only now that Agatha exclusively referred to him as *my grandson*. I never asked her for more details. Never wanted to show interest in him when my heart was so firmly elsewhere. But now, as I see him muster control over grief as unwieldy as my own, the urge to somehow connect with him—with someone else who loved her—is overwhelming.

"As others have mentioned before me," he goes on, "my grandmother was a remarkable woman, known for her generous patronage of the arts and her commitment to preserving Larkwood Estate—one of Rhode Island's greatest architectural treasures. But these are facets of her life that mattered little to me as her grandson." He swiftly brushes a hand beneath his eye. "You may be expecting me to speak about her tenderness. The warmth of her embrace. Perhaps about the cookies she'd bake for me as a child. But she was never that kind of grandmother. The truth is, the nana I grew up with was far more likely to sneak me into a cocktail bar with her theater friends and keep me behaving with sips from her dirty martini."

A small whoop goes up at the back of the church, where those late-arriving theater friends have gathered. Disapproval ripples through the crowd, but all I feel is an invisible rope and grappling hook launch itself directly from my chest toward this man. He *knew* her. Really knew her.

"I don't tell that story to disparage her character," he goes on, "but, instead, to celebrate it. And to also partly serve as an explanation for the last part of my eulogy." He removes a folded piece of paper from the box. "I was one of the lucky few who visited her in the weeks leading up to her passing. When I did, she insisted she didn't know when the world would be deprived of her sparkling presence

but gave me firm orders to wear these . . . accessories at her memorial when the day came to pass. She also instructed me to read a poem she'd written to—and I quote—'breathe a little goddamn life into the affair.' So without further ado," he continues, unfolding the paper before him, "the words my grandmother chose to be remembered by." He clears his throat, raises his cleft chin, and says in his resonant voice:

*"There was an old girl from Larkwood,  
who was often misunderstood.  
Except when she lifted  
her fine skirts and insisted,  
that handsome gents take a tour of her goods.*

*"Now she's gone and it's shocking  
for all the blokes who came flocking.  
They'll miss her sweet smiles,  
her money and wiles,  
but mostly how she had their boots knocking."*

He finishes in a tone more appropriate for reading Sylvia Plath, reaches into the box one last time, and pulls out a party horn. He blows it once, the paper unrolling with a loud *toot*, and the laugh that rockets out of me in a spasm of joy and heartache is uncontrollable.

Jude's eyes snap to mine, and I realize with dawning mortification that the rest of the church is completely silent—even her theater friends managed to keep their respectful silence. His eyes widen slightly as he gets a good look at me, and my face becomes the new primary heat source for the Earth. But then, he smiles. It's just the smallest quirk at the corner of his wide mouth, but it transforms that invisible cord between us into an electrical conduit, pulsing with unexpected connection. A corner of my own mouth twitches upward, like a tug on our string.

Jude blinks like he feels it, then drops his lashes. "Thank you, everyone, for coming." Without looking at me or anyone else again,

he gathers the items on the podium, removes his party accessories, and walks back to his seat.

I let out a breath when he sits. A woman with dark auburn waves and a similarly square jaw, who I assume is his mother, rubs his shoulder as the priest returns. He closes the service, but I barely hear any of it. My eyes are locked on the back of Jude's head, and I'm already plotting the best way to corner him at the canapé table later. It's probably—no, definitely—a terrible plan. He's grieving, and I'm sure he doesn't want to be accosted by a stranger who basically wore a Halloween costume to his grandmother's funeral.

But in the week since Agatha passed, there hasn't been anyone I could really mourn with. And maybe I'm just desperately projecting my own need for connection, but the way he held my gaze in mutual understanding felt like passing a note in secret. And more than anything else, I need to unfold it.



Entering Larkwood's ballroom in a stream of other funeral-goers, I'm a woman on a mission. Since leaving the church, my need to talk to Jude has condensed into a sharp and specific hope—that maybe if I tell Agatha's grandson how much I loved her, the regret of never having told her myself will feel a fraction less crushing.

Thanks to his height, he's not hard to spot. He makes his way slowly through the crowd, responding to greetings with a reserve that strongly encourages people not to chitchat. But I refuse to be deterred by this, *or* by his cheekbones, which seem biologically designed for intimidation.

Dodging other guests who stare openmouthed at the room's frescoed, velvet-draped splendor, I position myself behind a tall, tropical-looking plant near the bar Jude is headed for. It's the wrong move. The line moves surprisingly fast, and before I can extricate myself and casually sidle up to the bar, Jude is being handed a drink and turning away. He's moments from being greeted by another group of guests, and I stumble quickly from where I'm lurking.

"Jude?"

He turns at the sound of his name, but naturally the spiky plant I've brushed against in my haste decides it wants to hold on to me forever. The long, blade-shaped leaves catch in my carefully swept-back hair, and I rear back a step. Something sharp jabs into my scalp.

"*Shit*," I curse under my breath as I reach up and discover razor-edged leaves that are fully capable of ruining both hair and lives. Desperately trying to unsnarl myself while somehow looking completely chill, I execute a spectacular double-fail. I'm the picture of grace, half bent over with my arms over my head as Jude abandons his drink at the bar and strides toward me.

"Here, let go, you're going to—"

"Ow!" I cry as one of the leaf edges slices across the pad of my thumb.

"Hurt yourself," Jude finishes. I automatically suck the shallow cut between my lips, and then he's standing right next to me. Close enough that I can smell his cologne, which reads explicitly like a fall breeze rustling the crisp pages of a book beside a glass of whiskey. Which is ludicrous and— "Do you mind if I try?"

His voice is deep and soft. Like the kind of feather pillow that seems like a good idea until it swallows your head whole. I release my hurt thumb and raise my eyes to his. As my gaze travels up—and then up some more—I clock every detail of his suit. The expertly cut wool, the elegant roll of his lapels, the perfectly dimpled gray tie. A small, bright pink feather rests on his collar. It nearly makes me smile despite the plant situation, but when my gaze reaches his face, all brain activity dissolves.

Because Agatha's grandson is beautiful. From a distance, it was hard not to stare. Up close, it almost feels awkward *not* to comment on. Like when you're faced with a friend's terrible haircut, only the exact opposite. My gaze stutters up to his eyes, but they're half-shaded as he makes his own curious perusal. It takes me *way* too long to realize he's politely waiting on my answer to his question. *Dear lord.*

"Um, yes," I manage. "That would be helpful. I mean, helpful. And also great."

*Kill me now, Agatha. Take me with you to that infinite bubble bath in the sky and then drown me for good measure.*

A corner of his mouth pulls upward, right along with the blood rushing to my face. I want to explain that I don't get out much. That some exposure therapy to handsome men who love their grandmothers would probably do me some good.

"Okay, hold still," he instructs, before lifting his hands to gently explore my tangled strands with a touch I feel in my toes. He sinks perfect white teeth into his bottom lip.

"I'm sorry, there's no saving it," he says after a moment, looking down at me. "Do you mind if I take your hair down?"

I am a guppy. Unable to do more than blink and open my mouth several, pointless times. Finally, I nod, but it pulls at my scalp, and I wince.

"Don't move," he murmurs, eyes back on my hair. He takes a step closer, and then his hands are pulling pins from my chignon, one by one. The bottom half falls heavily around my shoulders, where it isn't caught by spiny leaves. He hesitates a moment, and then his fingers are sinking into my hair, scraping my scalp and freeing the bladelike leaves. I try not to moan. I'm at a *funeral*. But in my defense, the last person who touched me like this was my hairdresser, and her face doesn't make my brain feel like melted cheese.

"Oh my God, thank you," I say, when I'm free.

"Anything to be grelpful," he responds with a smirk, holding out his hand.

At first, I have the bewildering impression that he's about to twirl me into a dance. But then I see the bobby pins in his palm and flush. *Right*. Because I'm not an eloquently spoken debutante at a ball. We're at his grandmother's funeral, and I'm a woman who gets caught in potted plants and invents brilliant new words. I take the pins and put them in my clutch.

"I'd say you surpassed grelpful," I tell him, feeling no choice but to lean into my word vomit. "That was almost *neraic*."

One of his dark eyebrows lifts. "And that's some variant of . . . *neurotic*?"

"No!" I blurt. "No, it's a combination of *nice* and *heroic*. *Neraic*,"

I repeat, like saying it again might somehow make the situation any less humiliating. It doesn't.

He smiles kindly at me. Like maybe he's used to people completely losing their ability to speak naturally in front of him. "And here I thought you already had an accurate read on my personality."

It pulls an unexpected laugh from me. "I'm sure you can't be too bad," I tell him. "You're Agatha's grandson, after all."

His smile falters and my heart trips over its feet. "You knew her well?" he asks hopefully.

Behind my eyes is a quicksilver montage of my most cherished moments with Agatha. The day she insisted I move into the guest cottage and stop commuting from Providence. The first time she excavated the story of Calvin and assured me that *Every great life needs at least one great heartbreak, darling*. The last time she hugged me, when I missed my chance to tell her how much I loved her.

A tear slips down the side of my nose. "Yes," I whisper. "I knew her."

The step Jude takes toward me is almost imperceptible.

"I could tell," he says quietly. Fervently. "When you laughed at the church."

My shoulders creep toward my ears. "I'm so sorry about that—"

"No, don't be," he says, eyes wide and earnest. "It was such a relief to know I wasn't the only one who—"

"Knew she would have preferred to be scattered at sea on a *Chicago*-themed booze cruise?"

This time, he blows past all the smirks he's given so far and blasts me with a smile so wide and warm, I feel like a cat curling into a patch of sunlight. It cuts smile lines into his cheeks and creases around his eyes, and I'm . . . perfectly fine. Ambivalent, even. Totally neutral over these face-related developments. "Exactly," he says with a laugh that turns into a soft gaze. "I should have known from your dress that you were close with her."

I look down at my careful copy of the world's most iconic little black dress, and a warm buzz begins building inside me. "You recognize it?"

“Of course. Nana made me watch *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* anytime I was in a shitty mood.”

“It was *Roman Holiday* for me!” I beam, half joyous, half be-reaved. *This*. This was exactly what I’d hoped for—a connection with someone I could share my memories of Agatha with. What I didn’t expect was this constant fluttering in my chest after years of whatever the opposite of fluttering is. Sputtering, maybe. His gaze skates over my silhouette.

“It’s a lovely replica,” he says, eyes lingering on the high neckline resting just beneath my collarbones.

I brush a nervous hand through my bangs. “Thank you,” I say. “It was fun to sew.”

His eyes snap to mine. “You *made* your dress?”

I lift a shoulder. “I’ve always loved to sew. It seemed like—” I pause, calming the upsurge of emotion. “Like a good way to honor Agatha.”

Jude swallows. “She would have loved it. But you’re missing your pearls.” His gaze traces down one of my bare shoulders, all the way to my hand, and I suddenly feel like a repressed Victorian, scandalously flashing a little too much elbow. “And your gloves.”

Something small and shameful squirms in my stomach. I don’t want to admit that after buying the fabric, I couldn’t afford the costume jewelry or gloves. “I thought people might take offense if I showed up looking like I’d come for a costume party,” I say instead.

“I’m honestly surprised Nana didn’t stipulate that everyone come dressed in costume.”

My eyes drop to the tiny pink feather still on his collar, and before I can think better of it, I reach up to pull it off, my fingers grazing the soft wool of his jacket. I hold it between us, heart thrumming from my daring move. Since when have I made *moves*? The only moves I make are from the safety of my own mind when I’ve had a little too much wine and think about drunk-dialing Calvin.

*Calvin*. With a jolt, I realize he hasn’t crossed my mind once since Jude saved me from hell’s houseplant. It must be a record, but I suddenly realize I’ve managed to forget not only my ex, but also

where I am—at my dear friend’s memorial. Guilt is like a hard pinch to my heart. There’s got to be some kind of karmic penalty for flirting at a funeral, right? But then I think of Agatha, and a tingle at the back of my neck makes me feel like she’s here, eyes sparkling with delight as she watches us. If *anyone* would approve of me flirting at their memorial, it would be her—especially if it was with her grandson.

And so, gathering my courage, I twirl the feather between my fingers as I raise my eyes to Jude’s. “I think your costume would have stolen the show no matter what.”

He looks dazed, absently raising a hand to where I removed the feather. Then he shakes his head. “I’m so sorry. You know my name, but I haven’t gotten yours.”

I smile. “Is this when I tell you I have to leave, and then accidentally-on-purpose lose a glass slipper?”

“That depends. Do you have any scary stepsisters? Because you should know, as an only child, I’m completely unqualified to handle an evil stepsibling dynamic.”

I grimace, hoping he doesn’t pick up on how close he’s hit to home. When my sports-obsessed mom remarried, she gained my football-fanatic stepdad and the kind of daughters she always wanted. If I had to sum up Brianna’s and Josie’s personalities, it would be with the cheer, “Be *AGGRESSIVE!* B-E *AGGRESSIVE!*”

“Unfortunately, yes. They’re both division one volleyball champions and could easily wield their muscles for evil.”

He sighs. “Well, shit. Guess I’d better practice my serve.”

I’m grinning stupidly and try reining it in. “Or, I could just go easy on you. My name is Gracie. Gracie Holland.”

“Gracie,” he repeats softly. “That fits like a glove.”

My chest fluttering promptly turns into a chest rave, and I’m suddenly nervous he’ll be able to see a strobe light pulsing beneath my skin.

“And how did you know my nana?”

I exhale. An easy question. “Actually, I work here. I’m the estate’s wedding coordinator. Your grandmother hired me three years ago,” I tell him.

At this, all the warmth drains from his expression. “*You’re* the wedding planner? The one who lives on the property?”

The sudden alarm in his voice is edged with distaste, and I fumble to respond. “Um, yes? Does my reputation precede me?”

Jude rubs his jaw, staring at an unfixing point over my head like he’s either mentally shredding his good opinion of me, or wondering if I’ll fit in the body bag he keeps in his trunk. *What the hell?*

“Is there a problem with my . . . existence?” I ask, half joking, half desperate to get back to where we were before.

Finally, he looks back down at me, frustration tightening every line of his handsome face. “Frankly, yes.”

I step backward, and suddenly, being closer to the sword plant doesn’t feel nearly as threatening as Jude. *And this is why we don’t flirt with strangers!* a singsong voice chirps inside me.

I rise to my full height. “Well, since I’m so bothersome to you, I’ll go find somewhere else to take up oxygen.”

He lets out an exasperated sound. “Wait, no,” he says as I begin walking past him. He places a hand on my elbow, and I stop, shaking him off. He lets go at once. “I’m sorry. I was just—” He closes his eyes for a moment. “What I meant to say is that your *job* and living situation are the issue. Not you.”

My eyes narrow at the bitter way he emphasized the word *job* because that *job* is basically my whole personality these days. The first tendrils of panic begin curling in my stomach. After Agatha passed, I’d naturally wondered what it would be like to work for Larkwood’s new owner, but keeping my job wasn’t a question. Not when sharing Larkwood as a wedding venue was *so* important to her. Just like the estate’s gardeners and maintenance staff, who have continued going about their business, I’d assumed I was essential. My mouth goes so dry it could be a fire hazard.

“What’s wrong with my job and living situation?” I try to demand, but it comes out like a croak.

For a moment, he looks apologetic. But then his features firm up like he feels completely justified in dealing the coming hammer blow.

“The issue is that your job and living situation are about to disappear. Larkwood never should have been a wedding venue to begin with, and moving forward, it no longer will be. Your termination notice was going to be given on Monday.”

It’s unclear if the roaring I hear is from the surrounding crowd or the blood rushing in my ears. *No*. This has to be another joke. Any moment now, he’s going to grin and say *GOTCHA!* Because after the week I’ve had—after what happened with Calvin and losing *Agatha*—losing my home and livelihood on top of it all seems too catastrophic to be allowed.

“No,” I blurt, when the pressure inside of me builds to a whistling heat. “No, you must be mistaken. It was *Agatha*’s greatest joy to share her home as a wedding venue.”

Jude’s mouth tightens. “Well, it’s no longer her home, unfortunately.”

“Who is even making this decision?” I demand, looking around the room at funeral guests, like I might see someone casually leaning on a pitchfork. “I’d like to have a word with them.”

Jude frowns. “You are having a word with them. I’m Larkwood’s new inheritor.”

My eyes go round, and I’m almost positive the dramatic *DUM-DUM-DUM* sound wasn’t just in my head. He isn’t carrying a pitchfork, but my eyes immediately jerk to his dark waves, searching for horns.

“But you can’t do this!” I exclaim. “I have weddings lined up into the fall. Clients who booked us well over a year ago!” I don’t voice the more personally pressing matter of depending on this job to pay off my debt and generally avoid living under a bridge.

He looks around the opulent ballroom we’re standing in, and there’s no mistaking the bitterness in his expression. “I’m sorry, Gracie, but I’m canceling all upcoming weddings. The person interested in the estate needs it by August, and I need to prepare the property for the transfer.”

Tears spring to my eyes. “But our clients have signed contracts! Is it even legal to cancel their weddings?”