

VIOLET RAE

The
Valentine's
CHRONICLES

She has a

Heart
OF GOLD

Heart of Gold

Galentine's Chronicles

Violet Rae

Heart of Gold by Violet Rae

Published by Violet Rae

www.authorvioletrae.com

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Prologue

Gemma

“YOU DID *WHAT?*”

I wince at my mother’s screech. This is the confrontation I’ve been dreading.

I left my job at Abraham’s, the high-end jeweler, and after four years of hard graft, I’ve finally made it. And I’ve accomplished everything without my parents’ financial help or emotional support.

College degree? Check.

Apprenticeship with an industry giant? Been there, done that. Okay, it wasn’t a brilliant success, but I’m damn proud of myself for getting through it and seeing out my notice period.

I took what I learned from that experience and poured my heart and soul into launching my business. I’ve plowed all my free time into making my bespoke jewelry and spent the last year turning *Heart of Gold* into a successful online business while holding down a full-time job.

And now that I’ve cemented my position as an independent artist, I’m opening my first brick-and-mortar shop in my hometown of Garland, Colorado, in time for those Valentine’s Day sales.

Trouble is, I didn’t tell my parents what I was doing—until now.

They’ve never shown any interest in my chosen occupation, and I knew things would go downhill fast once they

discovered I'd sunk the remainder of my trust fund into my business venture.

I was right.

My mouth is dry as I look at my mother. She's as perfectly put together as always. Her blonde hair is perfectly coiffed, her makeup subtle yet flattering, and she looks casually elegant in her "loungewear."

She's my polar opposite. Sometimes it's hard to believe we're mother and daughter.

Physically, I favor my father, having inherited his hazel eyes, thicker build, and coloring. As usual, he stands behind my mother, always in her shadow. He likes a quiet life and does precisely what his wife says in order to have one.

It never ceases to amaze me that my brother, Callum, and I have turned out as well-balanced as we are. Our grandparents have a lot to do with it. They thought they were destined never to have children until Grams fell pregnant with my mother in her mid-forties.

Being older grandparents, Callum and I didn't have them for long, but we spent some of our formative years with them before we lost Gramps to a heart attack. Grams followed less than a month later, and I've always been convinced she died of a broken heart. They were together for more than fifty years and doted on each other.

When they died, everything changed.

My mother inherited my gramps' business, and my father quit his job as a salesman to help her run it. She went from a stay-at-home mom who baked, played, and helped us with our homework to the owner of Bridge Financial Services with no time for her kids. The country club, huge house, and materialistic trappings came next. She had everything she wanted except for one thing—neither of her children wanted to step into the family business.

Newsflash. You don't always get what you want in this life, but Megan Stone never got the memo.

Guilt hits me. I've lied to my parents by omission, but I wanted to get everything finalized before I faced their criticisms. Their disappointment in me is nothing new—it's ingrained in every decision I've ever made.

The sad reality is I have more chance of catching a fart in a sieve than convincing my parents my business venture is sound.

But I couldn't keep living a lie. It wasn't fair to my parents or me. And it certainly wasn't fair to Callum, who I swore to secrecy.

Callum is the golden boy who can do no wrong. I've never matched up to him in my parent's eyes. He's handsome, strong, and a genuinely good person. The star student with a promising career as a professional football player until the night when ...

I push the memories to one side. The pain and guilt still cut deeply. Callum and I are close despite my parent's favoritism. No matter what, Callum has always been my biggest supporter, and I needed to share my news about the shop with at least one family member who was as excited as me.

So, today was the day to announce my new venture to my parents. My father will come around in time, but my mother will be more of a challenge. I swear she'd rather staple her tongue to a moving train than have me open a small-town jewelry store—not impressive or ambitious enough for the daughter of Leonard and Megan Stone.

My father reacts to my news with his usual impatient huff and a disapproving shake of his head.

But my mother isn't shy in expressing her disdain. "How could you do this without telling us? How could you waste your trust fund on some trinket shop? Your grandparents would be turning in their graves, Gemma."

I bite my tongue. "It's not a trinket shop. It's a boutique to showcase my jewelry. Gramps and Grams didn't put a single stipulation on how Callum and I used our trust fund. In fact, I think they'd be proud. I'm almost twenty-three, dammit. I'm

an independent woman, and I've worked my ass off to achieve my dream."

"Don't curse in this house, young lady." My mother's mouth is tight with displeasure as she sits on the plush sofa worth more than I earn in six months. "You must find a way out of whatever agreement you've signed with this woman."

"Bette. Her name is Bette. She was my teacher in high school, remember?"

Mom waves a hand dismissively. "There were so many teachers. I can't remember all their names, darling."

Keeping my new business a secret from my parents in our small town hasn't been easy. I specifically asked Bette to keep my identity under wraps until the "t's" were crossed and the "i's" were dotted, giving me time to summon the courage to tell my parents.

I shake my head. "No. It's a done deal. The contract is signed, the shop is leased, and I have a few weeks to prepare for the grand opening."

"You can't seriously expect to make a living selling jewelry in Garland. There's no market for it here," my mother says.

I clench my hands into fists. Once again, she's made me feel like I don't matter. I've spent my life trying to please my parents, and I've always come up short.

No. Not this time.

"I don't believe that. I already have a successful online business, and there's nothing else like it in Garland or surrounding towns. This isn't some spur-of-the-moment decision. I've done my research and worked hard to make this a reality. All I'm asking is that you have a little faith in me."

My mother sniffs. "You could have been married now if you'd stayed with James."

I shake my head in disbelief. "James Alderman? Mother, I dated him in high school for all of two seconds."

If she had her way, my mother would marry me off, have us join their country club, and pop out perfect little grandkids for

her to parade around. She was more upset than I was when James dumped me right before graduation prom.

Her perfect vision of my life isn't working out the way she planned. *I'm* not working out the way she planned. Too much of a tomboy, too clumsy, too spontaneous, too unpredictable. Too much of *everything*.

And things only got worse after the accident ...

Since then, I've tried twice as hard to be the daughter they want. I've tried to make my mother happy, but the life she envisions for me would make me wither up and die inside.

"He would've made a good husband and provider, unlike that boy you used to moon over." Her lip curls in disgust as she says, "that boy."

She means Bentley Cormack.

Callum's best friend.

The guy I gave my heart to.

And the person she blames for the accident.

If only she knew ...

"All I'm asking is that you withhold judgment until you've seen. Opening day is the Saturday before Valentine's Day, and I'd love it if you could come."

My father glances at my mother. "She's our daughter, Megan. We should support her, regardless of whether we disagree with her choices."

Mother sighs. "Perhaps." Her eyes lift to mine. "We just wish you'd chosen differently with your career."

Callum was destined for bigger things career-wise, so they pinned their hopes on me gaining my bachelor's degree and slotting into the family business like the respectful, obedient daughter they always wanted. Guess I threw a wrench in that little plan.

"We love you, Gemma. Don't ever doubt that," my father adds with a reassuring smile.

Don't ever doubt that. How can I not? Actions speak louder than words, and their actions have fallen far short over the years.

I'm pretty sure my mother would rather set fire to her eyelash extensions or trade their five-thousand square-foot house with its exquisite mountain view than come to the grand opening of my little store.

But I'll take what I can get. They're trying, which has to count for something.

"Have you gained more weight?" my mother asks, running her eyes over my abundant curves. "Didn't you try that diet I sent you?"

"No, Mother. I've been too busy. Besides, I have no desire to starve myself—"

"If you just stopped eating those awful toffees you like—"

"Bonbons."

"—I'm sure you could lose several pounds in a few weeks by excluding carbs ..."

I slip into a coma for the next thirty minutes while she spouts the virtues of a zero-carb diet.

I LEAVE my parents and follow the familiar mountain road into town. I've been back and forth to Garland while at college and working for Abraham Jewelers, but I've missed living in my hometown. I almost miss the man who left this place with my heart.

Bentley.

It still hurts, knowing I wasn't enough for him, either.

My heart squeezes as a hot tear slides down my cheek. One of these days, I'm going to have to face my parents and tell them that they need to accept me for who I am rather than the perfect image they've created in her head—one I can never live up to.

I dash my tears away and shake my head to ward off the sudden emotions, causing my shoulder-length chestnut curls to bob around my face. I need to stop feeling sorry for myself. I need to stop pining for emotional support that will never materialize.

As if feeling my pain, my little Chevy whines at the steep incline of the next hill. I swallow the lump in my throat and pat the dashboard. “Come on, girl. Don’t die on me now.”

Garland is over the next rise, and my heart thumps against my ribs in anticipation. I reach the crest of the hill, and my hometown is spread out before me, surrounded by snow-dusted mountains. The Douglas firs are a striking contrast to the blue sky as I weave through a series of hairpin bends before reaching the flat stretch of road leading into the town.

Garland hasn’t changed much since I was a kid. The road morphs into a wider avenue separated by a central divider with neatly trimmed foliage. Wooden benches sit on the sidewalks, and quaint shops line the street—the café, charity shop, clothing store, and homewares store. Also, Valentine’s Kitchen, the bakery owned and run by Natasha Valentine, or Natasha Thompson, now that she’s married to Link, the local mechanic.

I love the sense of community here. Sure, we have the busybodies like any small town, but if anyone is ever in need, people step up to help.

My gaze falls on the shop on the corner. The sign still reads *Bette’s Book Corner* but will soon be replaced by *Heart of Gold*, where I’ll sell my jewelry creations. Pride and joy hit me hard as I park in the empty spot out front.

I received the sign I’d been waiting for in September last year. Bette Sanders, my mentor and English teacher from high school, called to say she was retiring—for the second time. When she left teaching, she opened a bookshop and study area on Main Street, offering her tutoring services for free to low-income families. Now in her early seventies, she decided it was time to hang up her thesaurus and move to the Caribbean to see out the rest of her days in the sun.

Which meant her little shop was available for lease. She'd bought it outright, so I would now be leasing it from her—a woman I trust who's listened to my many woes and grumbles over the years and offered me the maternal advice lacking in my life.

It's a win-win situation. Bette has a source of income while she suns it up in the Caribbean, and I have the opportunity to realize my dream.

I jump out of the car, my footsteps light and my smile growing as I approach my store.

Mine.

The thought never fails to give me a small thrill.

Rifling in my purse, I pluck out the key Bette gave me and unlock the door. The hinges squeak as I push it open, and I make a mental note to oil them before the grand opening.

I flip on the light switch. Nothing. I look up. Hmm, looks like the bulb has blown, but there's still enough daylight to look the place over. My mental "to-do" list expands like my favorite body-shaping underwear when forced to contain my abundant curves.

I wander from the shop floor to the stockroom at the back, envisioning the changes I'm going to make.

Work has already started, but there's still a lot to do before this place is fit for public consumption. Thankfully, the electricians and plumbers are in good working order, saving me a lot of money. I don't have a huge budget, so I've been doing some of the work myself, and rather than being daunted at the prospect, I couldn't wait to get started.

This is my passion, my project, an extension of myself, and the creativity my parents have never valued. In a way, I'm glad they won't see this place until opening day—no point in showing them an empty shell that they'll pick apart with their criticisms. While I can see past the tired décor and the holes in the walls left behind by Bette's bookshelves, I'm not sure my mother will.

I smile wistfully at the faint aroma of old books that still lingers in the air. Bette's enthusiasm as a teacher instilled in me a love of books and made reading and literature fun. She also got me interested in book clubs, which has led to some fantastic friendships.

I think of my girls: Cleary, Devyn, Mandy, Cordy, Tabitha, and Peyton. We're all so different, yet we bonded over our love of books. Our group chat is equal parts emotional and hilarious as we navigate life's ups and downs together.

My phone pings, and I pull it from my coat pocket. As if my thoughts have summoned them, I see the messages I've missed from the girls in our group chat. They're responding to my earlier message about Valentine's Day approaching.

Me: *Valentine's Day sucks.*

Cordy: *Nope. No way! We are not moping on Valentine's Day this year!*

I love Cordy. She's a sweetheart and always so upbeat and positive.

Tabitha: *We always mope on Valentine's Day.*

Tabitha's not wrong. None of us are in a relationship, and it's no secret that Valentine's Day sucks if you're single.

Cleary: *It's our thing.*

Devyn: *It's why we have wine.*

Me: *You have wine. I'll stick to my chocolate liqueurs. Booze and chocolate without the hangover.*

I add an emoji with its tongue out.

Mandy: *And cake! Cake is a must!*

Peyton: *Don't forget book boyfriends. They help ease the ache, lol.*

Cleary: *Especially when paired with "the rose."*

I still need to find out what all the fuss is about with this "rose."

Cordy: *I have an idea.*

I can almost hear the collective groan of our group and snigger at Peyton's next comment.

Peyton: *Wait up. I just need to grab a flak jacket.*

Me: *Oh, lord! Last time you had an idea, we almost got arrested. And I never did find my inflatable dolphin.*

I loved that dolphin.

Devyn: *That was the night I came home with one shoe. Your dolphin's probably with my lost sparkly stiletto.*

Mandy: *Rum and I broke up after the last time we all got together. I can't see a bottle without feeling a little nauseous.*

It's true. It was messy.

Peyton: *See? That's why I keep my nose buried in a book. You girls are dangerous.*

Cordy: *I'm not that bad.*

Cleary: *YES, YOU ARE!*

Peyton: *Cordy, I love you, but you are on a whole other level.*

Cleary: *Peyton's not wrong, sweets. You should come with a special kind of warning label.*

Cordy: *ANYWAY. I think we should make a pact.*

I frown, wondering what Corey has in mind.

Mandy: *What kind of pact?*

Me: *This better not require a blood sacrifice.*

Cordy: *We're all spending Valentine's Day doing something we'd never do.*

Something we'd never do? In my case, that's a list as long as my arm.

Devyn: *Like what?*

Cordy: *Whatever you want. I saw an ad in the paper this morning for a mountain man looking for an assistant for two weeks. Maybe I'll call.*

Cleary: *You aren't serious.*

Cordy: *I'm completely serious.*

My mind ticks over as the idea gains momentum.

Gem: *I like the idea. Maybe I'll take the plunge with that exhibition in the next town. Show off a few of my creations.*

Peyton: *It's insane, but I like it.*

Mandy: *Something we would never do? It's a terrible idea! We don't do things for a reason.*

Hmmm. Mandy has a point.

Devyn: *Fine. I'm in. One of the volunteers at the rescue keeps wanting to fix me up with her nephew. Next time she offers, I promise I'll say yes.*

Cleary: *But do you know the statistics of how many women go off to do something on their own and get targeted by a predator? I have statistics. So many statistics!*

Yeah, Cleary loves her statistics.

Me: *You know what they say—you don't grow if you stay in your comfort zone.*

Mandy: *Gem, that's an amazing idea! Your pieces are beautiful! Maybe you're right. I can't believe I am saying this, but I'm in! I'm going to book that boudoir shoot I've been thinking about.*

Warmth envelops me at Mandy's praise. It's always good to hear that others like my creations.

Peyton: *Well, if you girls are game, I'm doing it too. I was going to send the latest conservation report to the property developer, but I'm going to confront him in person!*

Cordy: *So, we're doing it then?*

Cleary: *I have a work conference in Vegas during Valentine's. But I suppose I could dip my toe out of my comfort zone.*

Peyton: *I'm standing up for what I believe in, and I'm not backing down.*

That's my girl, Peyton.

Me: *Yay!*

Cleary: *Maybe I'll quit the Sheriff's office and become a showgirl.*

Mandy: *I hate wine chats.*

Devyn: *Aw, Mandy, don't blame the wine. Whatever happens, it will all be Cordy's fault! I'm already regretting this.*

Cordy: *I'm actually looking forward to Valentine's Day now. Yay! This is going to be so much fun!*

My girls have lit a fire under me, and a few other ideas of how I can push myself out of my comfort zone pop into my head.

No more self-doubts.

No more sacrificing my wants and needs to please others.

It's time for Gemma Stone to step forward and claim her place in this life.

Chapter 1

Gemma

“I CAN’T DO IT, PEYTON! WHAT THE HELL WAS I THINKING? I can’t take my clothes off in front of a complete stranger.”

“Babe, you’re overthinking it. These artistic types have seen it all before. Besides, the guy’s in his sixties, right? And he works at the university, so you know he’s not some sketchy perv who wants to check out your penis fly trap for shits ‘n’ giggles.”

“Not helping, Pey. And penis fly trap? I wish!” I glare at her on my phone screen, having video-called her ten minutes ago in a panic as my appointment loomed closer.

“Listen, Gem. We all agreed to this pact. And you’re the one who said, ‘We don’t grow if we stay in our comfort zone,’” she says, quoting me word for word from our group chat.

Why the heck didn’t I just stick with showing my jewelry at the upcoming Art Festival in Crystal Peak?

I lean my head against the pillows on my bed with a groan. “Yeah, but that was when I thought I’d only be displaying my jewelry at the local fair, not flopping out my tits for a life drawing. Which was your idea, by the way,” I say with a hint of accusation.

“Because you asked me to come up with suggestions to ‘shed the old Gem and bring forth the new,’” Peyton reminds me, using her most dramatic voice. “You could have taken the skydiving option I came up with. Or the vampire blood facial. Or even the zombie role-play thing at that abandoned shopping mall. But no, I distinctly remember you saying how great it

would be to finally embrace your curves with a tasteful life drawing you could hang over your bed. Out with the old Gem and in with the new, blah, blah. You even used big words like ‘caterpillar,’ ‘metamorphosis,’ and ‘butterfly.’”

“Ugh! I did, didn’t I? But in my defense, I was on a sugar high from the lemon bonbons and chocolate liquors when we made our pact.”

“You and your sweet tooth,” Peyton sighs and shakes her head, sending her long, dark hair dancing around her shoulders. “You know sugar is eight times more addictive than cocaine, right?”

I laugh. “Are you suggesting I start snorting a line instead of popping a bonbon?”

Peyton grins. “Never. You stick to your bonbons, and I’ll stick to my wine. I’ll need a vat of the stuff to confront Mr. Property Developer with my conservation report. What was I thinking? Hey, maybe we can swap? I’ll wax my undercarriage and lounge seductively on synthetic fur for Mr. Life Drawing. You can confront Mr. Property Developer about his ridiculous plans to build a five-star resort in virgin forest with zero thought to the ecological impact on the environment and the habitat of endangered species.”

“You know what? The whole life drawing thing is starting to sound a lot more attractive after that epic spiel. You’ve got your work cut out for you, my friend.”

“I know.” Peyton rubs her temples and sighs heavily.

“Seriously, Pey. I’m proud of you. You’re making a real difference. It takes guts to confront the big guns who think they can bulldoze their way through legislation without considering the environmental impact.”

“Thanks, babe. That means a lot,” she says with a warm smile. “Sooooo, are we doing this?”

I take a deep breath and return her smile. “Yes, I do believe we are.”

“Look at us go!” Peyton chuckles. “We’re like ... Thelma and Louise.”

I laugh. “Hopefully without the whole driving off a cliff and plunging to our deaths part.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Ah, but did they die?”

I look at Peyton as if she’s crazy. “Of course, they did. They held hands and drove off a cliff at a hundred miles an hour.”

Peyton purses her lips. “Maybe a huge eagle swooped in, plucked them from mid-air, and flew them to safety?”

“Or maybe aliens with huge schlongs and ridged tongues beamed them up into their spaceship and whisked them to a tropical planet and gave them orgasms all day long,” I say, getting into the alternate fantasy ending of the movie.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Peyton sniggers. “Like that would ever happen.”

“Which part? The schlongs, the tongues, or the orgasms?”

“All of it. And, please, for the love of God, never use the word ‘schlong’ again. Jackie Collins has a lot to answer for.”

I smirk. “See? This is what I love about you. We have these wonderfully random conversations.”

“Great, isn’t it?” Peyton says enthusiastically. “Listen, I should let you go. You have”—she checks her watch—“one hour to slip into femme fatale mode. Go get ‘em, tiger. I’ll be waiting to hear all the juicy details.”

AN HOUR LATER, I’m feeling less like a tiger and more like a kitten that’s lost its way. I check the time on my phone again. 6.55 PM. My appointment is at 7 PM.

I swipe my sweaty palms down my jeans. This seemed like such a good idea when I booked the appointment—all part of my cunning plan to embrace my true self. But now I’m questioning my sanity as I stand outside the inoffensive red brick building in the next town to avoid being seen by anyone who may know me.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out one of the chocolate bonbons from the packet I stashed earlier and pop it into my

mouth. Sugar courage.

Of course, that's when a disembodied voice asks who's there. I sound like I have a speech impediment as I juggle the bonbon with my tongue and give my fictitious name.

The door buzzes, and I push it open, stepping into the main entrance. Another internal door greets me, which simply says Art Studio. What was I expecting it to say? *Welcome, Gemma Stone. Take off your clothes, and I'll be with you shortly to draw your naked body, bow-chicka-bow-wow?* Yeah, doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

I'm debating hoofing it out of there when the door opens so suddenly I almost inhale my bonbon.

"You here for the naked drawing?" barks a gray-haired man in his sixties. He narrows his watery-blue eyes on me.

My swallow is audible as the bonbon slides painfully down my esophagus. "Um, I prefer to think of it as an artistic—"

"Come in, come in." He cuts me off, opening the door wider and stepping back.

Oookay, then. Not getting the warm fuzzies from Mr. Personality. *Knew I should've gone for the vampire blood facial.*

No way on God's green earth am I stripping down for this guy. I'd rather slap myself around the face with a flesh-eating piranha.

We step into a large room, the walls painted white, giving it a clinical feel. Blinds cover the large windows, and various pieces of furniture are pushed against the walls.

"You know what? This wasn't such a great idea, so I'll be going—"

"You can change over there." He ignores me and points to a screen in the corner. "Mr. C will be with you shortly."

"Mr. C? Oh, so you're not the artist?" I ask, trying not to look and sound too relieved.

Mr. Personality guffaws loudly, which lowers his nasal hair to his top lip and shows off a splendid array of missing teeth. “No, love. I’m the caretaker of this building. Mr. C got caught on a phone call and asked me to let you in. I’m done for the evening, so I’m off now.”

With that, he’s gone. He moves like a ninja for a man in his sixties, leaving me standing here like a prune.

My phone buzzes, shaking me from my stupor, and I pull it from my purse to see a text from Peyton.

Peyton: *Are you there yet?*

Me: *Just arrived. Leaving soon.*

Peyton: *What? No! Don’t you dare! You’re there now. You’ve done the hard part.*

Me: *Um, I think getting naked is the hard part.*

Peyton: *You don’t have to get naked straight away. Did you bring your robe? And your jewelry?*

Me: *Yep.*

Peyton: *Okay, so not naked ... yet. Don’t back out now. You’ve got this, Gem. Don’t let anyone steal your magic, especially you.*

“She’s right,” I say aloud, stomping into the changing room. I place the bag with my robe and sexy lingerie on the chair and yank off my T-shirt and bra. “This is all about me. I’ve let others define how I see myself all my life, but not anymore. Nope. I want to see myself through the eyes of an artist and—”

“I like the tattoo. Very appropriate, Gemstone,” a deep voice rumbles from behind me.

I squeal and scramble for my shirt to cover my bare breasts. I’d know that voice anywhere, and only one person calls me Gemstone ... but it can’t be ...

The goosebumps breaking over my flesh, tightening my nipples, and sparking a throb between my thighs, say differently.

I slowly turn to face the man who's entered the room, and my brain fires in a sequence.

Mr. C is Bentley Cormack.

My brother's best friend.

And the only man I've ever loved.

Chapter 2

Bentley

I FINISH MY PHONE CALL AND SIGH, RUNNING MY HAND through my hair. It's been a busy week with moving back to where I grew up.

After years of living in Denver, I needed a change. At first, the buzz of the city was new and exciting—a far cry from the sleepy vibe of my hometown, Garland. But lately, the sheen has worn off. The frantic pace of living and the crippling workload at my previous tenure left me burned out, with no energy for my passion.

Somewhere along the line, while teaching the dry facts of fine art to mostly uninterested students who treated the subject like a fucking vacation, I lost the desire to create magic with pencil and paper. I needed the mental space to create in a less chaotic environment.

Drawing is my passion, superseded by only one thing, or rather, one person. But I left her almost seven years ago. Staying would've only weighed her down.

Call it a coincidence or a quirk of fate, but when Rocky Mountain University of Art offered me a short-term tenure close to my hometown with a ridiculously good salary and accommodation provided, I couldn't turn it down. Having the apartment right above the art studio was an added bonus. Their previous lecturer had a heart attack, and the university was looking for someone who could start immediately. Having recently resigned from my tenure in Denver, the timing couldn't have been more perfect.

I quickly check the appointment book to remind myself of the name of the client waiting downstairs. I inherited the apartment and the appointment list of the former art professor—which currently details one name, Gigi Summers. Guess my predecessor wasn't that busy.

Gigi has paid for a course of private life drawing sessions.

Grabbing my sketchpad and pencil, I descend the stairs and make my way through the connecting door into the studio, only to frown when I find it empty. I asked Gerald to listen for Gigi's arrival while I took my phone call. He was supposed to bring her through to the studio so we could talk a little before her session. People often get nervous about this kind of thing, and I like to put them at ease before we start.

Muttering reaches me from the changing room screen, and I almost stumble back a step as a curvy ass appears from behind it. A voluptuous goddess has her back to me as she yanks off her T-shirt and bra, revealing a smooth expanse of skin. A brightly colored gemstone tattoo decorates her lower back, and she has a peculiarly shaped birthmark on her shoulder that I would recognize anywhere.

"This is all about me," she mutters passionately to herself. "All my life, I've let others define how I see myself, but not anymore. Nope. I want to see myself through the eyes of an artist and—"

"I like the tattoo. Very appropriate, Gemstone," I say, combining her first and last name like I always used to.

She squeals and grabs for her shirt before spinning to face me. Her big, hazel eyes are flared wide in shock. "Bentley?"

Gemma Stone.

My best friend's little sister.

The sixteen-year-old girl I left behind has matured into a fucking *vision* of womanhood. My gaze roves over her, taking in her smooth skin and soft curves. Her chestnut curls kiss her shoulders, and her full lips are frozen in an "O" of surprise as she clutches her white button-down T-shirt to her glorious tits and gapes at me. A rosy nipple peeks out from a gap in her

shirt, and that's all it takes to have my cock straining uncomfortably at the seam of my jeans.

Ah, fuck. What is it about this woman? She's always affected me this way, and it was hell keeping my reactions hidden from her all those years ago. Seems nothing's changed in that regard.

"Ohmygodohmygod! Turn around!" Gem squeaks, her cheeks blooming a fiery red.

Quirking an eyebrow, I tear my gaze from the temptation of her pretty face and heavenly body, but I don't turn. The thin gentlemanly veneer I've perfected is stripped away in a heartbeat, and I'm the messed-up kid who left here years ago, wanting something he could never have.

"Ah, crap ... big mistake ... shouldn't have come ... stupid idea ... life-drawn portrait of myself ... gonna kill Peyton."

I'm not sure who Peyton is, but I swallow a smile at Gem's mutterings. She always had a habit of speaking her thoughts aloud. It was fucking cute. Still is.

By some twist of fate, she's in my studio, looking more beautiful than ever.

Twist of fate? Who the fuck are you trying to kid?

Much as I try to deny it, I knew there was a strong possibility I'd run into Gem. Shit, maybe a part of me, the part I've buried deep, was hoping for precisely this when I came back. After all, only a few miles separate Crystal Peak and Garland.

"Okay, you can turn around," Gem says a few seconds later, oblivious that I didn't turn away in the first place. She braces her hands on her hips, her expression bewildered. "What are you doing here, Bentley?"

I shrug, trying not to notice the smooth curve of her cheek and the tiny mole at the corner of her top lip. I squeeze the sketchpad in my hand, and my fingers twitch to capture her essence on the paper. "I live here. Moved in a few days ago. I'll be teaching at the university."

Something flickers in her hazel eyes. “Callum didn’t mention you were coming back.”

“I didn’t know about the offer until ten days ago. I didn’t mention it to Callum because I planned on surprising him.”

She nibbles on her lip. “So, you’re back for good?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Just for six weeks. The previous guy had a heart attack, and they needed someone short-term until they fill the role permanently.” I wave a hand around me. “This place came with the tenure.”

“And then what? You’re out of here ... again?”

Her subtle emphasis on the final word doesn’t go unnoticed, and my jaw tightens. “Yes.”

A flash of pain echoes in her eyes. Our past rears up between us like the silken threads of a forgotten spiderweb, tethering us together. She’s the reason I stayed in Garland as long as I did. She’s also the reason I left.

“So ... Gigi, huh?” My mouth twitches with suppressed humor.

Gem buries her burning face in her hands with a groan. “I know, I know! But I had to come up with a fake name so no one knew it was me.”

“There’s no shame in wanting a life drawing of yourself, Gem. I’ve drawn plenty of models. You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before,” I say bluntly. It’s a lie because every fucking thing about her is a revelation to me.

She looks a little wounded at my casual tone. “Yeah, I guess a boob is a boob is a boob to you, right? Seen one, seen ‘em all.”

It’s true I’ve drawn plenty of models, male and female, old and young, large and small, but none have ever affected me like Gem. One glimpse of her silky skin does more for my dormant libido than any of the scantily clad women I’ve sketched before because ... none of them were her. None of them were my Gem.

I rake a hand through my hair with a frustrated sigh. I’m fucking this up. “That’s not what I meant—”

Gem waves a hand in the air, cutting me off. “It doesn’t matter. It was a silly idea. Besides”—her cheeks flush, and she drops her eyes—“there’s no way I can strip naked in front of you.”

I’m assaulted by visions of her lying naked on a soft mattress, her hair tumbling around her flushed face, and her arms reaching for me.

I clear my throat and cross my arms over my chest. “So what was all that about not letting others define you and wanting to see yourself through the eyes of an artist?”

She presses her plump lips together and shakes her head. “You know, just bluster. Pumping myself up so I’d feel as calm and confident about all this as I do about my artistry with metalwork and gemstones. Same reason I brought a packet of chocolate bonbons with me. Some people need liquid courage, but I need sugar courage. That’s how I wound up booking this session in the first place ... aaaand you aren’t even paying attention.”

I lift my head from the sketchpad where I’m frantically drawing and fix her with an intense gaze. “Oh, I’m paying attention, Gem. You’re the one person I’ll always pay attention to.”

Her eyes flare, and she bites her plump bottom lip. Lust slams into me, almost causing my knees to buckle. So much for wondering if the connection is still there. Not only is it still there, but it burns brighter and hotter than before.

It’s official. I’m fucked.

Chapter 3

Gemma

BENTLEY'S DARK GAZE BURNS ME FROM THE OUTSIDE IN, causing muscles I didn't know I had in my nether regions to clench and throb. A vibrantly hot shiver runs through me at the sound of his gruff voice.

Laying eyes on him after so long is an almost spiritual experience. Time has been *good* to him. He seems taller, darker, and oh-so-delicious, dressed in a casual button-down shirt that stretches across his wide chest and jeans that fit snugly over his muscular thighs.

And it seems I'm not the only one who's added some ink to my body as tattoos peek from beneath his shirt sleeves and on the tempting V of flesh revealed by his open collar.

He exudes an animal magnetism that weaves around me from across the room. If he were a steak, he'd be sizzling. And then there are those dark caramel eyes framed by a tangle of black lashes. They're potent. Mesmerizing.

I'm not sure whether to run away screaming or strip naked and climb him like a horny monkey.

His shoulders are broader than I remember, his rugged face even more handsome, and dear God, the size of those hands. They look big enough to swallow my breasts while his thumbs lazily stroke my nipples and—

Nope. No. Nuh-uh. I won't go down that path again; that way lies danger.

Yup, the danger of sprawling naked on the conveniently placed chaise and shouting, "Take me! Take me now!"

Not that Bentley would be interested in "taking me." He won't be the one venturing where no man has gone before. He's never seen me as anything but Callum's kid sister. He made that abundantly clear when he left Garland for the big city and the big university and never once returned in all these years. It still stings that he's kept such a long, large distance between us when I believed he was my friend too.

I give myself a mental shake. Those are thoughts I'll have to examine later.

But for now ... priorities.

Bentley is back. Of all the art studios in Crystal Peak, I had to walk into Bentley Cormack's. Well, okay, there's only one art studio in Crystal Peak, but that doesn't do dramatic justice to the situation I find myself in. Because ...

One, Bentley heard me yammering to myself like a fruit loop.

Two, he clocked the tattoo on my lower back that no one other than Peyton knows about, and if my parents find out, they'll probably try to perform an exorcism to free me from the demon that made me do it.

Three, he's the artist I've paid in advance to draw me naked.

And four, he copped an eyeful of my boobs, which may have included some nipple action.

Number four shouldn't thrill me nearly as much as it does.

Bentley is still scribbling away, his brow furrowed in concentration. I lick my lips and finally find my voice. "So, what are you writing?"

He frowns. "Not writing. Drawing."

"Oh. What are you drawing?"

His gaze lifts to mine. "You."

I suck in a breath and heat explodes along my nerve endings at the look in his eyes. "Me?" I whisper.

Bentley tucks the pencil behind his ear and moves toward me. My heart ricochets against my ribs. He's so close that the heat radiating from him threatens to rock me back on my heels. And sweet Mother Mary, he smells divine.

He flips the sketchpad so I can see.

Oh, wow. Yes, it's me, all right, in light, barely shaded form. The back of my head, the profile of my face, and my shoulder—complete with my banana-shaped birthmark.

He's captured the moment I turned to see him, the flare of my eyes in dawning realization, my lips forming a surprised O-shape that makes me look sultry. Sexy. Until this moment, even though I'm learning to love my body, I've never thought of myself as delicate, sensual, or beautiful. But that's how I look in this hastily drawn sketch. How I *feel*.

"It's not perfect because you were in motion," he murmurs, staring at the sketch, "but hopefully, it gives you an idea of what I can do."

I would never question his ability and skill in drawing. No, it's more that I doubt my ability to sit before him, naked and wary and wanting. Undressed and under intense scrutiny from his piercing gaze. Where would I hide?

Glancing up at him, I ask, "I-Is this how you see me?"

He doesn't speak, but his eyes give me my answer. The corner of his mouth curls upward in that familiar lopsided smile that set my heart racing in high school. Oh, my. It's as potent now as it was then.

"Think about it, Gem." He opens the door, which is obviously my cue to leave. "I'm around for the next six weeks. I'd love to draw you, but it's your decision. If you change your mind, let me know. If not, I'll make sure you're refunded."

I open my mouth to decline and snap it shut again. I should say no, but the words won't come. Before I do something truly stupid, like throw all sense and caution to the wind along with my damp panties, I nod and walk out the door, leaving another shard of my heart with Bentley Cormack.

Chapter 4

Bentley

SEEING GEM AGAIN HAS THROWN ME, UNEARTHING MEMORIES I've tried to keep buried. The desire to pull her into my arms, kiss her senseless and lose myself in her soft curves was overwhelming. Instead, I held the door open and watched her leave. Have I just made the second biggest mistake of my life?

What the fuck am I doing? Nothing's changed. I walked away years ago, bruised but not broken, and since then, her parents have despised me. I moved to the city to escape the past but deep down, I'm still the kid from the wrong side of town, neglected by parents who were only concerned with where their next drink or fix was coming from.

I was a scrappy kid, and my parents didn't give two shits about where I was, what I did, or why I was even around. I knew hunger. I knew pain. And I knew neglect. Maybe that's why I spent so much time at the Stone family house because even though I knew they didn't think much of my family or me, they were at least polite to my face and let me stay for dinner most nights.

And while the Stone family had their issues, they showed me some measure of kindness. More than once, they passed down sports equipment and clothing Callum had outgrown, encouraging me to try football because they believed it would keep me out of trouble.

It worked for a while. Until I became a teenager and trouble at school became unavoidable—a tussle here and there when kids were cruel and things at home were bad, detentions for

drawing and doodling in class, and failing the more academic courses.

I tried to stick with football, for Callum, for the Stones, but my heart wasn't in it the same way Cal's was. Eventually, I dropped it altogether and channeled the brunt of my chaotic emotions into the sketches, the paint, the slashes of color, and the jagged edges of my imagination that spilled out of me and onto the page, onto the canvas, onto the walls.

And then, there was Gemma. I'm not sure when my feelings for her changed from affection to something ... more. Although I was loath to admit it, it became harder to remain immune to her bright smile and tempting curves. I knew she had a crush on me—I would've had to have been blind not to notice the adoration and innocent curiosity in her eyes when she looked at me.

Even if she wasn't my best friend's sister, there was no way I'd ever be good enough for Gemma Stone. She came from a wealthy family with a religious background, and I ... didn't.

It always surprised me that Mr. and Mrs. Stone tolerated my presence in their beloved son's life. It was no secret that Callum was their golden boy. Their preferential treatment of him over Gem was painfully obvious. I never understood it, and neither did Callum.

Maybe it was because Gem was outgoing and adventurous, whereas Callum was placid and content to stay in the lane his parents had prepared for him. Gem was a tomboy, always getting into scrapes and situations that made her parents huff and despair of ever molding her into their perfect image of what a young lady should be.

But the personality traits that annoyed her parents were the very ones that drew me to her. Her bubbly disposition and joy of life sprinkled sunshine through my gray existence. Although I tried to hide it, I basked in her presence.

When Gem stumbled across my drawings, she saw something worthwhile. She understood me and my sketches—the light, the dark, the pain, and the beauty—and she wasn't afraid, disgusted, or pitying.

She was the only person who told me my art was worth pursuing. The only person who slipped me sketchbooks and charcoals—extra supplies she harbored from her secret stash.

She wanted to design pretty things, fashion maybe, or jewelry, and would tinker away, coming up with some new, whimsical design.

But her parents told her it was an impractical, impossible dream that would lead her nowhere.

I know what it must have cost her to approach me that night—the night of the party. What she doesn't know is what it cost me to turn her away. She looked so beautiful, with her usually wild chestnut curls swept into some sleek hairdo and her subtle makeup emphasizing her hazel eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips.

It's an image I've memorized over the years and sketched a hundred times, trying to recapture that moment. But nothing compares to the real thing. Seeing Gem in the flesh again almost brought me to my knees.

My cell phone rings, tugging me from my thoughts. I pull it from my pocket, smiling when I see the caller ID.

“What the fuck, Skip?” Callum demands, using the nickname he gave me when we were eight, on account of me skipping school all the time. “Nothing like giving your best friend a heads-up that you're back in town! I've just had Gem on the phone tearing me a new one for not telling her.”

“Sorry, Cal. It all happened so quickly, and it's only temporary,” I say ruefully.

“Not good enough. You owe me a beer. Damson's Bar, twenty minutes,” Cal instructs, naming the bar we used to drink at back in the day. He hangs up before I have a chance to reply.

Looks like I'm returning to Garland after all.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I'm chugging beer with Callum as we catch up. We've kept in touch during my time in Denver,

and he's been to visit a few times, but it feels odd being back in our hometown together after so long.

"So, what brings you back?" Cal asks as he takes a swig of his beer.

"Needed a change of scenery," I reply with a careless shrug.

My friend's eyes narrow on me. "Don't give me that shit. We've known each other our whole lives. I know you better than anyone. What gives?"

He's wrong. He doesn't know me better than anyone. That would be Gem.

"The city was becoming too ... claustrophobic. A teaching opportunity came up at the university, so I took it. No hidden agenda," I tell him coolly.

"The university next to the town where you grew up?" Cal purses his lips thoughtfully. "The town you left so you wouldn't be tempted by what you couldn't have?"

My eyes snap to his. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Something we should have talked about years ago," Cal says calmly. "We all know why you left. You, Gem, me. We know what really happened that night, and not a day goes by when I don't feel guilty about it."

I shake my head. I wasn't expecting this when Cal invited me for a beer. I guess being back here is lifting the rusty lid on old truths. "It was a long time ago, Cal. Let's leave the past where it is."

"I would, only it's not in the past, is it? Not for you. Or Gem. She still has feelings for you, and unless I've missed the mark, what you felt for her never went away either."

I deliberately take a long swig of beer before answering. Cal's words shock me. I never told another soul how I felt about Gem, particularly not my best friend, who likely would've beat my ass. He was as protective of Gem as I was.

"That obvious, huh?" I finally say.

Cal cracks a smile. “I’d have to be blind not to notice how you looked at each other.” He holds up a hand to stall me as I open my mouth to reply. “I get it. My parents aren’t the most accepting of people.” He pauses, his mouth twisting in a wry smile. “Hell, that’s probably the understatement of the century. And then there was your damn moral code stopping you from pursuing anything with Gem, not to mention the accident—”

“Like I said, rehashing the past won’t change anything,” I growl, shooting Cal a warning look.

“No. It won’t.” Cal twirls his beer bottle absently between his fingers. “Have you considered that things worked out how they were supposed to?”

“You mean you with a trashed leg and me being arrested?” I ask bitterly.

“You weren’t the one drunk driving. That was the other guy. And my leg healed,” I point out.

“At the cost of your career,” I rasp.

“My career is doing great, thanks.”

My laugh is brittle. “Right. You were the high school football superstar, good enough to ‘go pro’ according to all the talent scouts and colleges that came knocking. That night, your leg was smashed along with all your hopes and dreams.”

“Pro football was what my parents wanted for me, remember?” he asks, his voice heavy with self-contempt. “I’m far happier training athletes than I ever was playing.”

I know he’s not lying. He has a sports and exercise science degree and loves his job as a sports coach.

Cal huffs out a breath. “I should’ve said something back then. I never should’ve let you take the blame for—”

I hold up a hand to stall him. “It was for the best. I was leaving anyway, going off to college and planning never to return to this ass-backward town.”

Cal studies me for a long moment before speaking again. “What happened that night? With you and Gem?”

I study my empty bottle. “Nothing.” I lift my eyes to his. “But not because I didn’t want it to. She came to me that night with a going away to college present for me—a selection of art supplies to give me a head start before school. She told me she loved me and tried to kiss me. I pushed her away and told her I couldn’t ...”

I pause and clear my throat as the memories crowd me. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I didn’t want to be the cause of the pain in her eyes ... but I couldn’t cross that line with her. I wasn’t worthy. I wasn’t anybody special. Your parents would never accept me, and”—I smile ruefully—“you would’ve had every right to kill me. I couldn’t be with her, not then, maybe not ever.”

“Fuck, we need another beer for this shit,” Cal says roughly.

He disappears to the bar, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Seems I wasn’t as successful at keeping my feelings hidden from Cal as I believed.

I took the easy option, I realize now. I left town believing I was doing the right thing for Gem and for me, but I was running from my fear of being abandoned, forgotten, and unworthy of love. And one thing I’ve learned in the time I’ve been away is that you can’t run from yourself.

I guess the silver lining is that Cal is happy. Ironically, the accident freed him from his parents’ expectations and led him down a different path to his new, successful life as a coach.

Callum returns and settles back in the booth opposite me.

“Why the fuck are we rehashing this now?” I ask bluntly as he hands me another beer.

“Because there’s a reason you’re back here. And I don’t mean the job,” Cal continues before I can speak. “If you were waiting for my blessing when it comes to Gem, you’ve got it. Not that you ever needed it. You’ve always been good enough for my sister.”

My throat tightens at my friend’s words.

Cal raises his bottle. “You’re a stubborn fucker, but it’s time to stop wallowing and show my sister what she’s missing.”

Chapter 5

Gemma

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY SPOT IS TAKEN?” I GAPE AT Veronica, the organizer of Crystal Peak’s Annual Winter Art Festival.

“I’m sorry, Gemma,” Veronica says, wringing her hands, “but it seems there’s been a misunderstanding or miscommunication. The booth space you were meant to have was already taken. I never got word that you’d accepted the slot, so ...” She lets her words trail off with an apologetic shrug and hurries away before I have a complete meltdown.

Great. Here I am, loaded down with all my gear, and my plans to make a big splash and get the word out about the grand opening of Heart of Gold in two weeks are up in smoke. I could cry, but what can I do?

I glance around the vast hall packed with every kind of art and craft you could imagine. Quilting, baking, fashion design, calligraphy—you name it, and it’s here. And every booth is taken.

Swallowing down the tears, I haul my things back to my car in the parking lot. I’m packing my stuff when a familiar voice calls my name.

“Gem?”

My head snaps up, and I narrowly miss smacking it on the edge of the trunk. “Bentley? What are you doing here?”

“Same thing as you, by the looks of it,” he replies, seeing the bags of supplies in the trunk.

“You’re here for the art festival?” *Duh, Gem. Of course, he’s here for the festival. He’s an artist.*

He nods, and then a frown creases his ridiculously handsome face. “I saw you leave. What’s up? Why are you putting your stuff back in the trunk?”

“There was a mix-up with my booking. Apparently, Veronica never received my confirmation. The art festival was my chance to get the word out about my shop, you know, plenty of opportunity, sales, and exposure, but ...” I shrug and give him a wobbly smile, still trying to hold back the tears of disappointment. I’m trying to remain positive. This is just a blip. I’ve had them before. No biggie.

The little tick in Bentley’s tightly clenched jaw tells me he’s not okay with what’s happened. “Wait here,” he instructs, and before I can open my mouth to object, he’s heading toward the building where the festival is being held.

What the ...?

I consider climbing behind the wheel and driving off like the coward I am when it comes to him, but something keeps my feet rooted to the spot.

Within minutes, he’s back, his face set in grim satisfaction. “Let’s go,” he says, barely breaking stride as he grabs my bags from the trunk.

I quickly slam the lid shut and lock the car, struggling to keep up with his long legs. “What are you doing?”

“Taking your stuff back inside,” he replies, stating the obvious.

I follow him into the huge hall to an expansive booth where he has all his artwork set up. Guess he paid for the deluxe version, judging by the size of his display. Before I know what’s what, he’s rearranging to make room for my stuff.

“Bentley, I ... You can’t—”

“Plenty of room for both of us, Gem,” he cuts across me, his dark eyes connecting with mine. “You’re damn good at what you do, and your art needs to be seen and appreciated. This mess-up isn’t on you, and I’m happy to help.”

Something lodges in my chest, and suddenly, I want to cry for a whole different reason. I'm already in this man's debt for the sacrifice he made years ago, and now he's bailing me out again. A mix of shame and gratitude envelops me, leaving me confused and unsettled.

"I ... Thank you," I murmur, unsure what else to say.

Bentley moves closer, lifting his hand and brushing his knuckles along my cheek. "You're welcome."

His fingers leave a trail of fire in their wake, and his gruff tone sends a shiver of pleasure straight through me. My panties may have spontaneously combusted, incinerating my pubic hair with them. Guess I can cancel my next Brazilian.

Someone jostles me from behind, and I stumble backward, knocking my purse off the table.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the lady apologizes, stooping to help me pick up the contents scattered on the floor. "Blind as a bat without these," she adds, sliding her glasses from her head onto her nose.

"It's fine. No harm done." I give her a reassuring smile.

She's an older lady with kind eyes and blonde hair streaked with gray. "I swear I trip over fresh air sometimes. Nearly knocked the whole stand over earlier," she says, pointing to the adjacent booth laden with hand-crafted greeting cards.

"They're beautiful," I say, impressed with the intricate designs on the cards.

"You're very kind, dear. Just a little hobby in my spare time to keep me out of mischief," she says with a twinkle in her eye. Her gaze falls on the piece of paper that's spilled from my bag. She picks it up. "My goodness, this is exquisite."

My cheeks burn. It's the sketch Bentley drew of me the other day.

"Whoever drew this has captured you perfectly. You should get this blown up and framed. Put it on display."

"It's just a doodle," Bentley says from behind us.

“You did this?” the woman asks.

He nods, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

She smiles. “I see,” she says, making me think there’s more to her words.

I glance at Bentley to find his gaze already on me, his expression unreadable.

“Well, apologies again, but I should get going as I still have items to put out,” the lady says with a small wave before hurrying back to her booth.

Where is she going to fit more? Every square inch appears to be covered with her cards.

“Looks like you have another admirer of your work,” I tease Bentley as I start unpacking my stuff.

“Well, I’m certainly an admirer of your work,” he says, extracting a necklace from the selection I’ve just laid out. It’s a jade green butterfly encased in a delicate silver fleur-de-lys pattern with a matching silver chain. “This is beautiful. Must’ve taken hours to perfect that metalwork,” he murmurs, turning it over in his long fingers as he examines it.

Days, more like, but then, all of my jewelry does because each piece is one-of-a-kind. Once a piece is purchased, it’s gone. I can craft similar pieces if a client wishes, but I never make anything exactly the same.

Warmth blooms in my stomach at Bentley’s praise. He’s the only person apart from Callum who encouraged my passion.

The day passes in a blur as hundreds of people pass through the large hall. Bentley and I are run off our feet with interest in our products. It’s a great event to attend if you’re a vendor because people come from far and wide for the variety of wares on sale.

I push down my jealousy when several people book sessions with Bentley, one of whom is a pretty young blonde with a perfect figure. He’s an artist. It’s what he does, I rationalize. Still, it doesn’t stop me from breathing a sigh of relief when

her boyfriend joins her, explaining that he wants a drawing of her as an engagement present.

Before I know it, the crowds are finally thinning as the day winds down. I've had a great day, selling over half of my stock and handing out flyers and gift vouchers with ten percent off any purchases made at *Heart of Gold* on opening day.

As I start the painstaking process of carefully packing away the pieces I haven't sold, the woman from earlier gives me a cheery wave goodbye, having already packed up her cards. My thoughts return to her comment when she saw Bentley's sketch of me.

Whoever drew this has captured you perfectly.

I pause as her words sink home. Maybe I should rethink things? Why not take Bentley up on his offer to draw me? The sessions are booked and paid for, after all. And I'd be lying to myself if I said I didn't want to spend time with him.

He's made a success of himself despite all he's had to overcome. Neglected by his parents and blamed by mine for something that wasn't his fault. In my parents' eyes, Bentley is the "wicked boy who led their son astray" by sneaking Callum out to go to "that party" the night of the accident. They don't know the truth: I was the reason they were at the party.

I made an absolute fool of myself that night. I finally worked up the courage to approach Bentley, trying to make him see me as more than Callum's little sister and a young woman in my own right. I confessed my feelings and clumsily tried to kiss him, but he turned me down flat. Hurt and humiliated, I stormed off and went to a house party, nursing my injured pride and consuming drinks I was too young to purchase legally.

So, why wouldn't I be flattered when a boy took a shine to me? And why shouldn't I indulge in a little harmless flirtation? Bentley didn't want me, but this boy was showing an interest.

But it turned out not to be so harmless because he wasn't satisfied with a flirtatious exchange of words. Instead, he tried

to kiss me, his hands gripping, roaming, and slipping under my T-shirt. My fear turned to panic, and my voice came out only in a whispered “no, no, no,” and “stop, please!” But I wasn’t strong enough to stop his hands from touching my bare skin.

And then Bentley was there, ripping the boy off me and snarling, “Didn’t your mother teach you any manners? She said no. She told you to stop.”

He turned up with Callum when they learned I’d gone to the house of a high school senior renowned for holding wild and out-of-control parties.

Humiliated and furious, I lashed out, telling him I didn’t need a protector and to mind his own business. And like the immature kid I was, I stormed off, stalking all the way home, where I sobbed into my pillow. So much for showing Bentley how grown-up I was.

A little later, my parents received a phone call with the news that Callum and Bentley were in a car accident.

Then we were off to the hospital, my parents seething with anger and looking to assign blame—which fell squarely on Bentley’s shoulders. He never corrected them—he just took their fury along with the brunt of their shitty comments. And Callum and I let him—out of fear of our parents’ wrath.

When I went to find Bentley the next morning, he was gone. Packed up and left for college.

Guilt coats my insides again. Bentley sacrificed so much for me. And I let him. He’s been my heart’s desire since I was sixteen—the troubled kid with neglectful parents. But he never let them tarnish his heart of gold. What would he say if he knew he’d inspired the name of my business?

Maybe it’s time for us to put the past behind us, for me to take a risk and reach out for what I want.

“Earth to Gem.” Bentley’s voice pulls me from my musings.

I shake my head, clearing the cobwebs of the past, and turn to face him. “Sorry, I, uh, zoned out there for a minute.”

His caramel eyes hold a hint of concern as he looks at me. “Everything okay?”

I nod and give him a beaming smile. “Everything’s great.” I take a deep breath. “I ... want to go ahead. I want you to draw me.”

Chapter 6

Bentley

I CAST MY EYES AROUND THE STUDIO, CHECKING EVERYTHING is in place, and nod in satisfaction.

I'm not sure who was more surprised when Gemma asked me to draw her—her or me. Something changed two days ago when the woman at the art festival commented on the rough sketch of Gem. That and working side-by-side. It was like old times when we hung out together, although Callum was usually around back then. I made sure we were never alone, not trusting my crumbling control whenever I was around her.

And now I get to draw her in the flesh rather than from my imagination.

The buzzer sounds, and I check the clock on the wall. It's just before 7 PM.

"I hope I'm not too early," Gem says as I open the door. "Traffic was bad tonight so I left a little earlier but it didn't take me as long as I expected so I sat in the car for a bit and ate half a bag of bonbons ..." She trails off as she realizes she's babbling.

It's fucking adorable. She's fucking adorable. But it's also evident she's nervous. She's dressed casually in jeans and a white button-down blouse that hints at her generous cleavage, and she looks gorgeous to my greedy eyes.

"No, you're right on time," I say with a smile, leading her to the studio.

Her eyes widen, and I hear her visibly swallow as she looks around. “Wow,” she breathes, taking it all in. “It looks ... beautiful.”

An enormous bed sits dead center in the studio, the silk sheets rumpled. The only light source is from the copious battery-powered candles with realistic flames, giving a diffused glow to the room. Rose petals are scattered on the floor and across the bed in a crimson contrast to the white sheets.

I agonized over the setup, wondering how much I valued my life to risk sketching my best friend’s sister. But Callum gave me his blessing.

You’ve always been good enough for my sister.

He opened the door, and I’m about to smash it off its damn hinges.

I’ve fantasized plenty about Gem over the years, sketching her from memory a thousand times. She’s been my muse for a long time, longer than I care to admit. From those early days of rough drawings when I couldn’t quite get the shape of her curls or the exact shade of her hazel eyes with their flecks of green to finally mastering the curve of her smile. In all the time I was away, I dreamed of the day I’d be good enough, worthy enough, to draw her.

“I want you to be comfortable, so how this goes is entirely up to you,” I tell her. “The main thing is that you’re relaxed. This is a safe, judgment-free zone. If you want to keep all your clothes on, you can. If you want to remove some or all your clothing, you can. If you want to change into an outfit you’ve brought, no problem. This is your time. This is for you, and you’re in control.”

Her nervous tension eases at my words, and her shoulders lower from her ears. She licks her lips and nods. “I-I’ll start fully clothed if that’s okay. You know, until I loosen up a little.”

“Whatever you want, Gem,” I reassure her. “The notes from my predecessor mentioned you wanted to wear your jewelry?”

“Yeah. Guess I was feeling a lot braver on the end of a phone before I realized it would be you drawing me.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why are you so nervous about me drawing you?”

Memories swirl in her eyes as she whispers, “You know why, Bentley.”

Fuck. Her answer is revealing. It means I still have a chance with her. It may have been her choice to come here tonight, but I’m not above using it to my advantage. Fate seems to be throwing us together, and I’m done fighting it.

“Why don’t you get comfortable on the bed while I set up.” I already have my supplies ready, but I turn away, allowing Gem to situate herself without me ogling her like a cartoon character with my eyes bulging and tongue hanging out of my damn mouth.

I hear the slither of fabric and turn to find her sitting stiffly in the middle of the bed like she’s about to attend her own execution. Yeah, that won’t work.

“Let’s do some exercises to get you warmed up,” I say, moving toward her.

“Um, exercises? I thought you were going to draw me, not make me do jumping jacks and push-ups. Which I can’t do, by the way. The push-ups, not the jumping jacks. I can do those, so long as I wear my bra with the built-in scaffolding.”

She’s babbling with her nerves. I need to get her to loosen up.

“Nothing that strenuous,” I reassure her. “Just some breathing to put you at ease. Close your eyes,” I instruct.

Gem does as I ask, and I lead her through some deep breathing exercises before persuading her to shake it out, tensing and releasing her muscles from her neck to her toes. I even have her making ridiculous noises with her mouth so she can relax. But Gem being Gem, dissolves into full-on belly laughs when she makes a noise like a strangled cat.

Gem could always make me laugh with her mischievous sense of humor, even in dark times. Seems like a long time since my mouth stretched with a genuine smile, but I find myself laughing along with her and wishing I could capture her like this, as she is right now.

She's relaxed on the bed, the sheet she had gripped in her fists now puddled around her hips. "Oh, screw it," she suddenly says, whipping off her jeans and unbuttoning her shirt. "Go big, or go home, right? Like you said, it's nothing you haven't seen before, just more of it, and I hardly think the sight of my body is going to turn you into a lust-crazed neanderthal who wants to do all kinds of dirty, depraved, and ... what?" she demands at my raised eyebrow.

I looked pointedly at her shirt.

"Ah, crap," she says as she realizes she's completely unbuttoned her shirt in her ramblings. It's slipped from her shoulder, revealing her lace-clad tits, her nipples pressing against the sheer fabric.

Had it been any other woman, I would've suspected it was a calculated move, but not Gem. She's guileless. It's obvious she has no fucking clue how to play games or how sexy she is.

"Oops," she says, cheeks blazing as she draws the edges together.

She's self-conscious about her body, but she shouldn't be. She's fucking gorgeous, and every muscle in my body tightens at the sight of her smooth flesh. Being exposed to bare skin is nothing new when it comes to my art, but it's never been a sexual experience. Or at least it wasn't—until now. Gem is the only woman I'd cross professional boundaries and break the rules for.

Acting on instinct, I move closer, grabbing her hands to still them from snapping the fabric closed. "Don't." My voice is a harsh rasp. "You're beautiful like this. All of you. Just like this."

Gem's eyes capture mine, and the wealth of longing in them is my undoing. I wrap one arm around her waist, grip her jaw

with the other, and then my mouth is on hers as I kiss her with fierce desperation. I taste her, drink her in, my mouth hard and demanding, until she's shaking and moaning low in her throat.

I drag my mouth from hers, breathing roughly, and mutter, "Fuck."

Gem's fingers are clenched in the front of my shirt, her eyes closed, her pretty mouth swollen. My taste buds are saturated with her delicious flavor, and my nostrils flare with the scent of her arousal.

I knew it would be like this when we kissed. Fucking explosive. It's why I pulled away from her all those years ago. I knew once I'd had a taste, I wouldn't be able to let her go. I'd foolishly thought that keeping her at arm's length would cure my addiction to her or at least dampen it. But one kiss has detonated the hunger between us.

Without opening her eyes, Gem whispers, "More. Please."

Before I can stop myself, I lean in and kiss her hard and hot until all thought has evaporated from my mind. Gem moans, eagerly tasting and teasing me with her tongue, her hands fisting my hair, and her breasts pressed against my chest.

Before it goes too far, before *we* go too far, I drag my mouth from hers. A possessive growl works up my throat as I see the lazy heat smoldering in her eyes, which have darkened to a verdant green.

She has a kissed-senseless and left-wanting look that I want—no, *need*—to capture.

"Don't move," I rasp, my breath feathering over her swollen lips as I tear myself from her soft curves.

She nods, her eyes dazed as I situate myself behind the easel. I grab my pencil, and my fingers fly over the paper, studying her as she lounges on the bed, her expression reflecting that delicious state of want.

Gem brings her fingers to her lips as she watches me studying her. They linger there as if she's reliving the sensation of my mouth on hers, and fuck, if it doesn't have me hard as hell.

“One sketch won’t be enough with you, Gem,” I say, the words out of my mouth before I can think. “I’d like to do a series of images of you and present them in my upcoming show at the end of my residency if you don’t mind being my muse.”

Gem’s eyes widen. “Me? But I’m ...” She pauses, shaking her head.

“You’re what?” I pin her with my gaze.

“I’ve never considered myself muse material,” she replies with a shrug.

“Well, start now,” I state, “because you are to me. The drawings will be tasteful,” I continue as she opens her mouth to speak. “And you can veto any you consider too revealing before the show. You wanted to see yourself through the eyes of an artist. Let me give you that.”

Gem bites her lip as she considers my words. “Okay. But I don’t need to veto anything because I trust you as an artist to present me the way you deem best.”

Her trust humbles me. And makes my cock hard. I won’t betray her confidence in me—a confidence she gave me when we were teenagers.

“So ... um ... You kiss all your muses?” she asks, her voice a little too bright.

I lift my eyes from the drawing taking shape on the paper and focus on Gem. “No. Never. And I’ve never had a muse until you.”

Her breath whooshes out, whether from relief or something else, I’m not sure.

What I am sure of is that keeping my hands off her just got a whole lot harder.

Chapter 7

Gemma

I LOCK UP SHOP, TIRED AND ACHING FROM HOURS OF SANDING, painting, sweeping, and scrubbing. The place is starting to shape up, which is good, as I have less than two weeks until the grand opening.

I've been working ten-hour days, fixing the holes left by the bookshelves, sanding and painting the walls a soft oyster, and donating the old furniture that Bette left behind.

The flooring company has been in to lay the new hard-wearing Carradine wood-effect flooring. I've removed the dusty blinds and hung string lights around the windows to give the shop a warm, welcoming atmosphere.

Callum is taking a few days off next week to help me set up and put the finishing touches on everything. Tasha, the owner of Valentine's Bakery, popped in yesterday and offered a selection of sweet treats and cakes for browsing customers free of charge.

I want my jewelry to be the focal point when people walk in, so I'm keeping the decor simple and stylish. My glass display units with pull-out storage draws are being delivered in a few days, and the new shop sign will be up early next week.

By far, my biggest expense is the augmented reality screen being installed in the cozy, sectioned-off area at the back of the store. I've digitized all of my jewelry creations, so customers have a unique try-before-they-buy experience by selecting the item they want and virtually trying on the jewelry. I've had augmented reality technology in my online store from the

beginning, so this is simply a physical version of the same thing. It's impossible for me to stock everything in the shop, so this is a great way to engage the customers with my entire collection while adding to my brand value.

It's all coming together, and my excitement is only eclipsed by one thing.

That kiss.

It's Friday evening—four days since Bentley kissed me at the studio, and although I've been busy, my thoughts have strayed to him at least ninety-eight times a day. Because *be still my twanging heartstrings*, that was some kiss. Hot and needy and wanting, Bentley kissed me like he couldn't get enough of my mouth before leaping up to draw me as if I'd inspired him in some way.

And then he asked me to be his muse. *Me*. I've been back every evening this week, and although there's been no more tonsil hockey—much to my disappointment—my sessions with Bentley have increased my confidence tenfold. I've become more relaxed each time as he's sketched me in different poses, wrapped only in a silk sheet.

I'm not brave enough to get naked, so having the sheet draped over me seductively gives me a sense of control. Besides, the finished product is going on the wall above my bed, so I want something tasteful I can bear to look at daily rather than a drawing of me with my tits escaping under my armpits.

I head upstairs to my apartment above the shop that came with the lease. Bette's taste in decor was eclectic, but somehow it all comes together to make the place feel homely.

In the main living area, two purple velvet sofas are strewn with gold silk cushions, and purple tassels hold the heavy brocade curtains back from the windows. The bathroom is a riot of colorful mosaics juxtaposed with a modern white suite, and the main bedroom is relaxed elegance with eggshell blue walls and a luxurious four-poster bed.

It's a mish-mosh of styles, and I adore it.

I quickly shower and change into clean jeans and a green button-down shirt, pulling on my fur-lined boots and warm jacket to shield me from the chilly February evening.

Anticipation swirls in my belly as I drive to Crystal Peak and the art studio. Seeing Bentley has become the highlight of my day, along with working on my shop, and I can't help thinking that things are finally coming together. Okay, my parents have shown zero interest in visiting the shop before the grand opening, but I stopped believing in miracles where they were concerned a long time ago.

Bentley answers the door quickly at my buzz, almost as if he's as eager to see me as I am him.

"Hey, Gemstone," he greets in that warm rumble, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile.

He's utterly gorgeous with his hair sexily ruffled like he's been running his hands through it. My hands itch with the desire to ruffle it some more. And whatever genetics produced a jaw that square should be cloned and gifted to all the chinless wonders out there.

His blistering gaze drops to my mouth, and a muscle in that perfect jaw flexes. Then he moistens his lips, and *holy shit* ... I'm too young for hot flashes, so someone must've lit a fire in my gusset.

My legs are like wet noodles as Bentley leads me through to the studio. The bed is set up like our previous sessions, but there's a velvet-covered wingback chair and an antique table holding a box of what looks like artisan chocolates this time.

"Thought we'd try something different this evening," Bentley says at my questioning look.

"Um, by different, you mean ...?"

"I want to draw you in that chair, wearing nothing but the silk sheet and your jewelry while you eat those chocolates."

The heat from my cheeks spreads down my neck, and my pulse goes haywire. I need a defibrillator. Stat.

When his gaze lifts to mine, I'm unprepared for the force of it. I stepped on a live wire once because, well, my name's Gemma Stone, and that's how I roll. Looking into Bentley's eyes is like that, sending a thousand bolts of electricity coursing through every cell.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. "So, I just sit there and look sexy eating chocolate?"

Bentley nods, his gaze never leaving mine. It's probably the candlelight and the glow of hormones spewing from my ovaries, but he looks even more handsome tonight. It's impossible to look away from his penetrating gaze. I'm pinned in place, turned to stone by the electricity crackling between us. No, not stone. Magma. Or Jell-O, judging by my wobbly legs.

"I think I can do that," I say, proud that my voice is only slightly strangled.

I don't think too hard about how easily it's gotten to disrobe in front of Bentley. How it's changed from a hasty, half-embarrassed race to a sensual dance—no longer hiding behind the partition in the corner but dropping my clothes as soon as the studio door's closed and the blinds are drawn.

I know he watches me, every move, every inch. And it sets my nerve endings on fire.

With the sheet wrapped around me, Bentley positions me in the chair. "Like this," he says, moving my legs so they're draped over the arm and I'm leaning back on an angle.

The sheet parts to my upper thighs, and his breath hitches almost imperceptibly. He's so close I can see his throat bob as he swallows. It takes everything in me not to lean forward and press a kiss on the warm skin, tasting it with my tongue.

He arranges the sheet so it's draped over one shoulder, leaving the other shoulder and arm bare as I lounge in the chair. I feel like Cleopatra, enrobed in a silk tunic as she awaits her lover. All I need now is some kohl eyeliner and a bath filled with goat's milk.

When Bentley has me arranged to his satisfaction, he hands me the chocolates. “I want you to eat them slowly like they’re the most divine thing you’ve ever tasted.”

My gaze drops to the telltale bulge in the front of his jeans, and I choke on my spit. I have a feeling there’s something that tastes more divine than the artisan chocolates I’m currently crushing in my hand.

I snort, dragging my errant thoughts from the image of my mouth wrapped around him. “Well, that shouldn’t be hard, what with my love of all things sugar.”

Bentley smiles. “You’re forgetting that I know you taste sweeter than the finest chocolate, Gemstone.”

Coming from anyone else, that would sound corny, but Bentley’s words are like a physical caress, tightening my nipples and igniting a furnace between my thighs.

He’s so close that the heat emanating from him threatens to melt me into a puddle of need. I’m scared of these powerful emotions he ignites in me.

He cups my face in his hand, his thumb tracing my bottom lip and pulling. And then he’s kissing me with a fierce desperation that steals my breath, devouring me with his lips and tongue. On and on, his mouth hard and demanding until I’m shivering and soft, needy moans escape from my throat.

His shirt is bunched in my fists. My nipples are diamond-hard, and a needy throb pounds between my legs. Every one of my five senses is saturated with him, but I need more. I need *him*. Inside me. His mouth on my skin, and my hands learning the hard lines of his body.

If he weren’t anchoring me to the earth, I’d shoot off like a rocket into space and explode into a million shards of bliss.

Bentley groans into my mouth, and I arch against him, sliding my hands up his shoulders and digging my fingers into his hair. I cling to him and shake, knowing that whatever he asks of me, I’ll give it willingly.

Bentley pulls back to look at me, breathing hard. His eyes are also black with desire as they skim over my face. “There you

are,” he murmurs. “My Gem.”

Shit, yes, here I am—every spontaneously combusting pound of me.

My heartbeat pulses in my fallopian tubes, and I’m pretty sure there are curls of smoke rising from my skin. If he brushed his thumb over my nipple right now, I’d come. Hard.

“Stay just like that,” he instructs.

He moves away before I can reply, taking his place behind his easel. Shit. One touch and I’m ready to toss caution to the wind along with the sheet.

Bentley is already immersed in his work, murmuring instructions as he draws.

“Lift your arm a little.”

“Hold that chocolate next to your lips, but don’t eat it.”

“Tip your head back.”

“Yes, that’s good. Beautiful.”

His praise makes me brave, and I blurt out the question that’s been plaguing me since he left. “Why have you stayed so far away from me for so long? Why didn’t you talk to me after the accident?” That night seems so long ago now. I was a selfish, naïve little girl.

Bentley shakes his head, a muscle flicking in his jaw. “It doesn’t matter now.”

I tip my chin, holding his intense gaze. “It matters to me. It’s mattered for seven years.”

“Gemma—”

“Tell me, Bentley! I know what Cal and I did was wrong. I know we should’ve come clean that night. Instead, we let you take the blame for something that wasn’t your fault. Do you think so little of me that you’d deliberately stay away from me all these years?”

Bentley closes his eyes briefly. “I think that kiss proves what I think of you, Gemstone. I wish you could see what I see when

I look at you.”

His words take me by surprise. “What do you see?”

I told him I trusted him to draw me, but he hasn’t shown me any sketches, so I’m curious to know how he perceives me and how I translate on paper. And maybe, just maybe, my greedy heart is hoping for more.

Bentley’s gaze finds mine. “What I see?”

“When you draw me. What do you see?” I whisper.

For a moment, I don’t think he’s going to answer. His eyes trace over me, and finally, he says, “I see the golden highlights in your hair and the flecks of green in your eyes. I see the soft sweep of your cheek, the full curve of your lips, and the sensuous arch of your neck. I see sunshine in your smile and longing in your eyes. I see your generous spirit, gentle heart, and the passion you hide beneath the uncertainty. You’re beautiful in a way that’s so much more than skin deep.”

His words bring tears to my eyes. How he describes me—it’s how I’ve always wanted to be seen. How no one else has ever seen me. No one but Bentley.

But he still hasn’t answered my question. “Then why did you freeze me out?”

His reaction is unexpected. He surges to his feet, jostling the easel and scattering pencils as he stalks toward me. He places his hands on the arms of the chair, caging me in as he gets up in my face. “Because I wasn’t worthy of you. You deserved better than the broken boy I was from the shitty family I grew up in. You deserved someone whole who could give you the life you deserved and the family you deserved. And that wasn’t me.”

I lift my chin, upset that he made those choices for me. “You talk about it like it’s for you to decide. What I deserve, Bentley, is to be happy. What I deserve is to be asked for my thoughts and my opinions. You never gave us a shot, Bentley. You underestimated me and my feelings for you.” Disappointment roils in my stomach. “You’re just another person who disregarded my desires because you thought you

knew what was best for me. But you couldn't see that *you* were what was best for me."

Frustration flares in Bentley's eyes. "Fuck. My words never seem to come out right when I'm with you. What is it you want, Gemma? What would make you happy?"

I don't hesitate. "You."

His mouth tightens at that one word. His gaze roams over me, hot and needy, making my nipples pebble beneath the sheet. I'm no siren, but that heated gaze makes me feel like one. My hair is rumpled, and I'm sure I have chocolate around my mouth, but I don't care. All I care about is having Bentley's mouth on mine again, and the rest of the world be damned.

"I'm done denying this, Gemstone. I'm fucking done fighting it. But know this: once we step over that line, there's no going back. You'll be mine, and I'll never let you go."

My heart batters my ribcage, but I hold his gaze and whisper, "Good."

Chapter 8

Bentley

GEM'S HAZEL EYES BURN INTO MINE, AND IT'S LIKE STANDING in the sun after being out in the cold for so long.

With a growl, I hoist her from the chair and stride toward the bed.

"Holy crap," she squeals. "Are you trying to give yourself a hernia?"

I lay her down among the crushed rose petals. "I could bench press you with my pinkie, sweetheart."

She pats my arm. "Sure you could, big guy." She pauses, pursing her lips. "But now I'm thinking about where you'd have to insert your pinky to achieve that feat of epic strength."

I laugh, a full, rich sound alien to my ears. She's always been able to do that—make me laugh at the most unexpected moments. "God, you're so fucking beautiful," I murmur, drinking in her soft curves bathed in the light from the candles.

Gem cups my face and pulls me in for her kiss, and I don't hesitate, sliding my mouth over hers slowly and hungrily. I fist my hands in her hair, holding her still for my tongue as I take what Gem offers, giving me what I need.

When I break away, she's softly moaning.

And I'm about to explode with desire.

I gaze at her, her face inches from mine, her eyes hazy and hot. I lower my body to hers, settling my hips between her thighs so she can feel me, and she arches her back like a purring kitten.

I take her mouth again, demanding and possessive, hungry and deep. Gem kisses me like a woman who wants more—who wants everything, clinging to me and trembling.

I moan into her mouth as she digs her nails into my neck, my pulse thrumming wildly under her palms. We melt into each other, lips fused, bodies on fire. I slide my hands beneath her, squeezing her ass as I flex my hips, pressing my cock against her and drinking deep from her mouth.

Clasping her wrists in one hand, I hold her arms above her head, stripping the sheet from her body. “Fuck,” I mutter, staring down at her big breasts with their rosy crowns. The only thing shielding her sex from my heated gaze is the scrap of lacy fabric that passes for panties. “Forget the drawings. You’re the work of art, Gemstone. In the flesh.”

The sight of her abundant curves makes me crazed. My stomach feels like I’m about to plunge from a plane in a free dive, only to find a soft landing in her arms.

“You look scared,” she whispers.

“Shitless,” I admit as my fingers fly over the buttons of my shirt. “You make me feel things that scare the living daylights out of me.”

Emotion brims in her eyes. “That makes two of us. No one’s ever made me feel like you do, Bentley.”

My shirt parts under my fingers, and I shrug out of it, tossing it to the floor. Surging to my feet, I quickly rid myself of my jeans and boxers so I’m completely naked, my cock rock hard and ready to sink into the one place it’s destined for.

Gem’s eyes widen as they slide over me, and her mouth hangs open. I’m fit, not ripped like a bodybuilder, but Gem looks at me like I’m a fucking god.

“You’re perfect,” she whispers, her gaze sliding over the ink on my chest and arms. She won’t see her initials over my heart among the swirls and shapes unless she looks closely. “Your tattoos are beautiful.” She cups a hand to her ear. “Do you hear that?”

I frown. “Hear what?”

Her mouth curves up in a mischievous smile. “The angels weeping at all this masculine beauty.”

Fuck, this woman will be the death of me. She’ll kill me with humor or pleasure. Either way, I’ll die a happy man.

I lower myself back to the bed, caging her with my body and claiming her mouth in a hard kiss. “Getting all poetic on me, Gemstone?”

“You make Regé-Jean Page look like something one of your art students would cobble together out of old magazines and crusty boogers.”

Laughter rumbles up my chest as I shake my head. “Who the hell is Regé-Jean Page?”

“The guy from Bridgerton,” she says, making my jaw and my abs clench as she smooths a hand down my chest.

“I’ve finally got you naked underneath me, and you’re comparing me to an actor from a period drama?” I ask in mock disbelief.

Gem purses her lips. “Like I said. No comparison. You win, hands down.”

“Hands down, huh?” I lean forward to nip her earlobe. “I can think of a few places on this delectable body I’d like to put my hands down.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” she asks huskily, a challenge in her eyes.

I settle my pelvis between her spread thighs and lower my upper body to hers, balancing on my elbows above her. Then I kiss her again, a deep, slow kiss that has her squirming underneath me within seconds.

I smile against her mouth. “Are you trying to get away from me, or am I doing something right?”

“Not something. Everything,” she moans, wrapping her legs around my waist.

My lips brush hers like a whisper. “I want to make you feel good, Gemstone. Tell me what you like.”

Panic sparks in Gem's eyes as she pulls back to look at me. "I don't know what I like, Bentley. This"—she waves a hand between us—"is all new to me."

I drop my forehead to hers. "That's what I thought, sweetheart."

Her legs tighten around me as if she's afraid I'll leave. No fucking chance.

I give her a wicked smirk as I lean in close to her ear. "Guess I'll have to find out for myself. Feel free to give me feedback."

I move lower, raking my teeth along the tendon in her neck, licking and nipping my way to her spectacular tits and biting down gently on her nipple.

"Oh!" She jerks, and her back arches, pushing her breasts toward my mouth.

"Talk to me, Gem," I command. "How does it feel?"

"Oh. Um ... it feels ... nice," she whispers, her cheeks blazing.

"Nice?" I raise an eyebrow. "That won't do."

I bend my head to her stomach, licking and kissing a slow path from her ribcage to the edge of her panties. Lifting her leg, I slide it over my shoulder, and she jumps as I sink my teeth into her inner thigh.

"Too much?" I ask, my voice muffled by her skin as I lick where I nipped.

"N-No. Just took me by surprise. Continue," she instructs.

I squeeze her waist and nuzzle my nose deep into her panties. When I gently bite her there, she jerks and moans. "Love those noises, sweetheart," I mutter. "Let's see if I can make you scream."

I pull down her panties and toss them aside, staring at her pink flesh, exposed and trembling. Holding her eyes, I lick the pad of my thumb and slip it between her folds, sliding it over the bud of her clitoris.

“Oh, God.” Gem sucks in a breath and closes her eyes as I move my thumb in lazy circles.

“Talk to me, Gem. Tell me how it feels,” I rasp.

“So good. S-so good,” she moans as her hips move in rhythm with my strokes.

“It gets better, sweetheart. You want my mouth?”

“Yes!”

“Where?”

“I—” She mewls as I slide a finger inside her.

“Tell me, Gem, or I’ll have to stop.”

She whimpers. “I want your mouth ... down there.”

“Down where?”

“On my p-pussy,” she practically yells.

“Good girl.”

In one swift move, I bury my face between her legs, stroking my hot, wet tongue stroke over her clit.

“Oh, God. Oh, shit.” She cries out, her back bowing off the bed.

I slide my hands under her to grip her ass and hold her steady as I make a meal of her, eating her noisily. “You taste fucking amazing. Knew you would,” I mumble, drinking her down.

“Sweet Jesus, do you have electrodes on your tongue or something?” she pants, her eyes glassy with lust as she looks down at me.

I smile wickedly and suck on her clit. Her eyes roll back in her head as I slide another finger inside her, and she rocks helplessly against my face. I reach up with my free hand and tweak her nipple, and she jerks, moaning.

“You like that, Gem?” I mutter, my lips moving against her sex.

She bites her lip. “Yes. I love it.”

Slipping my fingers out of her, I reach up and cup her breasts, stroking my thumbs over her puckered nipples. When she mewls with pleasure, I pinch them between my thumb and forefinger.

“Holy crap,” she chokes, her voice strangled.

I lower my head to suckle her clit again as I pinch and stroke her nipples. Gem babbles incoherently, shaking and trembling when my teeth scrape over her engorged nub.

She strains toward my mouth and begs, “Please, don’t stop. Oh, God, I’m so close, so ... ah!”

Her climax is a violent contraction that makes her shout hoarsely. She gasps, trembles, and jerks against my mouth as I brace her hips and eat her relentlessly. *Jesus*, she comes so fucking hard; my chest swells with the knowledge that it’s my hands and mouth bringing her so much pleasure.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Gem. Can’t wait to get inside this tight cunt. Need to claim you. Need to cum deep inside this hot pussy.” My words are a rumble against the swollen flesh of her sex. “Mine. You’re fucking *mine*.”

“I’m yours, Bentley,” Gem sobs, her body racked with the convulsions of her orgasm.

I crawl up her body, kissing her hard and letting her taste herself on my mouth.

She comes down slowly, crying and shaking. Her fists pound my chest as tears roll down her flushed cheeks. “Damn you, f-for leaving me, Bentley. And d-damn me, too, for not coming after you!”

Chapter 9

Gemma

“HUSH, SWEETHEART. I’VE GOT YOU. YOU’RE OKAY.” Bentley gathers me into his arms and cradles me against his chest. He rocks me gently, smoothing his hands through my hair and down my back.

“Seven g-goddamn years. Wasted!” I choke. “Because of w-what? Pride?”

He shakes his head, wiping away my tears with his thumbs. “Fear. I was scared, Gem. You know how I grew up. I was scared I’d never be enough.”

I nod. It’s the one thing he could’ve said that I understand on a fundamental level. I know the fear of not being enough. Not girly enough, not thin enough, not accommodating enough. Just not *enough*.

“And then with the accident ...” He pauses, his mouth tightening with bad memories. “It was better for me to take the blame. I was already leaving town for college, so it was no biggie.”

It’s one of my greatest regrets, letting Bentley take the blame. “No biggie? Bentley, it was huge. I was trying so hard to be the daughter they wanted me to be, and I let you fall on your sword. We let you,” I say, knowing that Callum feels the same. “And what’s worse is that in all the years since, we’ve never set the record straight with my mother and father. They still hold you responsible for something that wasn’t your fault, and I’m so sorry for that. I’m sorry for letting them drive you away. Not away to college, but away from *me*. From our

friendship. From the potential of us.” I wave a finger between us. “From this.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry, Gemstone. Sorry for leaving without a word and pushing you away. It didn’t have to be the end of our friendship, but I wanted so much more than that with you. I thought we needed time to grow into ourselves and realize who we were without each other. I’ve spent years in Denver making a name for myself as an artist, thinking it was all I needed to be fulfilled. But it wasn’t because I didn’t have you. You fulfill me. I love you, Gem. Always have. Always will.”

My mouth drops open as I gape at him, searching his eyes for any sign of uncertainty and finding none. Oh, this man is wrecking me. This selfless, talented, wonderful man has laid himself bare and made himself vulnerable for me.

I know in some corner of my psyche that we unleashed something in each other when we met. Something unnamable but strong and enduring. A powerful connection that hasn’t been eroded by time or misunderstandings and has brought us right back here. To this moment.

Only Bentley affects me this way. I’m physically naked, but I’m also emotionally exposed to him. He sees me in a way no one else does.

“I love you too, Bentley. Since I was sixteen. Maybe before. But you’re right. Maybe we did need time to figure out who we were. I thought I was so mature back then, but my actions that night proved I wasn’t. I never thanked you for coming after me. I was hurting and angry, but if it weren’t for you”—I shiver as I remember the guy’s hands on me at the party —“things would’ve gotten messy. As it was, they got messy in a whole different way. And that’s on me.”

Bentley leans in, kissing me softly. “It’s on all of us, Gem. We were just kids. We’ve spent years seeking people’s approval. You with your parents. Me with any fucker who dared to look down on me for where I came from.” His mouth twists in a wry smile. “But no more, Gem. No more putting our self-

worth into the hands of others. The only thing that matters is that we're enough for each other."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes again. He's killing me here. "I don't think I've ever heard more beautiful words."

Bentley pushes my hair off my face and whispers hotly, "You're enough, Gem. Just the way you are. You're amazing. Your beautiful mind and gorgeous body make my dick so fucking hard. And so does your trust. Letting me draw you was a big step, and it's not a gift I take lightly."

I shiver as the needy throb reignites between my legs. Gripping his face in my hands, I whisper, "And you're enough, Bentley. You were enough back then, and you're enough now. I don't care where you came from or what you did or didn't have because you're still the best person I've ever met." I pause, a smile pulling at my mouth. "And now I know those wicked fingers are talented in more ways than one."

"Gem," he growls.

My muscles clench. That deep rumble makes me feel like he's already thrusting inside me.

He kisses me with a fierce desperation that steals my breath, devouring me with his lips and tongue. On and on, his mouth hard and demanding until I'm shivering and soft, and needy moans escape from my throat.

He works his way slowly down my neck to my collarbone, dipping his tongue into the hollow of my throat. He touches and tastes and licks and nips at every inch of my body, sucking hard on my nipples until they're so sensitive, I think I might come again if he so much as breathes on them.

My pulse pounds in my throat. He's so hard for me. The heaviness between my legs quickly becomes an ache only he can quench.

Finally, he moves back up my body, adjusting his weight on top of me and sliding his leg between mine. He's so heavy and warm and solid. I'm not a small woman, but I feel womanly and feminine lying beneath his powerful bulk. God, how I love it.

Bentley braces his weight on his elbows and hovers above me, his hands planted on either side of my head and his eyes burning with lust. “I need inside you, Gemstone. Gonna make you mine. I’ve waited long enough. We both have.”

I glance down at his cock, bobbing heavily between my spread thighs. It’s thick and long, much bigger than I’ve seen in the snippets of porn I once watched at a friend’s house. I’m a virgin. I should be nervous, but I’m not. I know we’ll fit together like we’re made for each other.

I watch in fascination as he fists his cock in his hand and nudges it against my soaked folds. He slides it up and down until the head is glistening with my juices.

“Look at me.”

When I meet his dark gaze, he growls, “You’re mine. Say it.”

I say breathlessly, “I’m yours, Bentley. All yours.”

“I haven’t been with anyone since before that night, Gem. Since I realized what you were to me.”

My eyes widen in shock. “But ... I ... that’s—”

“Almost eight years of fucking my hand and imagining it was your tight cunt,” he finishes gruffly.

His filthy words should embarrass me, but they don’t. They make me wild. They unlock an inner vixen I never knew resided inside me, and she emerges wearing hot leather and cracking a whip.

“I want you bare, Gem. Don’t want anything between us this first time.”

I swallow hard. “I want that too. I’m on the pill. I need you inside me.”

“Wrap your legs around my waist and hold tight,” he commands.

I do, my thighs trembling as they grip his hips. He exhales, and with one abrupt flex of his hips, he slides the entire length of his thick cock deep inside me. The pain I expected doesn’t

come. He's worked me up so thoroughly that his passage is easy despite his girth.

"Ah, fuck, Gem," he grunts. "Heaven. You feel like heaven." He pauses, cupping my face. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Better than okay," I huff. "You feel amazing. This is amazing."

Bentley slides a hand under my ass and squeezes, drawing me closer and flexing his hips. Crying out, I arch from the mattress, clawing at his back as he slowly withdraws until only the crown of his cock remains inside me, then thrusts again.

He smothers my moan with a kiss, his tongue thrusting in rhythm with his hips as he drives hard into my aching wetness. He's not gentle, but he's beautiful in his urgency.

He hits some magical spot inside me, causing my internal muscles to contract. I drag my mouth from his. "Bentley, I think I'm going to come ..."

"Not yet, sweetheart. A little longer. Gonna make you come so hard, you'll see stars."

He slows the motion of his hips and holds himself still. Lowering his head to my breast, he draws my hard nipple into the hot, wet heat of his mouth.

Delirious, I writhe beneath him. My muscles clench, and my skin is on fire. I rock my hips, grinding my clit against his pelvis and chasing the orgasm just out of reach.

He releases a guttural moan, and his cock twitches as my muscles flex around him. "Stop moving your hips, or I'll pull out and spank your ass until you're begging me to let you come."

I whimper. *Oh. My. God.* This is a side of Bentley I've never seen before. This demanding, possessive man who knows exactly what I want. What I *need*.

I lie still beneath him, gasping and shaking, my skin slicked with sweat. He bends his head to my breasts again, nipping and flicking my nipples with his tongue. I bite my lower lip, needing to move so badly as Bentley moves between the

throbbing peaks, sucking and biting until I'm almost sobbing with need.

When I'm about to lose my mind, Bentley whispers, "How much do you need to come, sweetheart?"

"More than I need chocolate," I pant.

Bentley's laugh rumbles through my chest, and for whatever reason, it breaks my control. Bentley curses as I buck my hips, using the hard length of his beautiful cock to get myself off.

"Oh, God, I'm coming, Bentley. I can't stop! I can't—"

He thrusts into me and snarls, "Give it to me, Gem."

"Oh fuck, oh fuck—"

"Yes, love. Give me all of it. *Every fucking thing.*"

I thrash underneath him as he slams into me. My climax detonates through me, and my pussy clenches and releases with wave after wave of pleasure. I surrender to it as Bentley grunts, ravaging me with powerful thrusts of his hips.

A husky groan is torn from his throat, and his entire body jerks as he comes. His head rears back, and the strong column of his throat cords as he shouts his release.

But he doesn't stop. He fucks me right through his orgasm, drawing mine out. I hold on tight and clench my thighs around his waist.

He's mine. Finally. And I'm never letting him go again.

Chapter 10

Bentley

I WAKE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, AND THE FIRST THING I SEE is Gem.

She fell asleep in my arms in the studio last night. I woke her briefly to get her upstairs and into my bed. Then she went out like a light again, tucked into my side, her head resting on my chest and her leg thrown over mine. Eventually, I slept too, lulled by her soft breaths, her sweet scent saturating my senses. Now my sheets smell of her, and I fucking love it.

Gem lies on her back with the covers bunched at her hips. Her luscious tits are on display, the nipples I made a meal of last night now relaxed in sleep. A primitive growl rumbles in my chest when I see the marks on her skin where I used my teeth and sank my fingers into her flesh as I took her.

I've marked her. But she's marked me, too, in so many ways. She's engraved herself on my heart and soul.

Turning on my side, I prop an arm beneath my head as I drink her in, drawing a deep breath as raw emotion burns in my chest. She's precious, like the jewel she's named for. My Gemstone. Mine.

Her lips are swollen from our kisses, and her cheeks are softly flushed with sleep. I feather my fingers over her brow, tracing the line of her nose and savoring her soft skin beneath my fingertips. How many times have I drawn this face from memory, wishing I was drawing the real thing? Now she's here, and nothing compares to the reality.

Gemma stirs and blinks her eyes open. She tilts her head to look up at me, and her face breaks into a sleepy smile. “You’re awake.”

I return her smile, feeling lighter and more carefree than I have in years. “Morning, sleepyhead.”

I press a tender kiss to her lips, then adjust her body against mine, pulling her closer so she’s snug against my side. She lays her head on my shoulder and our legs twine under the rumpled sheets. I rest my cheek on her forehead, one hand toying with her curls while the other caresses her bare back.

This is so right, lying here with her in an intimacy I’ve never shared with anyone else. Never wanted to.

“I could get used to this,” she murmurs, sliding a hand down my abs.

I grunt as she grasps my hard cock. Fucker hasn’t gone down since he left her tight heat last night. “Careful, Gemstone, unless you plan to do something about it.”

She kisses me deeply, nudging me onto my back. Then, she’s straddling my hips, her hot pussy poised over my rigid length.

Her hazel eyes are alight with passion and love. “Oh, I plan to do something about it.”

We both moan as she sinks down on me.

And then there’s no talking for some time.

“So, WHAT GIVES?” Callum asks a week later as we position the table where Gem has instructed.

We’re at the shop putting the finishing touches on everything. It’s Saturday, and *Heart of Gold’s* grand opening is at midday, in exactly half an hour. I’m proud of my girl. She’s worked damn hard, and the place looks fantastic with its glass cabinets, fresh paintwork, and modern vibe.

“What do you mean?” I reply, deliberately playing dumb as I place the paper plates and napkins on the table.

“Don’t be an asshole, Skip. Gem’s smile is bright enough to rival the sun, and you’re walking funny because of what I can only assume is your chapped and overworked dick.”

I glare at him. “Careful.”

Cal holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay, cranky pants. It’s good to see two people I love finally happy, is all. You can thank me whenever you’re ready.”

My glare darkens. “Thank you?”

Callum nods. “Yeah, for giving you a nudge in the right direction. You’ve been in love with Gem for years, Skip. It’s about time you found happiness with each other.”

“I’m sure your parents won’t see it that way,” I point out, not looking forward to that little reunion.

Callum sobers at the mention of his mother and father. “Yeah, well, it’s not up to them, is it? A lot of things should never have been up to them.”

“I come bearing gifts. Namely sugar, sugar, and more sugar,” Gem announces as she enters the shop holding boxes from Valentine’s Bakery stacked from her hands to beneath her chin.

I quickly relieve her of them and place them on the table Cal and I just moved into position. I look at her suspiciously. “Did you eat one of the cakes?”

She shakes her head, her eyes wide and innocent. “No. Why?”

“Are you sure? Because you have a little powdered sugar right here,” I say, brushing my thumb over the corner of her mouth.

She grimaces. “Ah, crap.” Her eyes darken as I bring my thumb to my lips and lick away the evidence.

I tug her against me with a grin. “Caught red-handed, sugar lips.” I dip my head and steal a kiss, flicking my tongue across her sweet mouth.

We haven’t spent a night apart since we made love in the studio, alternating between my apartment and hers above the shop. I’ve been inside her at every opportunity and had her in

every conceivable position in the last week, but it's never enough. My need for her is burned into my soul. And judging by the heat kindling in her eyes, she feels the same.

"Aaaaand that's my cue to leave," Callum says in disgust. "On the list of things I do *not* need to see, witnessing my sister playing tonsil hockey with my best friend is at the top." He steals a flapjack from the box. "I'll go shower and be back later to support my little sis in her new venture." He plants a kiss on Gem's head and lifts a hand in farewell as he leaves.

"Huh. Good job we were done here," Gem huffs as she watches his departing back.

"Have I told you how gorgeous you look today?" I squeeze her ass in the figure-hugging jade dress that brings out the green in her eyes.

"Yeah, but I can stand to hear it as many times as you want to tell me." She loops her arms around my neck. "And you're looking pretty hot yourself, mister. Very art-professor-y in your two-piece," she says, indicating my slacks, button-down shirt, and waistcoat.

"I aim to please," I mutter, pulling her in for another kiss.

"Oh, you have. Multiple times," she murmurs against my mouth.

"Gem?"

"Yes, Bentley?"

"We have an audience."

Gem gasps as she follows my gaze to the window where a long queue has formed. Her eyes fly back to mine, panic in their depths. "Do they ... are they waiting to come in here?"

I nod. "Looks like you have your first customers, sweetheart."

"Shit, shit, shit! This is really happening. I'm not sure if I can do this, Bentley. The pressure, the spotlight ... just ... everything. There's still a part of me that thinks I'm not good enough." She wrings her hands and looks at me with panic-stricken eyes. "What if they don't like my designs? What if

they've only come for the free cake or out of pity for the local girl or—”

I cut her off by dragging her into the storage room before she hyperventilates. “Breathe, sweetheart. Just breathe,” I tell her, smoothing my hands over her shoulders and down her arms. “You’ve got this, Gem. You’ve worked damn hard for this and sacrificed a lot, including your parents’ approval. But don’t ever doubt yourself or your talent. Your jewelry is exquisite, like you.” I plant a kiss on her mouth. “I’m so damn proud of you. I’ll be here for moral support, but something tells me you won’t need it because this is your passion and your dream.”

Tears swim in Gem’s eyes as she grabs my face and kisses me noisily. “I love you, Bentley Cormack. Thank you.”

“Love you too, Gemstone. Now, go get ‘em.”

I SPEND the next hour watching Gem do her thing. She’s a natural with people, and they’re drawn to her warm, sunny personality. At one point, the shop is so packed that I can barely see her through the throng of customers as I sit behind the counter.

Callum returns a half hour after opening time. He gapes at the crowd before rolling up his sleeves and taking over the cash register and card machine while I wrap up the customers’ purchases in the tissue paper and *Heart of Gold* gift boxes. Gem gave Cal and me a crash course in wrapping the jewelry in case it got busy, but I don’t think she dreamed there would be this number of people.

Hours pass, and it seems like the whole town has come to see what all the fuss is about. Link and his wife, Natasha, who owns Valentine’s Bakery. Link’s sister, Kat, and her husband, Kurt, with their young son. Sheriff Drayton Saunders and his deputy, Connor, with their wives, Daisy and Jessica. Even the blonde woman who complimented my sketch of Gem at the Art Festival stops by, purchasing two necklaces for her granddaughters.

Today may not be a typical day with it being the grand opening, but Gem's gonna need a sales assistant if this place turns out to be as successful as I think it will be. Pretty sure she'll pass out when I tell her how much she's made in one afternoon.

As the crowd finally begins to thin close to closing time, I see Gemma's shoulders slump. Her eyes lose their sparkle, and her smile doesn't reach her eyes. I know why. It's because of the two people notable for their absence.

As she bids a customer goodbye, I pull her into the back room. "I'm sorry they didn't come," I say, wrapping her in my arms.

She pulls back a little to look up at me. "How did you know?"

"Because you're like an open book, sweetheart. You wear your emotions on your face." I lean in, kissing her softly. "You taste like cinnamon and brown sugar. Have you been stealing the customers' cakes?" I ask, lightening the mood.

She smiles against my mouth. "It was an emergency. My sugar levels were dipping, and I felt faint. I need my energy to keep up with my insatiable boyfriend—" She grinds to an abrupt halt. "Uh, I mean ... that is ... if you want to be my boyfriend."

I shake my head. "No, Gem, I don't."

Her face drops. "I ... You don't?"

I pull her against me, winding my hands into her hair and tugging her head back. "No. I want to be your husband."

Her eyes nearly pop out of her head. "My *husband*?"

"Yeah, you know. The one who rubs your feet and gives you mind-blowing orgasms."

"Is that all husbands do?" she asks breathlessly. "Sounds pretty mediocre to me."

"Not what you said last night when you were shouting my name while I ate your sweet cu—"

"Bentley Cormack."

We both turn at the female voice, so wrapped up in each other that we hadn't noticed her enter the room.

Gemma jumps away from me as if I'm a two-day-old dog turd and squeaks, "Mother!"

Chapter 11

Gemma

MEGAN STONE STANDS IN THE DOORWAY, HER BLONDE HAIR swept into some elegant updo, her designer clothes perfectly tailored to her slim form.

My father appears behind her, wearing an expensive suit and Italian leather shoes. His gray-streaked hair is neatly combed away from his tanned face, courtesy of their most recent tropical vacation. They both look like they've come from a cover shoot for a high-profile magazine.

Nothing like stealing the limelight from your daughter or keeping her waiting on her special day, I think bitterly.

I'm not sure what's worse—having absent parents who didn't give a shit like Bentley's or parents who try to control every tiny aspect of your life like mine.

My mother steps forward. "What's going on here?"

Her voice is heavy with accusation. It's a tone I know well, one she uses when something doesn't meet her approval.

In this case, that something is Bentley.

"Hello, Mrs. Stone. Mr. Stone," he says politely, nodding to them in turn.

Mother tilts her head, her eyes cold as she appraises him. "I'd heard you were back." Her tone is so icy, it's a wonder the water molecules in the air haven't crystallized.

"Funny story," I say with forced brightness. "Bentley and I bumped into each other at the Winter Art Festival a few weeks ago."

Not strictly true, but I can't tell them about the whole naked drawing thing—which led to other highly pleasurable naked activities.

My mother's icy gaze moves to me. "It looks like you did more than 'bump' into each other."

My cheeks heat. "That's true. Bentley has also been helping me get this place ready for today's grand opening, along with Callum."

"I see." Her mouth tightens. "I'm disappointed you haven't made time to see your father and me in the last week, Gemma."

I squeeze Bentley's hand as he tenses beside me. "I'm sorry. I've been so busy with the preparations, but it was worth it because today has been amazing. Come and see," I urge, brushing past them into the shop.

"Is this one of your jewelry items?" my mother asks, plucking a bracelet from one of the displays.

"Yes, it's a silver—"

"It's not my style, but I suppose it will sell," she cuts across me.

"What do you think of the shop? It's the first time you've seen it," Callum asks, closing and locking the door after the last customer and moving toward us.

"It's quaint," my father replies, speaking for the first time. "I'm proud of you, Gemma. You've done a great job here."

The warm glow from his praise evaporates with my mother's next words.

"Tinkering with metal will never give you financial security," she comments acerbically.

My mother's gaze moves to Bentley, and she indicates the two framed drawings on the walls. "I see you took advantage of my daughter to get some of your artwork on display."

Irritation churns in my stomach. "That wasn't Bentley's idea. I asked him for those drawings of the town square when I saw

them in his apartment. I knew they'd be perfect in here."

"When you saw them in his apartment? I see." She sniffs disdainfully, still glaring at Bentley. "I know you came from nothing, but I didn't realize quite how calculating you are. Using Gemma's business venture to gain exposure for your artwork. It's not enough that you ruined my son's career, but you're now interfering in my daughter's."

I clench my hands into fists as I hiss, "That's enough! You have no idea what Bentley is like because you never took the time to get to know him. The only thing he's done is help me, which is more than I can say for you both."

My mother shakes her head. "I'm worried about you, Gemma."

Okay, I wasn't expecting that one. "Why?"

"Because you're not behaving like the Gemma I know."

"No." I shake my head. "You don't get to turn this on me. You're not worried about me. You're worried about how this reflects on you and your precious image."

Mother takes a step toward me. "Gemma Stone, I won't let you waste your education on some pipe dream."

"Look around you, Mother. This isn't a pipe dream. It's *my* dream, and I've made it a reality without your help and approval." I pause to suck in an angry breath. "And that's the problem, isn't it? I don't need you. Callum doesn't need you. We've forged a path that doesn't include the family business you care about more than your own kids!"

The crack of my mother's palm against my face reverberates around the empty shop.

"Megan!"

"Mother!"

Callum and my father's shouts echo in unison. Bentley growls, actually *growls*, as he takes a step toward her. I grab his arm, stilling him. I know he'd never raise his hand to a woman, but I can feel the anger rolling off him in waves.

My mother's hands fly to her mouth. Her eyes widen in shock, and she shakes her head as if denying what she's just done. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean ..." She trails off as a tear trickles down her cheek.

Bentley turns to me, his expression concerned as he gently probes my throbbing cheek. "You okay, sweetheart?"

"Physically, yes," I say, my throat tight with unshed tears. *Emotionally? Not so much.*

Bentley turns back to my mother, who's now standing by my father, his arm around her shoulder. Bentley's eyes are colder than I've ever seen them. "If you ever lay a finger on her again, I swear to God, I'll have you arrested and thrown in jail for assault."

Bentley's voice is eerily calm as he stares holes in my mother, who blanches under his barely-contained fury. "You can say and think whatever the fuck you want about me, but don't ever demean your daughter that way. You should be proud of all she's achieved. Everything in this shop is a part of her. Her heart and soul are in these four walls, in every detail and handcrafted piece," he says, waving a hand around us.

My mother opens her mouth to speak, but Bentley's not done. "I feel sorry for you because you have no idea how big her heart is. Did you know she plans to run workshops for underprivileged kids in the area so they have a safe place where they can pour their fears and hopes and pain into making something beautiful? So she can encourage them the way she encouraged me to pursue their dreams and provide an outlet for emotions they can't name or won't discuss? Do you know she worked day and night to make this place a reality, to push herself to share her vision with the world, expressed as it was in gemstones and silver and gold? Don't you see her, *really* see her, in her art?"

My heart almost explodes at Bentley's words. If I didn't already know he loved me, I do now.

"How dare you preach to us about our daughter?" Mother snaps, regaining her composure. "You may think you're some high and mighty artist now, but you're still the good-for-

nothing, ungrateful boy who cost our son his career.” Her face twists into an ugly grimace. “You should’ve stayed away. That was the deal.”

Bentley flinches, the only indication that their hurtful words have hit their mark.

I fix my gaze on my mother. “Deal? What deal?”

“We mutually agreed that Bentley would keep his distance, not return to Garland, and certainly not encourage you and your silly schoolgirl crush.”

My blood turns to ice in my veins. “You *mutually* agreed?”

She nods. “In return, we gave Bentley enough financial support to fund his education at his dream university, a bill he and his family would never have been able to afford, not even with the support of financial aid. It was a debt we never expected he’d be able to repay, but he paid back every penny, with interest,” she admits grudgingly.

“I ... you paid him off?” Callum asks in disbelief, voicing the accusation stuck in my throat.

I’m bombarded with too many emotions to process. Pain at their deceit, not just my parents, but also Bentley. How could he not tell me? We’ve become so close over this last week. He told me he loved me. Was it all a lie?

No. I refuse to believe that what we have isn’t real. This is Bentley. *My* Bentley. He did what he did for me. I know it deep in my soul.

I step toward him, desperately needing him to anchor me. Looking into his eyes, I whisper, “Bentley?”

“I left because I wanted to make something of myself. I did it so I had something to offer you when I came back. And I was always coming back for you, Gem. My Gemstone,” he murmurs, cupping my face. “At first, I was convinced I was back here for the job, but I was lying to myself. I loved you when you were sixteen, Gem, but it’s nothing like my love for you now. It’s like comparing a snowflake to a blizzard.”

I swallow past the ball of emotion in my throat. “I should be angry ... I *am* angry with you. But I understand why you did it. I understand the need to make something of yourself, to prove to others that you’re good enough. But I also remember what you said the night we ... the night we, you know.” I blush, aware that we have an audience, but plow on. “You said we were enough for each other. And that’s all that matters to me, Bentley. You see me in a way no one else does. And I see you, too. Your flaws, your strengths, your talent, and your selflessness. I feel your love for me like a physical thing, and I’ll never stop fighting for that love. For you. For *us*.”

Bentley yanks me into his arms, crushing me against him. “God, I love you.”

“Love you too, big guy,” I wheeze. “Even though you’re about to crack a rib.”

Bentley’s laugh rumbles through me as he loosens his hold. I plant a quick kiss on his mouth, take a deep breath, and turn in the circle of his arms to face my parents.

“Bentley wasn’t responsible for the accident. I was, albeit indirectly. Bentley did nothing but be a good friend. It was me who snuck out to the party at a senior’s house. Bentley and Callum followed me because they knew this guy’s parties had a habit of getting out of control. Bentley stepped in when a guy I was talking to got a little too handsy. I don’t think he would’ve stopped if Bentley hadn’t stepped in. I threw a fit and walked home, and a drunk driver ran into their car on their way home. Bentley was sober and happened to be driving, but he took the blame so I wouldn’t have to.”

Relief washes over me as I finally confess the truth to my parents, and I feel a lightness I haven’t experienced in years. “So as much as you look down on him because he was less privileged, he’s risen above his circumstances and surpassed people like you, who see yourselves as superior. You’re so blinded by your misguided sense of right and wrong that it’s made you unyielding and closed-off. For years, you’ve blamed Bentley for the accident that robbed Callum of a career as a professional athlete, *a career he never even wanted*.”

My mother turns shocked eyes on Callum.

“It’s true,” Callum admits quietly. “I pursued football because you wanted it for me so badly, but it wasn’t a choice I would’ve made.” His mouth twists with a wry smile. “I hated myself for a while, but I was ... relieved when the doctors said I couldn’t play at a professional level without some difficulty.”

“We messed up, but we just wanted you both to be happy,” my father says, looking ashamed.

“No, you didn’t. You wanted us to fall in line with your plans for us. But this man”—I point to Bentley, standing beside me like I know he always will—“makes me happy. He could’ve had both—the career and me—but he put what he thought was best for me above what he wanted.”

I pause, drawing a breath and glancing at my brother. “As for Callum and me ... we’re happy *despite* you, not *because* of you.” Those words physically hurt as they leave my mouth, but I don’t regret them. I can’t because it’s the cold, hard truth.

Bentley squeezes my hand, and I lean into his strength as tears spill down my cheeks. I wipe them away and lift my chin. “I’d like you both to leave now. And please don’t come back unless you’re ready to accept me for who I am and not some ridiculous ideal I could never live up to.”

My mother’s face is pinched with anger and humiliation, and my father looks like his world has dropped from beneath him. Neither utters a word as they head toward the door.

As my father pulls it open, I add, “Oh, and in the interest of full disclosure, I have a gemstone tattoo on my lower back.”

My father’s mouth tightens, and my mother mutters, “Come on, Leonard. We’re not wanted here.”

The second the door closes behind them, I collapse into Bentley’s arms, sobbing. This certainly wasn’t the ending I anticipated today.

Bentley wraps me in his arms, holding me as I release years of anger, frustration, and sorrow. Speaking my truth to my parents wasn’t pleasant, but a huge weight has lifted from my

shoulders. I only wish I'd done it sooner. It'll take me a while to forgive myself for that.

When my sobs calm a little, Bentley steps back, and my brother's arms envelop me in a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to speak for you," I whisper, my voice thick from crying. "It all just came pouring out."

Callum squeezes me tighter, resting his chin on my head. "Don't ever apologize to me, Gem. I'm as much to blame as anyone. I should've spoken up sooner. I know they favored me, and I guess I didn't want to disappoint them either."

I pull back to look up at him. "We both dealt with it differently, but never doubt how much I love you, Cal, even if you are a huge pain in my ass sometimes."

Cal feigns an innocent look. "Moi? I'm a fucking angel."

I raise an eyebrow. "Yeah? Well, be careful that halo doesn't slip around your throat and choke you, hot shot."

We grin at each other, and he chucks me under the chin. "Love you, snot monster."

"Love you too, fart head."

Chapter 12

Bentley

I TAKE GEM BACK TO MY APARTMENT, FULLY INTENDING TO run her a hot bath, feed her, and then take her to bed and hold her after the emotional shitshow of the last hour.

But Gem has other ideas because she's on me as soon as I close the door behind us, her soft body and mouth crashing into mine.

"Gem, you're upset. Let me take care of you," I mutter against her mouth even as my cock goes from zero to nine-inch-hero in two seconds flat.

"You can take care of me by getting inside me," she pants, nipping at my mouth. "I need you, Bentley. I need you to fuck me hard and deep until I come screaming around your cock."

Okay, then. Seems my dirty talk is rubbing off on my little Gemstone. And who am I to refuse when I want exactly what she wants more than my next breath?

My hands move to the back of her dress, and I lower the zip, sliding it off her shoulders so it pools at her feet. Then, I unhook her bra and toss it aside. Her panties are gone with one quick rip and join her bra on the floor.

"Oh, shit, that was hot," she huffs, glancing at her torn panties.

"Just getting started, sweetheart," I mutter, dipping my head and fastening my mouth around one of her nipples.

She gasps, digging her fingers into my shoulders and arching against me. "Dear God, you're good with your tongue."

My chuckle is muffled against her skin as I heft her into my arms and carry her to the bathroom. I reach into the shower cubicle and turn on the jets, letting the water warm for a moment while I quickly undress. Tugging her under the hot spray with me, I lather some shower gel between my palms and massage it into her slick skin, and Gem moans as my fingers work over the tension knots in her shoulders.

Kneeling in front of her, I slide my hands up the backs of her thighs. I grab her ass and bury my face between her legs, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply.

She sucks in a hard breath and releases it with a moan. I look up, deliberately holding her gaze as I part her folds and give her a long, firm lick.

Turning her, I instruct, "Put your hands on the shower door."

She does as I ask, leaning forward and flattening her palms against the glass so her back is arched and her ass is stuck out. I curse at the sight and sink my teeth into her rounded flesh, not hard enough to hurt but enough to make her gasp and jerk against my mouth.

"I wish you could see yourself like this," I mutter harshly, squeezing handfuls of her soapy skin. "So goddamn beautiful. I fucking love it."

Sliding a hand between her thighs, I open my mouth over her flesh, sucking and nipping one cheek and then the other. I groan as I slip a finger between her folds to find her clit, already wet and swollen. "Always so ready for me, sweetheart."

Gem pants, rocking against my fingers as I slap her ass. "Oh, God, Bentley."

I rise to my feet and grip her hip with one hand while the other slides around and between her legs. Sliding my thumb over her sensitive bud, I slap her ass again. Gem moans and sags against me, her palms braced against the shower door.

"Give me your mouth."

She does as she's told, tilting her head back for my kiss. As my tongue invades her mouth, I slap her ass again while

circling her clit with my thumb.

“Please,” she whispers, her eyes blazing with heat as she gazes at me. “Please, Bentley.”

My breathing is as ragged as hers, but I don’t want this to be over yet. I want to give her pleasure unlike anything she’s experienced so far.

Turning Gem toward the spray, I pin her against my wet chest with one arm. Taking her hand with the other, I pull it behind her and between our bodies, curling it around my cock. I bite ear earlobe. “Stroke me.”

Releasing her hand, I move mine between her legs, gliding my fingers back and forth over her clit. I thrust into Gem’s hand with a groan as she squeezes my shaft and slides her thumb over the crown. When she slides her hand back to the base, I flex my hips and pump into her grip.

Tugging on her swollen clit, I grit, “Feel that, sweetheart? How fucking hard you make me?”

Gem makes an incoherent noise as I gently pinch her clit. She strokes the length of my rigid shaft again, and I suck in a breath as she pauses to fondle my aching balls.

Knocking her hand away, I line myself up at her entrance and thrust inside. Gem groans and lets her head fall back against my shoulder. I bite her neck and pump into her, one hand gripped around her hip and my arm around her ribcage to steady her.

“God, you’re so big. You fill me so perfectly,” she whispers.

“You’re made to fit me, Gemstone,” I grunt, sliding my hand up to squeeze her breast and tweak her nipple.

Gem makes a low sound in her throat, whimpering as I continue to fuck her from behind with long, deep strokes.

I grab her jaw, forcing her head up, and kiss her with desperate hunger. No other woman could unleash this carnal side of me, own me, make me fall apart like this.

Steam envelops us as Gem pants my name, pleading for release. I’ll give her what she needs. What *we* need.

I slide out of her and turn her around, backing her against the shower wall and gripping her ass in both hands. “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

“Standing up?” Gem squeaks, her eyes wide.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart. I won’t let you fall.” I kiss her, hot and hard, bracing my legs. “But I need you to guide me in.”

Gem wraps an arm around my shoulders and reaches between us, grasping my cock and guiding me to her entrance. With one firm thrust, I seat myself fully inside her, my chest pressed against hers so I can feel the pounding of her heart.

I start to fuck her again, my thrusts hard but my eyes soft as I drink in her beautiful face flushed with passion.

The hot water cascades over us while our moans echo off the tiled walls. My orgasm is approaching like a freight train, coiling tighter and poised to snap. But I need Gem to come first. She’s close. I can hear it in her gasped breaths and feel it as her hands claw at me.

I angle my hips, driving my cock inside her so it hits her G-spot, and she splinters. I hold steady as her body jerks violently, pumping my hips once ... twice ... and come *hard*. Spots dance in front of my eyes as I spill inside her, the pain of her nails raking down my back only adding to the pleasure.

I find Gem’s mouth with mine, kissing her softly as we both catch our breath.

“If it weren’t for your arm around me, I think I’d slide to the floor in a boneless heap,” she mumbles.

I laugh as I lower her carefully to her feet, ensuring she’s steady before reaching up to turn off the shower. We dry off with two fluffy towels from the heated rail, and I grab one of my shirts for Gem while I pull on sweats and a t-shirt. My shirt hangs almost to her knees, but she looks damn sexy wearing my clothes.

“You owe me a pair of panties,” she says, casting me an accusing look.

“Funny, I seem to remember you saying how hot it was as I tore them off you,” I remind her with a smirk. “But I’ll buy you a bunch of new ones if it means I get to dine on your sweet cunt every night.”

Gem’s cheeks flush at my words, and she bites her lip. “Maybe I won’t wear any at all. Maybe I’ll go commando in the shop in case my lover swings by for a lunchtime quickie.”

My mind gives me a full-color image of Gem bent over one of her glass display cabinets with her skirt hiked up around her hips while I fuck her from behind like a champ.

I stalk toward her, dragging her against me, and claim her mouth in a deep kiss. She moans and slides her fingers through my damp hair, meeting the thrust of my tongue with hers. When we finally come up for air, we’re both breathing heavily.

“We need to talk,” Gem says, sifting her fingers through my hair.

I sober, knowing we still have stuff we need to discuss. I tap the end of her nose. “How about I feed you first, and then we’ll talk.”

AN HOUR LATER, we’ve demolished homemade burgers and fries, and Gem is curled against me on the sofa.

“I’m still angry with you, despite the toe-curling sex,” she murmurs, pulling back to look at me with so many emotions swirling in her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me about the money my parents loaned you?”

“Because it felt like a dirty secret. They paid me to stay away from you, and I let them. It’s not something I’m proud of, Gem, and I’m not sure I deserved your defense of me earlier because my motives weren’t completely selfless. I knew how I felt about you, even back then, but I couldn’t stay in Garland if I wanted to study art, and I couldn’t ask you to come with me.”

“We could’ve still seen each other while you were at university,” she points out.

I nod. “You’re right. But I was messed up back then, Gem. I hid it well, but I went off the rails after my dad left and my mom lost herself at the bottom of a vodka bottle. I’m pretty fucking sure I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you and Callum. You both saved me in different ways. And despite your parents’ faults, they kept me fed most nights and gave me a place to bed down.”

“What happened to her? To your mom?” Gem asks.

“She took off not long after I left for university, and I haven’t seen her since. I don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

Gem wraps her arms around me. “I’m so sorry. I knew you had it rough, but I didn’t realize how bad things were. You never talked about your parents.”

“I knew I had to make something of myself to have any chance with you. I heard the whispers behind my back growing up, and I didn’t want to end up like my mom and dad. So I took your parents’ money and used it for something positive.”

“But why did you stay away so long?”

I sigh, pushing my hand through my hair. “The longer I stayed away, the harder it was to come back. All I could think about were the shitty memories—my parents, the fights at school, the accident. But then I realized there were a lot of bright spots too. And they all featured you, Gem. You never saw me any differently because of where I came from, despite your wealthy background. That night, the night of the party, when you gave me the art supplies and tried to kiss me, I pushed you away, and it’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.” I shrug. “Who knows what would’ve happened if I’d kissed you that night? All I knew at the time was that giving into my feelings for you would mean risking your future.”

“You didn’t think you were worth that risk,” Gem says sadly, nodding in understanding.

If anyone gets it, she does. Years of knockdowns from her parents left her doubting her self-worth. Two completely different backgrounds, and yet the damage was the same.

Gem lifts my hand, lacing our fingers together. “I would’ve waited for you if you’d asked. I want you to know that.”

“You did wait for me,” I remind her, tucking a curl behind her ear.

“Turns out you were worth the wait.” She blushes prettily. “My heart belongs to you, Bentley Cormack, and yours is solid gold, which is why I named the shop for you.”

Heart of Gold. I shake my head, looking at her in shock. “And here I thought it was because of the jewelry.”

Gem shrugs and then smirks. “Well, that too.”

I tug her toward me. “So, if you’re my Gemstone, and I’m your Heart of Gold, what does that makes us?”

Gem presses her lips to mine. “A match made in heaven.”

Epilogue

Gemma

Four Weeks Later

“I think I’m more nervous than you,” I say, glancing at Bentley.

He looks edible in his navy suit and pink shirt. Who says men can’t wear pink? My man certainly can, and he makes it look *good*.

Tonight, it’s Bentley’s turn to shine. The university is putting on a gallery show featuring his works, and I finally get to see the life drawing I posed for what seems like a lifetime ago.

“Don’t be nervous, sweetheart. I think you’re going to love it,” Bentley replies, steady as a rock.

He’s certainly been my rock over the last month after the fallout with my parents and supporting me with my business. Things have been crazy since the grand opening, and it’s only in the last few days that things have calmed down, and I’ve been able to catch my breath.

Heart of Gold has exceeded my wildest expectations, and if things continue the way they are, I’ll need to look for a sales assistant to help me. I need to replenish my stock, but I haven’t had the time to work on new pieces due to the demands of the shop.

I haven’t heard from my parents. I know they’ve been in touch with Callum, who’s working on his relationship with them. I don’t begrudge him if he can find answers and make peace

with them. The sad thing is, I haven't missed them. How can you miss something you never had?

It can't be easy knowing that your daughter resents you, and some truths are hard to face. If they make an effort in the future, I'm prepared to sit down and talk. But they need to make the first move. They have to prove they want a relationship, a real relationship, with me. I guess only time will tell.

As for Bentley and me? We've spent every available moment together, splitting our time between his apartment and mine. When the girls and I made our pact, love was the last thing we expected to find. But Cupid had other ideas, and every single one of us has fallen for our soulmate. Even Peyton, who's all loved up with Mr. Property Developer. Seems he wasn't quite the tyrant she first thought.

Cleary went to Vegas and fell for the bearded tattooist who sat next to her on the plane. Then, she shocked us all by revealing that she's the author of one of the books we read as part of our book club. The woman has talent because that book had a great plot and was seriously hot.

Tabitha, Devyn, Cordy, and Mandy all had similar stories about finding true love when they least expected it, and our group chat has been buzzing day and night over the last month.

The university offered Bentley an extended tenure until the end of the academic year, and then he'll decide what comes next. Lecturing at the university is relatively stress-free, and he gets plenty of time for his art, which keeps him fulfilled and on an even keel. It's more than merely putting pencil to paper for him; it's his therapy and what got him through some tough times.

Bentley leads me through the foyer and into the university art studio, where his gallery of work has been set up. We're here early, so he can show me the finished drawing before anyone else arrives.

My nerves jangle as we enter, and I smooth my sweaty palms down my white slacks, which I teamed with the multi-colored

cashmere sweater Bentley gave me as a Valentine's gift. I'm also wearing the sexy lingerie he bought me, but no one gets to see that except him.

Bentley steps behind me, placing his hands over my eyes. "Keep these closed. No peeking until I say." His voice is a rumble next to my ear, causing goosebumps to break out over my neck and shoulder.

I squeeze my eyes shut, and Bentley wraps his arms around me, walking me forward and getting me into position.

"Okay. Open your eyes."

It takes a moment for my brain to process what I'm seeing. A breathtaking display of work is laid before me, and the stand next to it says, *Gemma: A muse through the years*.

I falter, moving among the display as if in a dream. I see myself in different forms and formats, from pencil on the margins of school-ruled paper to charcoals, pastels, and paint. Images of me as a girl, a moody teenager, a woman, an artist, and a lover. A tempest, in a dream, in his imagination, and finally, the life drawing that re-ignited it all.

He's captured me after that first kiss we shared in the studio, and I look ... beautiful. This is how he sees me. My eyes are sultry, my mouth is swollen, and my cheeks are flushed as I gaze beyond the viewer at my lover. The sweep of my neck, the curve of my shoulder, and my necklace nestled in the swell of my breasts while the silk sheet hints at my generous curves beneath.

The piece is titled *Priceless Gem*.

At this point, I almost break down and start bawling. The entire display is a love story, beautifully mapped out over the years.

At the end of the gallery walk, I see Bentley's words in boldface print on a piece of framed parchment. It's an explanation of his work and the inspiration behind it. It tells of the girl he's loved all his life, the muse who saw his soul when he thought he had no soul, the woman who revitalized his imagination and loved him when he thought himself so

unworthy, the woman who taught him that love is a choice and happiness is within reach—if only one were brave enough to reach out and claim it. And finally, how he realized that he only needs to be worthy and deserving in the eyes of two people—himself and the woman he loves. Me.

When I turn, he's there, watching me, waiting for me. I go to him, pulling his head down and claiming his mouth, pouring every ounce of love I have for this man into my kiss.

“I've loved you for so long, Gem,” he says gruffly, cupping my face and wiping the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. “You were with me every day of every year, and I was a fucking fool to stay away for so long.”

He drops to one knee, pulling a velvet box from his trousers pocket. “I will never leave you again. I'm yours, Gem, every part of me, the good bits and the bad. Gemma Stone, will you marry me?”

He opens the box to reveal an emerald gemstone set in an eighteen-carat gold ring. It's perfect. It's us.

More tears spill down my cheeks as I nod. “Yes, I'll marry you, Bentley Cormack, just as soon as you like.”

Bentley slips the ring on my finger, bending forward to kiss it before rising to his feet. He wraps me in his arms, and his mouth finds mine, sealing our future with a kiss.

You can read more stories from the small town of Garland:

Natasha and Link's story: [Claiming Valentine](#)

Daisy and Drayton's story: [Claiming Daisy](#).

Jessica and Connor's story: [Claiming Christmas](#).

Keep reading for a sneak peek of [Tarnished](#), the first book in my [Silver Springs Series](#).

Bonus Content

Tarnished

Cassidy

I've been in love with Asher for as long as I can remember.
But this headstrong, billionaire rancher wants no part of me.
He says I'm too young.

He's wrong.

Asher still sees me as the girl I was.

It's time to show him the woman I've become.

Asher

I'm a man of few weaknesses.

Cassidy is one of them.

She's my Kryptonite.

Too beautiful.

Too Tempting.

And completely off-limits.

Almost losing her is the wake-up call I need.

I hope I haven't left it too late to claim the only woman I've ever loved.

Chapter One

Cassidy

MY MOTHER IS FINISHING HER SECOND WHISKEY AS I DISH UP supper. Thanks to her frivolous spending, our grocery budget is meager, so I've made a chicken pie and stretched it out with plenty of vegetables. God knows what she buys, but it's always a struggle to get through the month to my next paycheck.

Now in her mid-forties, she's still a knockout. She has a great figure and a lovely face, and she uses both to good advantage. I've lost count of the number of lovers she's had over the last ten years.

"What you need is a man to loosen you up a bit," she says as we sit down to supper. She pauses to take a slug from her tumbler of whiskey. "You'll need a bit of a makeover first, though. Put on a little makeup and buy some new clothes that fit you better."

It's the same every night—my mother already tipsy, pointing out my shortcomings. I bite my tongue. It only makes her worse if I answer back. The best course of action is to say nothing at all.

The chicken pie is delicious, served with homemade bread rolls, but she hardly notices what she's eating as she rambles about a man in town allegedly having an affair with a married woman. She seems to thrive on bad news and misery, which is why I keep a good distance between myself and the coldhearted woman who calls herself my mother.

I eat a mouthful of my pie, wondering for the hundredth time where my father is.

I was eleven when my parents first split, and he took me to Denver. I spent the next five years with him, missing the wide-open spaces of Silver Springs. Then my father's business went under. He wasn't the same after that. Not that we were close before. With no way to support himself, let alone a teenager, he brought me back and dumped me on my mother's doorstep. He said a girl my age needed security, and he could no longer provide that for me. Why he thought my mother could, is beyond me. He knew as well as I did that her behavior was unpredictable at the best of times—he just chose not to remember. He left me on her front porch, a shy, awkward teenager full of insecurities and hormones.

Life has been a struggle ever since. I've almost saved enough to move into a tiny apartment in town. I've had all I can take of living here, with a parent who treats me with indifference at best and disdain at worst. I'm twenty-one years old, and it's time I took control of my life.

"I always wanted a beautiful little girl who looked like me," my mother sighs wistfully. "You know, if you made a little effort, lost some weight, and got your hair styled properly, you'd be quite attractive, Cassidy," she says, determined to ram my shortcomings down my throat.

I clench my teeth. "Beauty isn't everything, Mother. I'd rather be smart. Even the most beautiful people can be ugly on the inside," I say with a meaningful look in her direction.

"If you're so smart, why don't you go back to college and get a better job," she retorts, ignoring my snub. "Working in a veterinary surgery isn't exactly aiming high, is it? Although I must admit, Dr. Cole is a good-looking man," she adds with a lusty grin, causing me to almost choke on a mouthful of vegetables. "I asked him for a drink last week when I saw him in town, but he ignored me. He must have a girlfriend," she says as if that's the only reason a man would turn her down.

The idea of my mother asking Brand out is mortifying. I know Brand isn't interested in a relationship with anyone, let alone a

woman like my mother, who drinks, smokes, and gossips too much. Brand has never said anything, but rumor has it he lost someone he loved years ago.

My mother leans back in her chair, her pale blue eyes raking me up and down. “You’ll never get anywhere with any man looking like you do, you know.”

I drop my fork, leaving the rest of my food untouched as I turn to look at my mother, my eyes flashing with anger and pain. “Why do you hate me so much?”

The following silence is laden with tension as she considers her reply. “Did you know your father wanted a son? He never said it, but I could see his disappointment when you were born. He wanted to try again for a boy, but I refused. One kid was enough. When you were eleven years old, and your father divorced me, he said he’d take you with him if I’d loan him enough money to set up his car renovation business. So, I did, and he took you off my hands, even though he didn’t want you either.”

I stare at my mother in horror, the color draining from my face. She’s always had a vicious tongue, but this is a new level. Over the years, I’ve had to accept that my mother and I will never have the close relationship I always yearned for, but it’s devastating to learn that neither of my parents ever really wanted me.

I get to my feet and clear the table without a word, carrying the plates into the kitchen. Escaping onto the porch, I take deep breaths to keep the tears at bay. I wrap my arms around myself, cold despite the balmy summer evening. Walking out to the front yard, I stop at the railing separating our land from the Stanton ranch. It’s a beautiful view at night, with the moon painting the leaves of the spruce tree in the front yard silver.

But I’m blind to all that beauty, my thoughts consumed by my mother’s revelations. When I think I’ve experienced the worst, another knife slices my heart. I don’t want to go back inside the house. Maybe I can stay here until the sun chases the moon from the sky, taking my worries with it.

“SHE SAID *WHAT?*” Dani demands the following morning when we meet for breakfast in the local café in town. “I’m sorry, Cass, I know she’s your mother, but she’s a fucking cow!”

Since kindergarten, Dani and I have been friends and kept in touch when I moved to Denver with my father. When I returned, we picked up our friendship as if we’d never been apart. Having her in my life is one of the few things that keeps me going.

“I shouldn’t be surprised, not really. She’s never tried to hide her dislike of me,” I say, glancing across the table at Dani with a grimace. “I’ve tried my best, but it’s never been enough.”

“I don’t think it’s you she hates so much as herself,” Dani says intuitively. “The sooner you get out of there, the better. Like I’ve told you a hundred times, there’s always a place for you at the ranch.”

“Yeah, right,” I snort. “Asher would love having me under his roof.”

It’s a source of constant sadness because Asher and I were close before I left for Denver. The ranch was like my second home when I was growing up, and many of my happiest memories are of the long summers I spent with him and Dani.

Nowadays, he doesn’t even look at me and barely speaks to me. It’s as if I’ve become invisible. Apart from that afternoon in his office at the ranch a few years after my return to Silver Springs. I’d just turned eighteen, and the memory of that encounter still makes my nipples tighten and the pulse between my legs surge to life.

“Asher is a fool. He can’t see what’s right in front of his nose,” Dani huffs. “You need to move on. Stop wearing your heart out on my brother and go on a date.”

I shake my head firmly. “Not interested.”

Dani’s gaze is on me, but she doesn’t say anything.

I’ve been in love with Asher Stanton for as long as I can remember. I’ve been watching him from a distance my whole life. He’s gorgeous, with his dirty blond hair, golden-brown

eyes, and muscular body. He has a presence, a way of carrying himself, that commands people's attention.

I've lost count of the daydreams I've spun around him, where we fall into bed, make babies together, and live happily ever after. The whole baby-making part usually fades to black in my mind, having had no experience in this department aside from a few less-than-satisfying kisses in high school.

He's a loner despite his massive wealth—courtesy of wise investments and his sought-after purebred cattle. He doesn't chase the lifestyle that others with his kind of money do. He'd much rather be at home working on his ranch in faded jeans and a t-shirt than wearing a designer suit at some glitzy social function. In my opinion, he looks equally hot in either.

I take a sip of my coffee. "So, have you got your outfit organized for the charity ball next weekend?" I ask Dani.

"Yep. Nice little strapless number. Gonna show Inola what he's missing," she says with a wicked grin.

"Is Officer Inola still driving you crazy?" I ask, giving my friend a knowing smile.

Dani works as a clerk at Silver Springs Police Department, and being around Officer Inola all day is driving her crazy. She certainly doesn't have to work, but she's adamant she wants a career and isn't content to live off her inheritance.

Dani flushes and shifts uneasily in her chair. "He told me I was too young to make googly eyes at him and not to do it anymore. Didn't even realize I *was* making googly eyes at him. I mean, there's no denying he's hot... and dangerous. And did I say hot? Most women look at him like they want to eat him. Maybe my money intimidates him." She sighs.

I frown. "I don't think Inola is like that. He's a whole lot of man, I'll give you that. He's street-wise, and you've been sheltered," I point out.

"Thanks to my brother, who still thinks I'm five years old," Dani mutters. She takes a long breath, summoning a smile as she looks at me. "So, what about you? Are you going to the ball, Cinderella?"

I laugh at the comparison. “Can’t. I’m on call at the surgery that night. You’ll have to vamp it up for both of us.”

“Ugh. Sucks you have to work,” Dani says with a grimace.

“It’s not so bad. I love my job,” I say, nibbling at my croissant. The only person I want to go to the ball with seems to hate me these days.

Dani frowns. “Cass, you’re barely twenty-one. You’re too young to waste your life working and pining over a man.”

“You can’t help who you love,” I say, giving her a meaningful look. I know her feelings for Officer Inola go deeper than mere infatuation.

“He’s scared, Cass,” she says softly. “Our mother was twelve years younger than our father, the same as the age difference between you and him. Seeing our mother run off with a younger man pretty much killed our father. I was too young to remember, but if you ask me, she can’t have loved him in the first place. Asher’s always blamed it on the difference in their ages. He says they were from different generations and should never have married in the first place.”

Hearing her talk about it always makes me feel bad for them both. “Do you ever hear from her?”

“Occasionally. We get a birthday and Christmas card and the odd phone call, but—” she shrugs, “—she lives in Virginia now, married the guy she left our father for.”

“I’ll never understand how a mother can leave her children. Why have kids if you don’t intend to love them with everything you have?” I muse sadly.

“I hear ya. I guess not everyone is made for parenthood. Mom leaving made Asher bitter. I was only five at the time, so I don’t remember much, but he was seventeen. It hasn’t left him with a high opinion of women.”

“I can understand why,” I sigh, smiling and murmuring my thanks to the waitress as she comes over to refill our coffee.

“I wish he’d see that not all relationships end up like your parents,” she says wryly. “Have you heard from your father?”

“No, and I don’t expect to. He’s never been great at keeping in touch, but it’s been years since I last heard from him. It’s for the best. He’s as self-absorbed as my mother. You know what their relationship was like. Fiery at the best of times. They were either all over each other or at each other’s throats. There was no middle ground. It’s bad enough living on the roller coaster of my mother’s mood swings without throwing any other complications into the mix.”

Dani takes a huge bite of her donut. “Men, huh?” she asks through a mouthful of sugary dough. “They’re all a pain in the ass.”

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