

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS NINETEEN years old the first time I saved Stella Bradley's life.

One of the older boys who lived in a shabby off-campus house had managed to capture Stella's attention. When Stella needed rescuing from these situations, from these men who couldn't resist monopolizing her, she would signal to me. Tuck her hair behind her ear, tap a finger against her chin. But for the better part of an hour, she'd ignored me entirely.

Ascending the stairs, she caught my eye. *He's cute, right?* her shrugging look said. *This one is worth it.* Earlier that year, Stella had declared that she was finished with men. Immaturity and frattish antics aside, the men at our college were simply *boring*, and Stella couldn't stand that. "You know what I mean, don't you?" she had said. "It's just not worth it."

"Totally," I had replied. Which was a lie, and wasn't. Stella's intelligence often surprised me. Her categorical statements seemed silly but were in fact insightful. Are the men you meet when you're eighteen really worth the effort? Well, I had no experience with boys, so what did I know? But I could also see the truth she was getting at.

See, this was why I loved Stella Bradley. There's a lot of bullshit in life, and not many people who can cut through it.

“You’re sure you want to drive?” I had asked, on our way to the party.

“It’s freezing,” she had said, backing out of the lot near our dorm. “And anyway, I’m too hungover to drink tonight.” It was a cold night, a Saturday in the slump of February. She parked her SUV in the driveway outside the house.

Later that night, with Stella occupied, I went home alone. The snow made for a long and slippery walk, but I was warm in a plush down jacket with a fur-trimmed hood—a jacket Stella had lent to me a few months earlier and insisted I keep. I stamped the slush from my feet on the sodden entrance mat to our dorm and fitted the key into our door. Midnight was an oddly quiet hour. The partygoers were still absent, the conscientious students already asleep.

Over the years, I would grow used to this feeling. Empty bed, ticking clock: the chilly vacuum created by her absence. I was who I was because of her. I wanted the sight of her smile, the sound of her laughter, the warmth of her hand on my arm, the sense of her within easy reach. On quiet nights when I was alone and Stella was elsewhere, I wondered how pathetic this was. I mean, really: was it normal to think about another person so much?

But this night, this particularly cold and snowy February night, was only five months into our friendship. As the months turned into years, questions like that would lose their sharpness, and the answers would become irrelevant. What we had—eventually, I would see this—was nothing like a normal friendship.

Around 3 a.m., unable to sleep, I began to worry. Stella had been tired that day. She’d been planning to sleep in her own bed. She said that she had sex like men did, leaving afterward, refusing to spend the night. She had been sober when I left, and would have driven herself home. The boy, behind her, had bounded up

the stairs two at a time. He had looked so pleased with himself. Too pleased.

“It’s me,” I said into the phone. “Again. Call me, okay? I’m worried.”

But my texts and calls went unanswered. Another hour passed before I started to panic.

Something was wrong.

It had been the last stop on my trip. A small New England college, second tier and expensively manicured, what I imagined a country club looked like. On that trip to tour colleges, certain differences stood out. At some schools, I could imagine seamlessly fitting in. The bigger schools, those with vast student bodies and ample scholarships for people like me, room for a democracy’s worth of differences.

This school wasn’t like that. The smaller the club, the harder it is to blend in—I’d learn this repeatedly in the years to come. I lingered at the back of the group. Then someone approached, a shadow blocking the April sunlight in my peripheral vision.

“Nice shoes.” She nudged her foot against mine. We were both wearing black Converse.

I turned and took her in. She was tall and blond and beautiful in a way that suggested glamour and globe-trotting, and radiated the possibilities of serious money. She pulled down her sunglasses, revealing cool blue eyes, and leaned closer. “I’m so bored I want to kill myself,” she said.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “You’ll never get the blood out of that white shirt.”

Her laugh was harsh but amused. “What’s your name? I’m Stella.”

“I’m Violet,” I said.

“Well, Violet, I’m afraid I have no choice.” With a sigh, she hung her sunglasses from her shirt. A white Oxford, top three buttons undone. The weight of the sunglasses tugged the fabric down, revealing an arc of lacy bra. “This is the only place I got in.”

“It’s a good school,” I said.

“It’s a good school for people like me,” she said.

“Which means?”

The tour group was moving on. We followed, slowly.

“Rich,” she said. Then shrugged. “And lazy.”

It was my turn to laugh. She smiled.

“Live your truth,” she said. “Isn’t that what the gurus say?”

“A quarter million bucks in tuition is a lot to pay for your truth.”

Stella laid a hand on my arm. “See that woman?” she said, indicating an older but similarly attractive woman at the front of the group. “That’s my mother. You know what *she* always says? You can’t put a price on respectability.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what that means,” I said.

Stella laughed again. “Me, neither. But she says it with conviction.”

The group was rapt as the tour guide described a stone gargoyle. But Stella was looking at me, squinting. The quality of her attention was at once sincere and ironic, unlike anything I’d experienced before. *Keep talking*, it said. *We’re just getting started*.

“So what’s your deal, Violet?” she said. “Are you going here, too?”

I could hear the thumping music from a hundred yards away. The windows were bright against the darkness. I told myself I

was being paranoid. Stella was probably fine. But then the driveway came into view, and sure enough, her car wasn't there.

The boy from earlier was in the living room, his shirt rumpled and eyes rimmed with red. The die-hard handful of remaining partyers didn't notice me, or the blast of cold air from the open front door. The room was humid with whiskey and sweat.

"Hey," I said, grabbing the boy's arm. "Where did Stella go?"

He swayed as he turned toward me. "Who are you?"

"Her roommate. She never came home."

"Dunno. She left a while ago."

"How long? Like, minutes? Hours?"

"I told her to stay. But she was all, *Ew, no. Your house is disgusting.*" He laughed at his own impression. Another boy was passed out on the lumpy couch, and someone was drawing in Sharpie on his forehead. The boy started to turn away, but I grabbed his arm again.

"Hey," I said. "Her car isn't in the driveway."

"She said she was fine to drive," he said. "I guess she can really hold her liquor."

"She wasn't drinking tonight."

"Oh yeah? Señor José Cuervo would say otherwise. Yo," he shouted as I hurried toward the door. "Tell that chick to call me."

At the end of the driveway, I whipped from left to right, my heart hammering. There hadn't been a single car on the road from our dorm. Stella must have gotten confused, driven in the wrong direction. I started walking that way, deeper into the woods, carefully but quickly. The road was icy and tunnel-like between the tall snowbanks, curving as it hugged the edge of the river. The moon was bright and full, and the stars were thick as spilled sugar.

"Stella?" I called into the empty woods. The sound of my voice, almost erased by the wind rustling the evergreens, was

small and useless. She could be anywhere. How the hell would I find her? “Stella?” I shouted, louder this time.

The road dead-ended. I retraced my steps, and turned down another road. It was nearly 5 a.m. Calm down, I told myself. Maybe Stella was safe and sober. Maybe she’d taken another way home and was already asleep in bed.

After another dead end, then another, my fingers and toes had gone numb. That’s when I saw a glimmer down the road. A shine of metal and glass, easy to miss in the snow.

New York plate, Mercedes medallion, MTK and ACK bumper stickers. The car had veered off the road, coming to a stop against a tree. “Stella!” I shouted, running to the front door. She was slumped over the steering wheel. A trickle of blood descended from her hairline.

“Wake up,” I said, shaking her. She was breathing, but her skin was cold. The blood on her forehead had started to dry. “Wake up!” I shouted again, pushing her into an upright position, shaking her even harder.

She blinked several times. Then she shook her head, her eyes sliding back into focus. “What?” she said. “What happened?”

“Are you okay?” I said. “Is it just your forehead?”

“I’m so tired,” she said.

“Jesus,” I said. “Slide over. I’m going to drive.”

“Last night was crazy,” Stella said the next day, over a late brunch in the dining hall. She didn’t remember how she’d gotten that drunk. When I asked if something had gotten into her drink—“you know what I mean,” I said darkly—she rolled her eyes and said I watched too much TV. She took dainty bites of her toast, stirred a packet of sugar into her coffee. She kept recognizing people across the dining hall, smiling and waving at them.

“Stella,” I said. “This is serious. You could have *died*.”

“You’re so dramatic,” she said. “You shouldn’t worry so much.”

“But what if I hadn’t found you?”

She laughed. “That’s my point. You did find me. So who cares?”

“You’re sure about this?” Diane Molina said, when I told her about my decision.

This was the week after I’d returned from seeing colleges. Mrs. Molina, my history teacher, had encouraged me to apply to the best schools, to every possible scholarship. The fact that I was throwing away a full ride at Duke surprised her as much as it did me.

“I already sent in the paperwork,” I said.

“What do your parents think?” she said, cutting a square of lasagna from the pan, the melted cheese stretching into strings. I had dinner with the Molinas at least twice a week.

“They won’t even care,” I said.

“Of course they will.” Diane frowned. She insisted I call her Diane at the dinner table. “Sometimes you’re too hard on them, Violet.”

“Well, they’re hard on me.” Like a reflex, my finger touched the scar above my eyebrow. My mother liked to throw things—bottles, plates—to make her point. Years ago, when my father took me to the clinic to get the gash on my forehead stitched up, he smiled and told the nurse how clumsy I was, falling on the playground.

“I think you have to be the bigger person here, sweetheart,” Diane said.

Diane was the closest thing I had to a friend in my hometown in Florida, but sometimes she was too nice. Too forgiving. Her kindness didn’t prevent my mother from resenting her. “Teacher’s pet,” she spat, every time I went over to the Molinas’. “You act so high and mighty, Violet. But they’re trash, you know. Those people are trash.”

No matter that the Molinas had college educations and a tidy split-level ranch, and we lived in a mildewed apartment with roaches. Despite how poor we were, my mother was a snob of the worst kind. Teachers weren't better than her. She paid taxes, which meant teachers *worked* for her.

"Not possible," I said to Diane.

"People can change," she said. "You'd be surprised."

Diane knew what it meant to be stuck in the wrong place. She had followed her husband to Florida for his job, and she was determined to make the best of it. Corey Molina was a reporter for WCTV, the CBS affiliate in Tallahassee. Before school, during the segments at 7:25 or 7:55, I'd watch him reporting on local robberies or fires or car crashes. He always arrived late to the dinner table, sighing with exhaustion. My fascination with Corey's work was the real reason I liked spending time with the Molinas.

That night, I was grilling Corey for more detail about his latest story when he laughed and shook his head. "You ask a lot of questions," he said, serving himself more lasagna.

"Sorry," I said.

"Just an observation, not an accusation," he said. To Diane, he cocked an eyebrow. "She'd be a good reporter, wouldn't she?"

She smiled. "She's going to be too busy with her Rhodes Scholarship for that."

"That is ridiculous," I said, though I was flushing with happiness. Those spring days on the eve of my departure felt heady with liberation. I was leaving behind a miserable town and miserable family forever. The freedom was intoxicating. I had just picked a school, and a future, based on a five-minute conversation with a stranger. But when you've grown up without money, and therefore without options, it's liberating to finally make this kind of reckless choice.

“Plus,” Diane said, “she’s got too much moral integrity to be in your business.”

Corey looked at me, ignoring his wife’s teasing. “I mean it,” he said.

As luck would have it, Stella and I were in the same dorm. Within a week, Stella decided that she disliked her assigned roommate. Within a week and a half, the school happily accommodating, given her parents’ donations, I’d switched places with this girl, taking her bed while she took mine. Stella told people that her old roommate had sleep apnea and the machine kept her up at night. The truth, which she told me alone, was that she found this girl pious and mousy.

Got it, I remember thinking. *Avoid those things*. When I passed this mousy girl in the dining hall or library, I gave her a sympathetic smile. I felt sorry for this girl, but I wouldn’t have changed a thing. My position came with advantages.

“You’re Stella’s roommate?” people always said. “She’s so cool.”

A lush bouquet of adjectives described Stella: cool, funny, clever, outspoken, beautiful. Life was a party when she was around. But her personality had byways and channels that were invisible from most angles. Picture a river from above, and the canals and locks that only open when the conditions are right. I saw the parts of her that most people never did.

“Fair warning,” Stella said, as we drove to her house for Thanksgiving that first year. “My parents aren’t really huggers.”

“Mine weren’t, either,” I said.

She laughed. “You talk about them like they’re dead.”

I shrugged. Instead of saying what I was about to say—*they might as well be*—I turned up the radio. Stella liked my cynicism, but only to a point.

“Violet,” Anne Bradley said, shaking my hand as we stood in the foyer of their house in Rye, New York. “It is so wonderful to finally meet you.”

During the pleasantries, I tried not to gawk. To describe the Bradley home required a vocabulary that would take me months and years to accumulate: a majestic white Colonial overlooking Long Island Sound, with a circular driveway and a carriage house. A sprawling green lawn with an orchard of Bosc pear trees, a swimming pool edged in travertine, a dock jutting into the water.

Through that week, I gave them reasons to like me. Stella’s mother found me cleaning up the kitchen after breakfast. Stella’s father saw me reading *The Portrait of a Lady* and complimented my taste; Thomas Bradley had always regarded Henry James as one of our greatest novelists. Anne and Thomas watched me, their polite-but-cool judgment evolving into warmth. They had oysters as an appetizer one night. When Anne demonstrated how to slip them loose from the shell, her guidance was free of condescension, like I was an exchange student from a foreign country.

In good palate-cleansing Protestant manner, the Bradley family always capped Thanksgiving dinner with a brisk walk through the neighborhood. It was freakishly cold that year. Stella looked at my thin jean jacket and said, “That won’t work. Take this,” handing me a parka from the hall closet. It was tomato red, heavy with down filling, the lining slippery smooth. Expensive clothes were like camouflage, or alchemy. During the walk, the Bradleys waving at the occasional neighbor, I liked the idea that—from afar, at least—I blended right in.

“Keep it,” Stella said, later. “You’re going to need a real jacket. I’ve got others.”

Stella had treated it as a *fait accompli* that I’d come home with her for Thanksgiving. I hadn’t even considered going back to

Florida, and Stella didn't question that, which was another reason to love her. "Thank God we saved you from those people," she sometimes said, which was the closest we ever got to talking about my family. My home seemed to exist in her mind as a dense jungle, a tangle of sinister mysteries.

"And my parents love you, by the way," she said, after Thanksgiving. "I can tell."

"Oh!" I said. "Good. Well, I love them, too."

Stella snorted. "You don't have to say that."

"But it's true."

"Really?" She arched an eyebrow. "Then you're a better person than me."

It was, in fact, only half true. I loved the calm and comfort of the Bradley family. But what I couldn't admit to Stella, what I could barely admit to myself, was the underlying calculation. It whirred constantly in the back of my mind. To wind up at a private college like this was luck enough, but to wind up best friends with the most dazzling girl on campus? It wasn't that my personality changed when I met Stella. It was that it *became*, it flourished, because I could say things to Stella that I wouldn't have said to anyone back home—knowing they would only respond with bafflement, or laughter—and she always volleyed right back, sharpening me like a whetstone to a knife. I didn't just want the friendship of this dazzling girl. I wanted the world that had made her so dazzling in the first place. This was a golden opportunity not to be taken for granted. So I paid attention. I studied everything. I learned the vocabulary and the syntax. It was hard work to win over people like Anne and Thomas Bradley. But in the service of a larger ambition, hard work is nothing.

Besides, genetics dictated that I had inherited the streak of darkness in my parents. Overcoming that would take deliberate effort. I'd rip the weeds out by the root, leave the soil rich and

bare. I was certain that if I played the game correctly, I could become someone better. The past could be overcome. Outcomes could be changed.

And through the years, new things grew. My role became firmly established. “Violet’s the responsible one,” Stella told people, slinging her arm around my shoulder, spilling her drink in the process. “And I’m a mess.”

Everyone came to agree on this. Stella Bradley didn’t care about anything. That’s what made her so *fun*. Stella’s credit card paid for spontaneous road trips, lavish meals, and hotel rooms. She made cutting remarks about her family’s net worth as she handed over the platinum AmEx. She liked being rich, but she knew that it wasn’t really *her* money, so she expurgated her guilt with fits of generosity. The fun we had was genuine and real, but Stella was also strategic when she declared me to be the responsible one. My responsibility had a particular utility. Stella had a unique tendency to get herself into binds; I got her out of them. I retrieved her when she was stranded, brought her money when she’d forgotten her wallet, held her hair back when she vomited from drinking too much. I saved her, over and over. *See?* she’d say, when I rescued her from yet another scrape. *See how right I am?*

There was an assumption, shared by nearly every student at our expensive college, that anything was possible. No careers, no avenues were off-limits. Your ambition didn’t have to be circumscribed or compromised. Stella had taught me how to live in this world of long horizons. I imagined the years ahead, the two of us gradually becoming equals. Look at how well the system had taken care of the Bradleys. If I worked hard, wouldn’t it take care of me?

NECESSARY PEOPLE

But that, I eventually realized, was naive.

Stella opened doors for me. She showed me how confident and outspoken a person could be. Even a young woman, whom the world is not inclined to take seriously. I learned by watching her, witnessing the power of her charm and confidence. I loved Stella, and beyond that, I needed her. This life wouldn't have been possible without her.

But the things you need when you're nineteen years old aren't the things you need later. People change. Relationships change.

There would be a test in the years to come. Could I do it without her?

Or, more accurately, could I do it in spite of her?