

Praise for *The Violet Hour*

“*The Violet Hour* is a bighearted, juicy tale that turns on the knotty, necessary ties of family and friendship. Victoria Benton Frank serves up a delicious, hilarious, wise, and, well, frank tribute to learning how to step out in the world as your own woman and take a big ol’ bite.”

—Anna Godbersen, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Luxe series

“It turns out that hope has a color—it’s Violet! In this emotional page-turner, two best friends, Aly and Violet, are reeling from loss. This is a novel of reinvention and resolve as they find their way forward. Victoria Benton Frank has taken her place among the great southern storytellers who write of love, food, and family as the centerpieces of a happy life. *The Violet Hour* is a glorious read.”

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Praise for *My Magnolia Summer*

“Victoria Benton Frank shows that she is the rightful heir to the crown of summertime storytellers. Her mother would be so proud.”

—Ann Patchett, author of *Whistler*

“A tale of the complicated relationships between mothers, daughters, and, let’s not forget, sisters—this enchanting novel will bring romance and sunshine to your summer reading list.”

—Elin Hilderbrand, author of *Swan Song*

“Proving that when things fall apart, indomitable women come together, *My Magnolia Summer* is enchanting, hilarious, and insightful.”

—Patti Callahan Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Story She Left Behind

ALSO BY VICTORIA BENTON FRANK

My Magnolia Summer

The
Violet Hour

A NOVEL



VICTORIA
BENTON FRANK



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To Carmine

The
Violet Hour

PROLOGUE



Violet

I was born with salt air in my lungs and pluff mud between my toes. As a girl I wore seaweed in my hair and seashells around my neck. I was raised knowing the tide tables along with my ABCs. I knew not to swim in August or April, because I didn't want to keep company with the jellyfish, and I understood that oysters were best in the fall. I took my afternoon naps alongside the dunes and learned to walk lightly on the hard-packed sand. My backyard was the ocean, and I would always call it home. Although I am named after a spring flower, I am an island girl.

There is something different about women who were born by the sea, baptized in salt water, and raised by the tides. We were mermaids, adapting to the temperamental whims of storms that brewed beyond the shores. I lived at a different pace than the people on the mainland. We called it "island time." We moved a little slower and smiled to ourselves at the city people. The thick humid air bound us to a secret only we knew: life was a little sweeter at the beach.

Being born on an island meant you were also in tune with nature. All women are daughters of the moon, but our relationship is strengthened by the ocean. Along with the water, we belong to her phases. I grew up with an appreciation for the cycle of life because I saw it play

out so clearly in front of me. I respected the ocean because it deserved and demanded it. I knew there were places that would swallow you whole if you weren't careful. Riptides took out a few clueless tourists each summer. Us island folk knew better. Oceans are not always joyful; in fact, very quickly the water can turn dark, roll in and roll out to cover and uncover deep secrets. The ocean, if it wanted, could make you lost forever. Reaching up and pulling you into its mouth, never to be seen again. People have gone missing at sea for as long as we have ventured out on her. The ocean is beautiful, but also wild and mercurial. The beach at noon is not the same beach at dusk.

We appreciated the gifts of the ocean and understood how it could also take away.

Anyone born next to the rolling tides of Sullivan's Island knew a lot about the natural world, especially its weather. Island people know about hurricanes. They will tell you crazy things happen during hurricanes. Tragedies, too. Heart attacks and early births. I had lived through many storms, but as all island women knew, we were always ready for the next one.

Somewhere along the way, though, I had become timid about life's storms. I had learned to keep my mermaid nature wrapped and hidden. If I had an inner siren, she'd become muzzled in the process of growing up. I'd grown scared, I guess, that if I let my hair out of its tight bun, if I acted on my wild and tempestuous impulses, I would lose control and then be truly lost at sea.

This is the story of how I found myself, out there in the storm, and learned my own true nature.

CHAPTER ONE



Violet

It was a balmy almost afternoon on Sullivan's Island, and I decided to escape from my desk for once, take my work outside and enjoy the beautiful afternoon. There was a gentle clinking of wind chimes, danced around by a breeze that promised a hotter tomorrow. The bright Lowcountry sun was spilling out through the palmetto fronds, warming my shoulders and bathing me in golden light as I spread out a handmade quilt on the soft grass that surrounded Gran's garden. It was all lovely, but my mind was on work, on the wedding I had to photograph tomorrow, obsessively going over the checklists that helped me keep track of all the shots I needed to capture between the ceremony and the cocktail hour, memorizing the wedding party names. It was all that planning, those little touches, that had put me in high demand among the brides of Charleston.

Summer was right around the corner, and the wedding season would be coming right along with it. That meant good money for a girl in my line of work, but it also meant a lot of old dreams were about to be right up in my face. For a moment I got distracted by the wind chimes and the heat of the sunshine, allowing myself to slip into the cushions of my imagination and fantasies of another life.

It was comfortable living at my gran's. I had originally moved in to

help her recover from a surgery she'd needed after an accident a little over a year ago, but then my business had started to take off, and it just made sense to stay. She was finally starting to get back to her normal self. I helped with the cleaning, but she'd make us dinner most nights or order takeout. I had some wounds that were slow to heal, too, and things were simple there. It was great to have company, and I could dedicate a lot of time to my photography.

The home I used to live in, back when I thought I was going to live that picket fence life, was currently being rented out. I got good rates for it on Airbnb (Charleston was a hot destination these days), and I was glad to have an excuse not to live in that house all alone.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, taking me out of my head and back into reality. I picked it up, expecting a frantic message from one of the brides who'd contracted me to shoot their upcoming weddings. But it wasn't that. My chest got tight, then filled with sweet air at the sight of a message from Chris, my boyfriend—or ex-boyfriend, I guessed. Our status was, well, complicated. The family life we'd planned together had been snatched away, but we still owned that house in Byrnes Downs together. For almost a year now, he's lived in Japan on a job that was meant to last only a few months. We were in touch, though. Part of me thought I should move on to new things, but I liked that easy familiarity and the sense that there was someone out there who cared about me, that we could start up again at any moment and it wouldn't be starting over from scratch with someone I didn't know at all.

I tapped open the message.

Hey, I got an alert for funds available in our shared account . . . do you know what that's about?

Oh shit. My stomach dropped. I *did* know what that was about, though I hadn't planned to tell him about it yet. Or maybe ever?

Though maybe he deserved to know I'd been renting out the house. Squirreling away money for who knew what. My fantasies changed all

the time. A Vera Wang gown for a harbor wedding, or a Caribbean elopement?

That's weird, I typed.

Had I sent the last renters the wrong account number? This wasn't the kind of mistake I usually made. Had I somehow done it subconsciously—like, accidentally on purpose? I *had* been really busy. And I'd tried to simplify some of my admin when I was putting in a few security measures—a camera, a lockbox—and maybe I'd mixed a few things up?

I'll look into it.

For what seemed like a long time he didn't reply, and then for what seemed like an even longer time those three dots rippled in the gray speech bubble.

Then his response came, and my stomach dropped again.

Violet, I miss home.

My heart started to race. This was not a normal message to get from Chris. Our exchanges these days were almost entirely practicalities about the house—making sure the flood insurance was up to date, that kind of thing. Sometimes he would text to tell me about a strange or cool discovery he'd made. Mostly pictures of food. It hadn't been romantic in a while.

Everything okay?

We have a lot to talk about. I think I need to come home.

Well, you are overdue for a visit.
I'm sure you miss your Bessinger's Barbeque.

My words were easy breezy, but my fingers trembled as they hammered at my phone.

That's not all of it, Vi, although I do miss their pulled pork.
That's not what I meant by home, though.
I think I miss us.

I stared at the screen on my phone.

I guess on some level I had been longing for a message like this, a direct plea that we go back in time, or forward in time—that we form a real, official couple again and sign up for all the official couple things. But now, clutching my phone, I felt nervous. Maybe I was projecting anyway. Did he mean he missed seeing us regularly so we could all hang out? Or did he mean *us*, like us sharing a home again, and maybe a bed?

I felt a little foolish. One *I miss you* and I was imagining the whole domestic world that had almost been ours but had been flung back into orbit. I chewed on a fingernail.

Speaking of nails, I hadn't gotten a manicure in a hot minute.

My mind whirred with insecurities, little fears—what would he think of me now? I had a lot of lady maintenance to do if he really was coming home.

Somewhere along the line, after my world was turned upside down, I didn't recognize myself; I didn't know anymore what I used to know. New corners of my heart had been ripped open, and what had mattered before seemed to hold less space now. I had buried my grief in work. I had become sharp and laser focused on becoming the most successful photographer in Charleston. If my chance of having a more domestic life was taken from me, I figured I'd better commit hard to something else. I shifted, placing myself in the center of my own attention. If my work got good enough, was noticed by someone at *New York* magazine, say, then maybe I could transition and do some editorial work, or even travel a little. I was a new version of myself, and I was still figuring her out.

How much of the old me was still in there? The one who was a perfectly toned size four? The one who knew exactly where the salad fork went, and how to write the perfect thank-you note? That was the version Chris and I both knew. But I had changed since he'd been gone. My time now was spent in the gym or working on my photography. My weekends weren't open to days spent on his boat; they were

spent at weddings, or in the darkroom, or at my computer editing. When Chris said he missed me, I wondered if he meant the old me.

He didn't know the Violet I was trying to become, and maybe I didn't, either.

The door of Gran's truck slammed and out popped my sister, a blaze of copper red hair floating behind her as she ran toward me.

"Hey, girl, whatcha doin'?" she called out, crossing the yard.

We were so different, my sister and I, though we'd always been close. I was small, and Maggie was on the taller side. I had dark, straight-as-an-arrow hair; hers was wild, curly, and red. Her eyes were green; mine were brown. She was loud and impulsive; I was quieter, more calculating. I liked tradition, and she broke the mold. So dating Chris, who happened to be my sister's ex-boyfriend, would always make me feel a little naughty, whereas Maggie got a kick out of seeing us together. On some level the fact that Chris and I got together probably let her off the hook. It had been my opinion, and still was, that she was a fool for letting him go, but the pull of New York City made her heart sing louder than he did.

She plopped right down next to me and sent up the perfume of garlic. Maggie—my sister the chef—brought her work with her wherever she went. She stretched out, rolling her pant legs up and leaning back to accept the sun's kiss. She shook out her hair so that it caught the sunlight, lit her aflame.

"How goes the kitchen?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, another day, another review for the Lantern," she replied with just a hint of bravado. "Lots of pressure, but I'm whipping out some classics."

"Like what?" I was still feeling a little unnerved by the Chris thing—my mistake, and his comment—and wanted to be told something good.

"Like a mussels dish in a saffron cream sauce with garlic toast."

That explained the garlic smell. My mouth watered a little. "Yum. I'm sure that will be a hit."

"When in doubt, go French to impress," Maggie replied with a wink.

“You’ve come a long way from the Fire Department Cook-Off.”

She grinned at me. “I had those boys beat when I was in high school.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied, grinning right back. “The article from the newspaper is still framed on Gran’s mantel.”

“As it should be.” Maybe Maggie noticed my grin slipping, because she tilted her head and asked, “What’s up?”

For some reason, I didn’t want to tell her about the text from Chris. I didn’t want to admit to myself, much less to her, the hopes it had kicked up inside me. Instead, I asked, “Do you miss New York City restaurant life any?”

“Sometimes.” My sister shrugged, released a sigh. “But I learned I don’t need to chase destiny up the coast. I have everything I need to achieve my dreams right in my own backyard.”

Maggie ran our family’s restaurant, the Magic Lantern. It was an institution on Sullivan’s Island, right up the road from our childhood home. Our great-grandmother Daisy started the place and handed it down to her daughter, my grandmother Rose, who handed it down to my sister, Magnolia, or Maggie as we all called her.

“You look dark, Violet.” She squinted in my direction, sizing me up, coming to one of those snap big-sister judgments. “You need some playtime.”

“Maggie, my fellow workaholic. You of all people should understand. I have zero free time, except for the next thirty minutes, and I’m actually working. See my pretty planner?” I held up my perfectly color-coded planner, complete with a violet cover and containing a very full to-do list.

“That’s exactly why you need to rekindle some old friendship flames and maybe catch a date? Stop working for a moment.”

I couldn’t help laughing a little at the irony. “You should talk!”

“I know, I know. But Sam is all I need.”

Must be nice, I almost said, but I managed to hold my tongue.

Sam was Maggie's doctor boyfriend of a few years. He was a catch—I knew, because I used to date him. Yes, if you are keeping score, then that's correct—we kind of swapped boyfriends. Sounds scandalous, I know, but in truth there was no juice in that fruit. He was the kind of catch that didn't really do anything for me. We were better as friends, and he was just right for Maggie somehow. He was a good southern man from an old Charleston family who had been farmers for about a hundred years on Johns Island, a barrier island off Charleston.

"I have Aly," I said. Aly was a new friend, but we had become close fast.

"That's not the same. Speaking of needs," Maggie said, a twinkle in her eye. "You could use your coat shined."

"Coat shined,' good lord, Maggie." I giggled at our family phrase for, well, *you know what*. I hadn't had sex in . . .

But Maggie, not noticing my embarrassment, forged right on ahead. "Time to dust off one of your Lilly Pulitzer shifts! Maybe wear less black? Jimmy just moved back, you know—he needs a companion. A single girl—I won't do, shacked up as I am. So maybe y'all will go out?"

Jimmy was our childhood best friend. He was the best dancer, the best dressed, and he had the sweetest heart I'd ever known. He was loyal to a fault and had looked out for my sister and me since our sandbox days. But he had gotten closer to Maggie when they were both living in New York, and I hadn't seen him in a minute. "I thought Mr. Hollywood was too busy for us. Where is he living?"

"He's technically a soap opera actor; is that considered Hollywood?"

"How should I know?"

"He's here for the summer, staying with his aunt on the island. His show doesn't film in the summer."

"It'll be good to have him around again." I bit my lip, resisting my sister's suggestions. "I wouldn't even know where to take Jimmy. Except for wedding venues, that is. I'm so out of it."

"Vi, your sister is a very important chef in Charleston. Maybe try

a new restaurant? You know I love Vern's. Their chicken is totally Last Supper status." She made a playful face and said, "Maybe loosen that tight ballerina bun?"

These days, I never had a single hair out of place; it was always the same style. I slicked it back with my wax stick, parted it down the center, and wound the rest of it into a bun so my hair was off my neck. It had become my signature look.

"Yeah, we could do that. I'd like him to get to know Aly, too," I said noncommittally. "I haven't been to a restaurant other than the Magic Lantern or a banquet hall in a long time. Maybe the three of us could go out? Or the four of us?"

"Violet, what's wrong?"

"Well . . ." It hurt when I swallowed just then, but I figured I should come clean, tell Maggie what was on my mind. My weird little secret, and the emotions coursing through me. "Chris sent me a text today." For a moment, Maggie didn't say anything, so I added, "Just house stuff at first, but then he sent an 'I miss you' text."

"Not the 'I miss you' text; come on, Violet! Don't fall for it!" Maggie groaned.

"I'm not falling for anything, Maggie." My words were tumbling out of my mouth fast and defensive. "But he might be coming home."

"Yeah, okay. Who cares? Why would he send you that? I thought the romance department was closed with that guy."

"That guy." I must have repeated her words a little too sharply, because she flinched at the sound.

"Violet, I love you. I'm not saying this to start a fight; I just think you need to be careful with him. Why would he send you an emotional text out of the blue . . . It seems fishy."

"Does it? I mean, we own a house together; it can't be totally out of the blue . . ."

"Don't you dare say you told him you miss him too." Maggie's eyebrows were about at her hairline.

“Maggie, I’m not going to pretend like the fire is totally out. I wonder sometimes how things could’ve been if—”

“Stop, I’m not entertaining that, and you shouldn’t either. Have you told Chris about the Airbnb thing yet?” she asked.

My irritation with my sister faded as my guilt welled up. “No, not yet . . .”

I mean, I should feel guilty. I was lying by omission. I had initially done it just to get a little extra cash for house maintenance and didn’t think Chris needed to know about it, but it proved lucrative, even more so once I moved into Gran’s and could rent out the whole house. Not that I had shared the money with him.

“He’s on the deed!” Maggie said.

“I know I need to tell him. I’m just waiting for the right moment . . .” I looked at my toes, which, as it happened, could really use a fresh coat of paint.

“You are always waiting for the right moment for everything . . . but you know when the right moment comes? Never.”

I didn’t have an argument for that.

“So, speaking of the wrong moment, Mom’s coming home soon.”

“Yeah, back from another European adventure.”

“At least we’ll have Jimmy to roll our eyes with. Hopefully this time won’t be so dramatic.”

“It’s Mom we’re talking about here,” I said. “There’s always drama.”

Maggie nodded. Just like that, we were on the same team again.

Our mother was a true handful, to put it mildly. After years spent as an aspiring ballerina, she had a warped relationship with food and a tendency toward the operatic. Years ago, when we were small, our father died in a motorcycle accident after a dance with some narcotics. That woman was no stranger to drama.

“Is Gran inside?” Maggie asked me.

“Yeah, she was knitting something in her chair and dozed off. She’s been sleeping for a while now, so we might want to head in.”

“Huh, she okay?” Maggie jumped up and disappeared into the house.

I followed her but stopped at the gallery wall of pictures by the stairs and straightened out the framed image of Grandmother Daisy that was always falling to the left. I tiptoed in to find Gran staring out of the glass door that overlooked the marsh, a wistful look on her face.

“Gran?” I whispered.

“What? Oh!” She collected herself and gave me a glancing smile. “I was just remembering.”

“Something sweet, I hope?”

As she turned to face me, she gave me the once-over. “What’s on your mind, Violet?”

“Nothing.”

“You look like you’re hiding something.”

“I’m not hiding anything . . .” It was hard to lie when Gran was staring right at me. With a sigh, I admitted, “Chris wants to come home.”

“Oh, lord. How do you feel about it?”

“I mean, I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“And right when Lily is coming home, too.” Gran reached out and cupped the side of my face. “It all happens at once, doesn’t it? You might want to go see Malory over at Stella Nova Salon. I know I always feel better when my hair’s looking good. If Chris is coming home, he needs to see what he’s missing.”

“How do you know I want him to miss me?” I smiled and put a hand on my hip.

“Violet, I’ve known you since before you knew yourself. You’ve been moping around this house, not going on any dates. You two almost made a family together. It makes sense. You have unfinished business. We all know you miss him, even if you are busy with work. Maybe he’s made some mistakes in the past . . . but so have you, right?” She gave me a warm smile. “Everyone likes second chances!”

It took a special bond to be able to speak like that to each other. I was grateful when she did that, cut right to the chase. She always saw

through me anyway, and her saying it out loud gave me permission to feel what I was feeling. The little tug at my heart made me realize I was actually excited to see him, too.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile.

“There you are,” Maggie said, emerging from the next room. “I was looking for you in the other room—Violet said you were in your chair. Keeping secrets, are you?”

“What? No . . .” Gran glanced from Maggie back to me. “I was just going out, actually. Want me to pick you up something to eat?”

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m meeting up with Aly at the Co-op.”

“Then have a shower, Vi,” Maggie said.

“Okay, y’all, I get it. I’m going to see Malory tomorrow; everyone relax.”

“Thank goodness,” Maggie teased. “Did you tell her to caffeinate?”

“I’m sure she knows she has her work cut out for her. It’s been a minute,” I replied, catching my reflection in the mirror. How long had it been, exactly? They had a point. I had stopped caring about my hair; I just tucked it away and went to work. But I had stopped making time for things like hair appointments. I had just been so busy making everyone else look good. All my brides needed to capture perfection, yet a woman’s hair in the South was a very serious matter of pride and, according to my mother, fifty percent of a woman’s looks.

“Gross, Violet!” Gran said, swatting my hand away from my mouth before I had a chance to bite my nails.

“Y’all, I’m going to run over to the Nail Place on Main Street.”

“Yeah, you don’t want Chris seeing you like that,” Gran said.

“You’re gonna need a fresh sharp set, in case you need to scratch his eyes out,” Maggie said. She was smiling again, but I still couldn’t tell if she was joking.

CHAPTER TWO



Aly

There will never be a colder Christmas than the Christmas after my mother died. I'm a midwestern girl, but I've lived in Charleston long enough that my internal thermostat isn't set to normal. A little chill in the air was felt much more dramatically here in the South. Yet nothing has ever felt chillier and more vacant than that December. I was a shell of a woman, and I know that now. I was drifting in and out of my days like a ghost through walls. I didn't know how to show up to my own life. I had forgotten how.

They say you are never truly an adult until you lose your mother, and the morning after I lost mine, I had to remember how to breathe. I remember waking up in hot, damp, nightmare-riddled sheets thinking that it had all been a dream. Opening my eyes to a raw new world in which she wasn't, so foreign and strange. I remember telling myself not to attempt anything bigger than micromovements. *Pull back the covers, go to the bathroom, turn on the shower, and then get in it.* Every choice was hard, because I no longer had a mother to care about what I did. She had saturated my entire identity, and that was wonderful. Living without her was like drinking sweet tea without the simple syrup. It quenched my thirst, but it wasn't as fun anymore.

I was still trying hard to thaw out and warm to my life.

My mother was a small-town star. Everyone in Charleston knew her, her stories, and the town lore that she contributed to. She'd expanded her brand in recent years with a line of home goods at Crate and Barn that had gained a cult following in the Carolinas. People still say she was born under a hydrangea bush, one so blue it rivaled the sky. The same color as my mother's eyes and the ribbon she always tied around her ponytail. She was lovely. She moved through rooms like music, like jazz. You could tap your feet to her beat, even if you didn't know the tune. My mother was a true beauty, glamorous and thoughtful. Nothing she did was by accident; every decision was exquisite and deliberate.

She had left our tight-knit family—me, my two siblings, and my father, her soul mate in every sense of the word—a little unraveled. Maybe that's the youngest child's view, but I don't think so. My brother still lived in Michigan, where we were originally from, and my sister was in Los Angeles now. I lived in Charleston, with my dad, in what was once our family vacation home, now turned full-time home, on Sullivan's Island.

I moved in after my mother passed, when neither of us could bear being alone. We'd both grown used to the arrangement.

Grief isn't one-size-fits-all; it looks different on everyone. My dad and I were, for whatever reason, hit the hardest by her loss. Probably because my sister was so busy with her job, and my brother was married with kids. So my dad and I bonded over our shared trauma of losing Callie—Momma to me—and joked that the only good that came from losing her was our newfound closeness.

And here was another layer of complicated heartbreak: I had been working for her.

Callie Knox. She went to New York to begin her career but then moved back to Michigan to start a family. She designed homes all over the Midwest and Texas. She began to put her designs on Instagram and TikTok, and in less than a year she was a full-blown star. People were drawn to her warmth and the beauty of her lifestyle. She always looked as if she had everything together, and, in truth, she always did. She

was glamorous and down-to-earth at the same time. Her genuine personality resonated with women across the country. She went viral with her *Car-Line Confessionals*, where she would talk about the constant struggle for work-family balance. She was relatable and aspirational. In one video she would be setting a table with expensive china, and in the next she would be unloading her dishwasher. I loved her content, despite being her daughter, and so did a whole universe of fans.

When she was younger, she vacationed on Sullivan's Island, and with all her success she had decided that it was time to move here full-time. She and my dad bought a giant house on the beach, and it quickly became our refuge. A sanctuary. When she relocated to Charleston, she opened up a small boutique, where she sold some of her homewares and did a YouTube decorating show, and her brand became more closely associated with the city of her childhood. She had designed a line of linens that seemed to be on everyone's table. A few years ago, everyone had a "Callie mug"—they were *the thing*. I was lucky to be a part of her empire, professionally and personally.

I wanted to be brought in front of the camera eventually, or at least that was the long-term goal. To evolve a single-woman show into a mother-daughter act. But I didn't feel like I had honed my own style enough yet to be worthy of sharing her stage. So I was learning how to be her. She had been grooming me to take over for her one day in the far-off future. She had been on top of her game, so stepping back wasn't on the horizon.

My mother was a force larger than life, but the past summer, out of nowhere, cancer took a bite and didn't let go. We lost her in eight weeks. It was a devastating shock. Dad was absent in his own body without his person. I witnessed him crying for the first time in my life. I figured I needed to keep an eye on him. I left my rented place downtown and moved into the apartment over his garage.

The boutique my mother owned closed the moment we found out she was sick, but I had been keeping her social media accounts going,

maintaining her virtual community. I wanted to keep them true to her—I was afraid to post anything personal, anything of my own. I did post about Charleston, and that seemed to generate more attention. I was trying to find my own style and perspective, but so far all I really posted was old content of hers and pictures of our home, throwback projects, projects she never got around to. I went on trying to still engage her old audience. As it was, her lines at Crate and Barn and a few local stores were still selling, and her cookbooks were in print and stocked at our favorite bookstores.

After attending the College of Charleston, I had fallen into the world of influencing on Instagram. I started by taking pictures of my friends, the things we did for friends, and I threw in a few clever hashtags. I didn't have to do too much work to get people to like the pictures and blogs I was writing. After all, my subject was one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and I hopped on that bus at just the right moment. Charleston had been a hidden gem for too long and was ready to be shared. Not yet the number one tourist destination for the last twelve years in a row, like it is now. As the city got hot, I got more attention. But I was still small-time, as far as my own influence went.

I wasn't putting out viral videos like my mom had, and I wasn't making a ton of money—not yet, anyway. Really all I wanted to do was share what I found beautiful, or delicious, or fun. But on the other hand, once I realized I had an opportunity to make a career from what I was already doing, it seemed foolish not to at least try. My father, who was in finance, had another point of view. He hated the influencer thing. He liked to roast me about that expensive college degree in biology, how it was just gathering dust.

When I started my blog in college, it was right at the beginning of the social media craze. Facebook was phasing out, and Instagram had hatched. It was just my little corner of the internet, where I could share my love affair with Charleston. But now the competition was getting fierce. It seemed like every time I opened my Instagram these

days there was another girl, against another house on Rainbow Row, with a little paragraph about the Lowcountry lifestyle. I felt the pressure to hone my voice into something sharper. I needed my perspective to be unique. I vowed to myself that this summer would be the summer when I found my own style.

Enter Violet.

I met my best friend, Violet Adams, by accident. I was a bridesmaid in a wedding, and she was the photographer. I felt an instant connection with her, and she was so funny, making us pose in creative ways. We became fast friends—she was the native, while I was a newbie to the greater Charleston area. When the pictures from the wedding came back, I was astonished that not only had she made me look beautiful but she had also captured my personality. She had just made me so relaxed in front of the camera. I had never gotten myself to look that way; it was almost as if she had bent the light to make my tired face look angelic.

On this particular morning on Sullivan's Island, it seemed like all the birds were singing. A perfect day for the new beginning I had promised myself. The air was warm and scented with the jasmine that crawled all over the lattice on my dad's porch. My mom had planted it the spring we bought the house, and it had since gone absolutely crazy. The porch looked like it was wearing a cardigan.

As I walked down the driveway to pick up the newspaper, a salty breeze lifted my hair, and I looked up at the robin's-egg blue sky, so bright that I slid my sunglasses down to look at the clouds. Giant puffs reminded me of the cotton pads my mother had always used to remove her eye makeup. It was going to be a good day, a good week, and a great summer. It had to be! The winter had been long and bruising.

But first I needed some coffee.

I found my dad in the kitchen filling the French press. He stood there measuring out his water, dressed in tailored khaki trousers and a lime green button-down. Not one single wrinkle on it, and not one single strand of his hair out of place. He looked up at me through

tortoiseshell glasses and gave me a warm smile, then shuffled over to the cabinet and pulled out a Herend Chinese Bouquet mug. It was my parents' wedding china. I loved that rust color.

"Morning, Minnow." It was the nickname he had bestowed upon me because of my love of swimming.

"Hey, Dad. How'd you sleep?" I gave his cheek a kiss and slid the *New York Times* over to him.

"Not great. But you know I don't sleep very well these days. It's a big bed."

"I think it's time you got a dog, Dad."

"Aly, I do not want a dog." My dad made a face of disgust. "All that hair?"

"They make dogs that don't shed, you know."

"Yeah, but those are froufrou dogs. Real men have Labs, and Labs shed," he grumbled. "And *chew*. Also, there is no way in hell I'd let a dog in my bed."

I sipped my grainy French-press coffee. "What about a cat?"

"Aly, can we be serious for a minute?"

I sat up a little straighter, hearing his tone. "Yes?"

"I am doing a little work on settling Mom's estate."

"Okay."

"The lines you all were working on—Crate and Barn wants to let the collaboration deal lapse, now that Mom is gone."

"No!" It felt like a lance through my heart. That would be like losing her all over again. It was such a big revenue stream for Callie Knox—the whole thing might fall apart without it. "They can't do that."

"Well, actually, they can. *She* was the product in many ways. Her sensibility. Without her as pitchwoman . . ."

"But I mean, someone could take over," I said fast, before I could think what it might mean.

"Someone could." He leveled his deep-blue eyes at me. "What about you?"

“Me?”

“I think you should consider officially taking them over. Otherwise . . .”

I frowned. What he was suggesting was a dream in some ways, but it gave me a sad, scared feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I’m not ready for something like that. I only have, like, five thousand followers. Of my own, I mean.”

“How many does Mom have?” he asked.

“Still over two hundred and fifty thousand.”

“And you’ve been part of maintaining that audience, right? Seems to me like the best, most natural move for you is to officially take over her account and start the crossover.”

“Dad, I’ve never designed anything in my life on my own except, like, a few rooms and that one towel set . . .”

“It’s time, Minnow. You have to start stepping into your own. You can do it.”

Maybe this was the push I needed? But how to go about it? Would I start with interiors as she had done, or should I go directly to the homewares? Or could I do all of it at the same time? My brain was firing before I even admitted to myself that I wanted this.

“You know,” Dad said, putting a hand on my shoulder, “it wasn’t *entirely* my idea.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Your mother used to say you had the star power. And the taste. I stay in touch with Rosemary, your mother’s business manager, and I mentioned this as a possibility. Who else can create like her? Who better than her own daughter? You know the operation. You’ve already done most of the training.” He smiled at me, and I felt that sweet, sad arrow going through his heart like it was piercing mine, too. “You had the best teacher.”

“Maybe.” I knew he was right—I would be good at it, and honestly there was nothing I’d rather do. But something kept my enthusiasm tamped down. “Let me think about it.”

“Good. Think on it, but don’t think too long. This could be a good move for you. And if we can’t find an heir for Callie, first that deal will expire, and then people will stop buying her books, and we’ll have to sundown the operation.”

“I thought you wanted to try to sell the brand.”

“I did, but your brother and sister don’t want to sell. After we talked, I agreed they were right. We can’t lose her *and* her life’s work.”

“You’ve already asked my siblings?”

“Yes, Aly. They each own a share in the company. But the vote has to be unanimous. If you don’t think you can handle it . . .”

“I can handle it.” I spun my mug on the table. That beautiful table we had gathered around as a family, that rust-colored mug she’d chosen when her family life was just beginning. “I just worry that I won’t be as great as she was.”

“Minnow, you’ll be different. I wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t think you could do great.”

The way he was looking at me set off a sunburst of pride in my chest. He believed in me. Mom had believed in me. Maybe I could really do this.

“We did have that idea for the magnolia-scented candle with the glasswork from that artisan on King Street . . . Maybe I could pick that up again?”

My dad nodded. “Give Rosemary a call.”

“Okay. I will. I’m excited, Dad . . . This could be . . .”

“Wonderful.”

“Yeah.” I was beaming now and flushed with adrenaline. “Thanks, Dad.”

My dad turned to the paper as though that was settled.

When he flipped to the business section, I noticed that he’d removed his wedding ring.

And just like that, I fell from cloud nine. “Dad, where’s your ring?” I asked.

“Well, I—” He gestured with his hand. “I have a date tonight.”

I was not proud of my tone of voice when I said, “*A date, Dad?*” My heart was feeling very tight. I mean, I didn’t want him to be lonely, but I also didn’t know how I felt about his moving on so soon.

“Time to get back on the horse.”

“Not a superfan of you calling a woman a horse, but . . .” I swallowed, tried to make myself sound neutral-ish and curious. “Who’s the date with?”

“A woman who—don’t you worry—is age-appropriate and financially comfortable.”

“Oh, so not a gold digger or a bimbo,” I quipped, wishing I didn’t sound quite so bitterly sarcastic. “That’s good, Dad, that’s really good.”

“Your old man doesn’t need that noise.”

“Okay, well.” I filled my cheeks with air, trying to think what a supportive daughter would ask next. “Well, where are y’all going?”

“Chez Nous, downtown.”

“Wow, that’s romantic.”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “That’s the point. Maybe you should try getting out there. You never know who you might meet.”

“I don’t know. My life feels pretty full right now.”

“Okay, Aly, you know best. Except . . . you might need some new shorts. Those look a little worn-out. Can’t be a Callie Knox CEO in shorts like that.”

“They are cutoffs; they are meant to look like this.” I gave his hand a pat, trying to appear breezy and untroubled, then hurried back to my garage apartment. I opened the door to the floor-length gold mirror and took a look at myself. My outfit that day was beach chic—a long-wrinkled button-down and my favorite faded cutoff jean shorts—something Dad would never understand, though my mother would have given him a slap on the back of his hand, winked at me, and said, “Men don’t get it.”

I could feel my eyes start to well up with tears.

It was another sad milestone—how many would there be? The first Christmas without her, my birthday, whenever I had a hard day and

couldn't call her to kvetch. But the past twenty minutes were a special kind of mindfuck. The suggestion that I take over my mother's entire company at the same time my dad was declaring himself ready to start dating.

Grief was a mean little bitch.

Most of my grieving I did in private, not wanting to upset my dad. Whenever I could, I would text Violet.

Dad's got a date.

Oh, shit. You okay?

Nope!

Well, that's normal. Who's it with?

Some woman. He said she's quote
age appropriate.

Let's all pray that means over fifty.

I have a long list of prayer requests.

Girl, me too. Maybe you should go for a swim?

I need one, I think. Go clear my head a bit.

Yeah, do that, then maybe meet up for nails
and then lunch?

Okay. I need to run some things by you, too.

My little apartment over my dad's garage was lovely, but I still hadn't fully moved in. The apartment was a blank space, all white everything. I missed being downtown sometimes, but the serenity of the beach couldn't be beat, and the ocean was excellent for healing a wounded spirit. The window in my bedroom had a view of the water. I could watch the harbor all day long in any weather. Being close to the ocean anchored me.

Today the water seemed to be dancing as it sparkled with sunshine.

I tripped on one of the moving boxes that I had never gotten around to unpacking.

I struggled to find anything in that mess. I walked across to the other side of my apartment, by the kitchenette, and looked out on my mother's garden. Neither Dad nor I had stepped foot in there since she passed. It was her favorite place. The weeds had claimed her herb patch, but the thought of going in there and messing it up hurt. Everything hurt then, and when grief wanted me, it was best to give in and let it pass.

This apartment might be a great place to start. Maybe actually decorating it and making it my own wouldn't just be a great distraction from my broken heart; it could be content for my Instagram account, and my mother's. If I was going to decorate, might as well share it, and maybe this would look like an organic transition onto her account. She had a ton of followers still, and a lot of them still engaged with the account, knowing I was the one curating her feed now. It would be wasteful to just flush that captive audience.

But then another memory of her popped into my mind, a memory of us laughing over a color swatch, and then another of us giggling uncontrollably over some joke when we did a photo shoot together. I loved style and décor because it was something I got to do with *her*. I wondered if I could love it, enjoy it, or even do it without her.

What would she tell me to do?

I sat down at my kitchen table. My throat was painfully constricted. I was missing her. If she were here, she would say, *Go for it, girl*. The same way she told me to go for team captain of the swim team in high school, or encouraged me when I auditioned for the class musical *Annie*. She made me believe I could do anything. I felt her blessing.

My eyes filled up with tears. I could hear her laughing at me and then scolding me for being emotional.

"Momma, I miss you so much. What if I fail?" I said out loud to the empty apartment.

Then I heard her voice again, deep in my heart.

But what if you don't?

CHAPTER THREE



Violet

I took a fast shower and then threw on a black maxi dress. I slicked my hair back into a bun and added some thick gold hoops. When I turned my car on, the radio began playing my favorite song, “Gypsy” by Fleetwood Mac—a good omen.

May was the time of year when either the air-conditioning would be super cranked or the door would be open. South Carolina summers were sneaky. It would be springtime in the morning and the height of summer by the afternoon.

Sullivan’s Island had, almost overnight, become like the Hamptons. I was grateful to already live here, I guessed. Now you couldn’t get a house on this island for under a million dollars, even one of those ratty run-down beach shacks. But it was strange to see my hometown transformed into a playground for wealthy outsiders. People were moving here from all over, snatching the properties, tearing down the houses, and throwing up giant mansions. It was true that with the gentrification came fun shops, restaurants, and some new blood, and let’s face it, the island was more beautiful than it ever was before . . . but sometimes I missed the island of my childhood, unpretentious and unfussed.

Also, a time when you could get a Caesar salad for under thirty dollars.

I rolled down Middle Street, watching groups of people empty out of their Land Rovers and spill into the new chic restaurants or pull their fabric wagons filled with kids in designer clothing—smocked, to resemble peasant wear—while their parents wore linen caftans, espadrilles, fedoras. A part of me wanted to be one of those fashionable mamas, and I wondered if Chris coming home meant I would be before too long. But I also wondered who had the time to iron all that linen and considered their dry-cleaning bill.

That's when I spotted him. The dial of time was turned down. My attention was stolen. My eyes caught sight of a tall, toned, tan man jumping out of his vintage burnt orange Ford Bronco. His white, unbuttoned, crinkled linen shirt flared out with the breeze, revealing an impressive six-pack. His dog popped out, following him. The man and the white Lab. His dark hair shone in the sun, and even at a distance I could see his eyes were bright blue. This was one of the perks of living on an island—everyone was always in some state of undress . . . Actually, that could be a negative thing sometimes, too.

He saw me looking at him, gave me a little nod. I waved back, cracked a smile, and then got startled by the beep of the car behind me.

Oh, lord, help me, I was staring at this strange man and stopping traffic.

What was the matter with me? I hit the gas.

Maybe I needed to eat sooner than planned. I quickly texted Aly, offering to pick up something before, instead of after, the salon. Then the bright bubblegum pink awning of the Co-Op caught my eye, and I knew I had to have their turkey sandwich and an iced latte. Inside, I saw Olivia, who lived a few doors down from us. She was in high school but already working the cash register.

“Hey there, Olivia! I didn't know you worked here!”

“Oh, hey, Violet! Yeah, my first big-girl job. What can I get you?”

“The turkey sandwich and an iced latte.”

“Oh, man, I love the turkey, but have you tried our chicken salad? It has grapes in it.”

“Gimme both, and might as well add another latte.”

As I stood there waiting for my order, looking around at the fun T-shirts, the signs, and the frozen-drink machines, I saw the man with the blue eyes and his dog pass the window, and I panicked and ducked.

“Violet, are you okay?” Olivia shouted, a little louder than I would have liked. I lifted my head to shoot her a look but then realized the man with the abs and the dog had come into the Co-Op. Shit.

I then, stupidly, decided to act like I had dropped my keys.

For a few moments, I did my best improv, pretending to search for keys on the dark concrete floor.

A smooth voice poured into the air: “Can I help you, miss? Did you lose a contact lens or something?” I detected a slight British accent.

It was the man. Bronco, abs, dog, accent.

Double shit.

“I actually seem to have dropped my keys,” I said quickly, before realizing I had them on a key chain bracelet around my wrist. “Oh, I’m wearing them. How silly of me.” I was sounding slightly British myself. What was happening?

I looked up at him then and was lost in the sharpness of his jawline, so pleasantly sprinkled with stubble. Just the right amount. His eyes, beautifully fringed in thick lashes, crinkled when he smiled back at me, flashing the whitest teeth I’d ever seen.

It was probably a pity smile. Jesus. How dumb could I look?

“It’s all right. I’d lose my head if it wasn’t attached to my neck.” The man was probably relieved to turn away from me, inch toward the cash register. “Hey there, Olivia! May I please have the Masters sandwich and a Coke?”

Meanwhile I was still on the floor. Slowly I rose to my feet and smoothed out my dress.

“Sure thing! Violet, your sandwiches are ready! Here ya go!” Olivia said, handing me my bagged lunch. I slipped the sandwiches into my bag and grabbed the lattes in a carrying tray.

“Violet? What a beautiful name. Same as my grandmother.” The Brit gave me another pure white smile. I wondered why full eyelashes were wasted on men.

“Oh, thanks. All the women in my family are named after flowers,” I blurted.

“Oh, that’s lovely. I’m Henry.” He held out his hand for me to take, which I did, and I immediately felt a jolt of fire in my . . .

God, I needed to get it together. Was it possible to be made immediately stupid by a sudden burst of attraction for someone?

“Uh, Henry! Nice to meet you! Like, King Henry the Eighth?” What was happening to my mouth? I was sweating from my armpits and my palms.

“Yes, but I don’t tend to cut off my lovers’ heads,” he said with a sly smile.

“Good news!” I replied, nervously giggling.

“See you around, Violet?”

“Yes, sure. Yes, sir. Your Majesty.” Then I did a little curtsy.

Oh. My. God. I. Was. So. Lame.

“Here’s your order!” Olivia said.

“Thanks,” Henry replied. Then he arched an eyebrow, gave me what must’ve been a polite chuckle, and went out.

Me, I was going to need this coffee to be a little more Irish.

“Wow, that was something,” Olivia said.

“Yeah, let’s all pretend that didn’t happen.”

“You know who that was, right? Henry Tucker. He’s some big shot from London, I guess. My mom got the gossip from Emily down at High Thyme on Saturday. She said he was a big deal . . . Fancy family, I think, or some kind of investor or something.”

“Great, great.” Time to focus on my nails and erase that unfortu-