

LBRIS

We know
books

the things
we leave
unfinished

REBECCA YARROS



PENGUIN BOOKS



CHAPTER ONE

Georgia

My dearest Jameson,

This is not our end. My heart will always remain with you no matter where we are. Time and distance are only inconveniences to a love like ours. Whether it's days, months, or even years, I will be waiting. We will be waiting. You'll find me where the creek bends around the swaying aspen trees, just as we both dreamed, waiting with the one we love. It's killing me to leave you, but I'll do it for you. I'll keep us safe. I will wait for you every second, every hour, every day for the rest of my life, and if that's not enough, then eternity, which is exactly how long I'll love you, Jameson.

Come back to me, my love.

Scarlett

Georgia Ellsworth. I brushed my thumb over my credit card, wishing I could wipe hard enough to erase the letters. Six years of marriage, and the only thing I'd walked away with was a name that wasn't even mine.

In a few minutes, I wouldn't have that, either.

"Number ninety-eight?" Juliet Sinclair called out from behind the plexiglass window of her booth, like I wasn't the only person at the Poplar Grove DMV and hadn't been for the last hour. I'd flown into Denver this morning, driven into the afternoon, and hadn't even been to my home yet—that's how desperate I was to rid myself of the last pieces of Damian in my life.

Hopefully, losing his name would make losing him and six years of my life hurt just a little less.

"Right here." I put my credit card away and walked up to her window.

“Where’s your number?” she asked, holding out her hand and wearing a satisfied smirk that hadn’t changed much since high school.

“I’m the only one here, Juliet.” Exhaustion beat at every nerve in my body. If I could just get through this, I could curl up in that big armchair in Gran’s office and ignore the world for the rest of my life.

“Policy says—”

“Oh, stop it, Juliet.” Sophie rolled her eyes as she walked into Juliet’s booth. “I’ve got Georgia’s paperwork, anyway. Go take a break or something.”

“Fine.” Juliet pushed away from the counter, vacating her seat for Sophie, who had graduated the year before us. “Nice to see you, Georgia.” She flashed a saccharine-sweet smile in my direction.

“You too.” I offered her the practiced smile that had served as my glue for the past few years, holding me together while everything else disintegrated.

“Sorry about that.” Sophie cringed, scrunching her nose and adjusting her glasses. “She’s... Well, she hasn’t changed much. Anyway, everything appears to be in order.” She handed back the papers my lawyer had given me yesterday afternoon with my new social security card, and I slid them inside the envelope. How ironic that while my life had fallen apart, the physical manifestation of that dissolution was held together by a perfect, forty-five-degree staple. “I didn’t read the settlement or anything,” she said softly.

“It was in *Celebrity Weekly!*” Juliet sang from the back.

“Not all of us read that tabloid trash!” Sophie retorted over her shoulder, then gave me a sympathetic smile. “Everyone here was really proud of the way you held your head up through... everything.”

“Thanks, Sophie,” I replied, swallowing the lump in my throat. The only thing worse than failing at the marriage everyone had

warned me about was having my heartbreak and humiliation published by every website and magazine catering to the gossip lovers who devoured personal tragedy in the name of a guilty pleasure. Holding my head up and keeping my mouth shut when cameras were thrust in my face was exactly what had earned me the nickname “The Ice Queen” over the last six months, but if that was the cost of keeping whatever was left of my dignity, so be it.

“So, should I say welcome home? Or are you just visiting?” She handed me a little printed paper that would serve as my temporary driver’s license until the new one came in the mail.

“I’m home for good.” My answer may as well have been broadcast from the radio station. Juliet would make sure everyone in Poplar Grove knew before dinner.

“Well, then welcome home!” She smiled brightly. “Rumor has it your mom is in town, too.”

My stomach twisted.

“Really? I...uh...haven’t been over there yet.” *Rumor has it* meant Mom had been spotted in either one of our two grocery stores or the local bar. The second possibility was much higher. Then again, maybe it was a good—

Don’t finish that.

Even thinking Mom might be here to help me would only end in crushing disappointment. She wanted something.

I cleared my throat. “How is your dad doing?”

“He’s good! They think they got it all this time.” Her face fell. “I really am sorry about what happened to you, Georgia. I can’t even imagine if my husband...” She shook her head. “Anyway, you didn’t deserve that.”

“Thank you.” I looked away, spotting her wedding ring. “Say hi to Dan for me.”

“Will do.”

I stepped into the afternoon light that painted Main Street with a comforting, Rockwellian glow, and sighed in relief. I had

my name back, and the town looked exactly how I remembered. Families strolled by, enjoying the summer weather, and friends chatted against the picturesque rocky mountain backdrop. Poplar Grove had a population smaller than the altitude, big enough to demand half a dozen stoplights, and was so tight-knit that privacy was a rare commodity. Oh, and we had an excellent bookstore.

Gran had seen to that.

I tossed my paperwork on the front seat of my rental car, then paused. Mom was probably at the house right now—I'd never demanded she give back her key after the funeral. Suddenly, I wasn't so eager to head home. The last few months had sucked out my compassion, strength, and even hope. I wasn't sure I could handle Mom when all I had left was anger.

But I was home now, where I could recharge until I was whole again.

Recharge. That was exactly what I needed before seeing Mom. I headed across the street to The Sidetable, the very store Gran had helped start with one of her closest friends. According to the will she'd left, I was now the silent partner. I was...everything.

My chest tightened at the sight of the for sale sign on what used to be Mr. Navarro's pet store. It had been a year since Gran told me he'd passed on, and that was prime real estate on Main Street. Why hadn't another business moved in? Was Poplar Grove struggling? The possibility sat in my stomach like sour milk as I entered the bookstore.

It smelled like parchment and tea, mixed with a little bit of dust and home. I'd never been able to find anything close to its soothing scent in any chain store while I'd lived in New York, and grief pricked at my eyes with my first breath. Gran had been gone six months, and I missed her so much, my chest felt like it might collapse from the hole she'd left behind.

"Georgia?" Mrs. Rivera's jaw dropped for a second before she smiled wide from behind the counter, balancing her phone between her ear and shoulder. "Hold on one second, Peggy."

"Hey, Mrs. Rivera." I grinned and waved at her welcomingly familiar face. "Don't hang up on my account. I'm just stopping in."

"Well, it's wonderful to see you!" She glanced toward the phone. "No, not you, Peggy. Georgia just walked in!" Her warm brown eyes found mine again. "Yes, *that* Georgia."

I waved once more as they continued their conversation, then walked back to the romance section, where Gran had an entire stack of shelves dedicated to the books she'd written. I picked up the last novel she'd published and opened the dust jacket so I could see her face. We had the same blue eyes, but she'd given up dyeing her once-black hair around her seventy-fifth birthday—the year after Mom had dumped me on her doorstep the first time.

Gran's headshot was all pearls and a silk blouse, while the woman herself had been a pair of overalls, dusty from the garden, and a sun hat wide enough to shade the county, but her smile was the same. I grabbed another, earlier book just to see a second version of that smile.

The door jingled, and a moment later, a man on a cell phone began to browse in the general fiction aisle just behind me.

"A modern-day Jane Austen," I whispered, reading the quote from the cover. It had never ceased to amaze me that Gran had been the most romantic soul I'd ever known, and yet she'd spent the overwhelming majority of her life alone, writing books about love when she'd only been allowed to experience it for a handful of years. Even when she'd married Grandpa Brian, they'd only had a decade before cancer took him. Maybe the women in my family were cursed when it came to our love lives.

"What the hell is this?" The man's voice rose.

My eyebrows flew upward, and I glanced over my shoulder. He held a Noah Harrison book, where—go figure—there were two people in the classic, nearly kissing position.

"Because I wasn't exactly checking my email in the middle of the Andes, so yes, it's the first time I'm seeing the new one." The guy practically seethed as he picked up another Harrison

book and held them up, side by side. Two different couples, same exact pose.

I'd definitely stick with my selection, or anything else in this section.

"They look exactly the same, that's the problem. What was wrong with the old— Yes, I'm pissed off! I've been traveling for eighteen hours and in case you forgot, I cut my research trip short to be here. I'm telling you they look *exactly* the same. Hold on, I'll prove it. Miss?"

"Yes?" I twisted slightly and glanced up to find two book covers in my face. *Space much?*

"Do these look the same to you?"

"Yep. They're pretty interchangeable." I slid one of Gran's books back onto the shelf and mentally whispered a little goodbye, just like I did every time I visited one of her books in a store. Was missing her ever going to get easier?

"See? Because they're not supposed to look the same!" the guy snapped, hopefully at the poor soul on the other end of the phone, because it wasn't going to go well if he was using that tone with me.

"Well, in his defense, all his books read the same, too," I muttered. *Shit*. It slipped out before I could censor myself. Guess my filter was just as numbed out as my emotions. "Sorry—" I turned to face him, lifting my gaze until I found two dark brows raised in astonishment over equally dark eyes. *Whoa*.

My ruined heart jolted—just like every heroine in one of Gran's books. He was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen, and as the now-ex-wife of a movie director, I'd seen my fair share.

Oh no, no, no. You're immune to good-looking men, the logical side of my brain warned, but I was too busy staring to listen.

"They do not read the—" He blinked. "I am going to have to call you back." He moved both books to one hand and hung up, pocketing his phone.

He looked about my age—late twenties, maybe early thirties—stood at least six feet tall, and his black, just-out-of-bed hair fell carelessly over tanned, olive skin before reaching those lifted, black brows and impossibly deep brown eyes. His nose was straight, his lips carved in lush lines that only served to remind me exactly how long I'd gone without being kissed, and his chin was shaded in a light shadow beard. He was all angular, sculpted lines, and, given the flex of muscle in his forearms, I'd have bet the store that he was pretty well acquainted with the inside of a gym...and probably a bedroom.

"Did you just say they all read the same?" he questioned slowly.

I blinked. *Right. The books*. I mentally slapped myself for losing my train of thought over a pretty face. I'd had my name back for all of twenty minutes, and men were off the menu for the foreseeable future. Besides, he wasn't even from around here. Eighteen hours of travel or not, his tailored slacks blatantly screamed designer, and the sleeves of his white linen shirt were rolled in that casually messy style that was anything but casual. Men in Poplar Grove didn't bother with thousand-dollar pants or have New York accents.

"Pretty much. Boy meets girl, they fall in love, tragedy strikes, someone dies." I shrugged, proud that I didn't feel any heat creeping up my cheeks to give me away. "Throw in some legal courtroom drama, a little unsatisfying but poetic sex, and maybe a beach scene, and you've pretty much got it. If that's your thing, you can't go wrong with either book."

"Unsatisfying?" Those eyebrows drew tight as he glanced between the books, then back to me. "Someone doesn't *always* die."

Guess he'd read a Harrison book or two. "Okay, eighty percent of the time. Go ahead and see for yourself," I suggested. "That's the reason he's shelved on this side"—I pointed to the general fiction sign—"and not on this side." I swung my finger

toward the romance marker.

His jaw dropped for a millisecond. "Or maybe there's more to his stories than sex and unrealistic expectations." His attractiveness slipped a peg or two as he tapped one of my pet peeves right on the nose.

My hackles rose. "Romance isn't about unrealistic expectations and sex. It's about love and overcoming adversity through what can be considered a universal experience." That was what Gran and reading thousands of romance novels had taught me in my twenty-eight years.

"And, apparently, *satisfying sex*." He arched a brow.

I willed my skin not to flush at the way his lips seemed to caress that word.

"Hey, if you don't like sex, or you're uncomfortable with a woman embracing her sexuality, then that really says more about you than the genre, don't you think?" I tilted my head. "Or is it the happily-ever-after you object to?"

"I am all for sex, and women embracing their sexuality, and happily-ever-afters." His voice went all growly.

"Then those definitely aren't the books for you, because the only thing they embrace is universal misery, but if that's what does it for you, enjoy." *So much for leaving behind the Ice Queen*. Here I was, arguing with a complete stranger in a bookstore.

He shook his head. "They're love stories. It says so right here." He held up one of the covers that happened to have a quote by Gran. *The* quote. The one her publisher had begged Gran for so often that she'd finally relented, and they'd made do with what she had to say.

"No one writes love stories like Noah Harrison," I read, a slight smile tweaking my lips.

"I'd say that Scarlett Stanton is a pretty well-respected romance writer, wouldn't you?" A lethally sexy smirk played across his face. "If she says it's a love story, then it's a love story."

How could someone so devastatingly handsome annoy the

shit out of me so thoroughly?

"I'd say that Scarlett Stanton was arguably the *most* respected romance writer of her generation." I shook my head, filed Gran's other book back where it belonged, and turned to walk away before I completely snapped at this guy throwing Gran's name around like he knew the first thing about her.

"So it's safe to take her recommendation, right? If a guy wants to read a love story. Or do you only approve of love stories written by women?" he called after me.

Seriously? I pivoted at the end of the aisle, my temper getting the best of me as I turned back to face him. "What you don't see in that quote is the rest of it."

"What do you mean?" Two lines appeared between his eyebrows.

"That wasn't the original quote." I glanced up at the ceiling, trying to remember her exact words. "What was it... 'No one writes painful, depressing fiction masquerading as love stories like Noah Harrison.' The publisher edited it for the blurb." *That was a step too far*. I could almost hear Gran's voice in my head.

"What?" It must have been the way he shifted under the fluorescent lights, but it looked like his skin paled.

"Look, it happens all the time." I sighed. "I'm not sure you noticed, but here in Poplar Grove, we all knew Scarlett Stanton pretty well, and she was never one to keep her opinions to herself." *Guess that's genetic*. "If I recall correctly, she did say that he wrote with a flair for description and was...fond of alliteration." That was the nicest thing she'd said. "It wasn't his writing she objected to—just his stories."

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Well, I happen to like alliteration in my love stories." He walked by with both books, heading for the checkout. "Thank you for the recommendation, Miss..."

"Ellsworth," I responded automatically, flinching slightly as it left my lips. *Not anymore*. "Enjoy your books, Mr..."

"Morelli."

I nodded, then walked away, feeling his gaze follow me out the door as Mrs. Rivera rang up both books for him.

So much for getting some peace. Worst part of that whole little spat? Maybe he was right, and the books Gran wrote really were unrealistic. The sole happily-ever-after I knew of was my best friend, Hazel, and, since she was only on year five of her marriage, the verdict could hardly be determined.

Five minutes later, I drove onto our street, passing Grantham cottage, the closest of the rental properties Gran owned. It looked vacant, which was the first time since...ever. Only being a half hour or so out of Breckenridge meant rentals never stayed empty for long around here.

Shit. You didn't make the arrangements with the property manager. That was probably one of the dozens of unheard voicemails, or perhaps one of my thousand unread emails. At least the voicemail box had stopped accepting new messages, but the emails continued to pile up. I needed to pull myself together. The rest of the world didn't care that Damian had broken my heart.

I pulled into the driveway of the house I'd grown up in and parked. There was already a rental car at the apex of the semicircular drive.

Mom must be here. That ever-present exhaustion swelled, sweeping over me.

I left my suitcases for later but grabbed my purse before heading toward the front door of the seventy-year-old colonial. *The flowers are missing.* Perennials popped up here and there, all rather desiccated, but there were no bright splashes of color in the beds that usually lined the drive this time of the season.

The last few years—when she'd been too fragile to spend that much time kneeling—I'd flown out to help Gran plant. It wasn't like Damian had missed me...though now I knew why.

"Hello?" I called as I walked into the entry hall. My stomach churned at the stale scent of ash in the air. Had she been *smoking*

in Gran's house? The hardwood looked like it hadn't been mopped since winter, and there was a thick layer of dust on the foyer table. Gran would have shit bricks to see her house like this. What had happened to Lydia? I'd asked Gran's accountant to keep her housekeeper on payroll.

The doors to the sitting room pushed open, and Mom came through, dressed for company. Her megawatt smile slipped when she saw me, then widened.

"Gigi!" She opened her arms and gave me the two-second, back-pat hug that had pretty much defined our relationship.

God, I hated that nickname.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" I asked the question gently, not wanting to send her into a meltdown.

She tensed, then pulled back, her smile faltering. "Well...I've actually been waiting for you, honey. I know losing Gran was a major blow, and now that you've lost your husband, I figured you might need a soft place to land." Her expression dripped with sympathy as she looked me up and down, grasping my shoulders lightly, ending her perusal with a slightly raised eyebrow. "You definitely *look* heartbroken. I know it's hard right now, but I swear the next time will be easier."

"I didn't want there to be a next time," I admitted quietly.

"We never do." Her eyes softened in a way they never had toward me.

My shoulders fell, and the thick defenses I'd built over the years cracked. Maybe Mom was turning over a new leaf, starting a new chapter. It had been years since we'd spent any real time together, and maybe we'd finally reached a point where we could—

"Georgia?" a man asked through the opening of the French doors. "Is he here?"

My eyebrows hit the ceiling.

"Christopher, if I could have a second? My daughter just arrived home." Mom flashed him the million-dollar smile that had snared her first four husbands, then took my hand and tugged

me toward the kitchen before I could see into the sitting room.

“Mom, what is going on? And don’t bother lying to me.”
Please, just be real.

Her expression flickered, reminding me that her ability to change plans on the fly was second only to her emotional unavailability. She excelled at both. “I’m concluding a business deal,” she said slowly, looking like she was considering her words. “Nothing to worry about, Gigi.”

“Don’t call me that. You know I hate it.” Gigi was a little girl who spent too much time looking out the window at taillights, and I’d grown up. “A business deal?” My gaze narrowed.

“It all came together while I’ve been waiting for you to come home. Is that so hard to believe? Sue me for trying to be a good mother.” She lifted her chin and blinked rapidly, her lips pursing slightly like I’d hurt her.

I wasn’t buying it.

“How did he know my name?” Something wasn’t right here.

“Everyone knows your name, thanks to Damian.” Mom swallowed and patted her perfect ebony French twist—her tell. She was lying. “I know you’re hurt, but I really think there’s a chance you could get him back if we play our cards right.”

She was trying to distract me. I swept past Mom and into the living room with a smile.

Two men jumped to their feet. Both were in suits, but the one who had peeked through the open door looked to be a good twenty years older than the other.

“Sorry to be so rude. I’m Georgia Ells—” *Damn it.* I cleared my throat. “Georgia Stanton.”

“Georgia?” The older one paled. “Christopher Charles,” he said slowly, his gaze darting toward the door, where my mother had made her entrance.

Recognition flared at the name. Gran’s publisher. He’d been the editorial director of her imprint when she’d written her last book about ten years ago at the age of ninety-one.

“Adam Feinhold. It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Stanton,” the other, younger one said. Both looked positively ashen as they glanced between my mother and me.

“And now that everyone’s been introduced, Gigi, aren’t you thirsty? Let’s get you a drink.” Mom rushed toward me with an outstretched hand.

I ignored her and took over the large wingback chair at the head of the seating arrangement, sinking into its familiar comfort. “And what exactly would my great-grandmother’s publisher be doing all the way in Poplar Grove, Colorado?”

“They’re here for a simple book deal, of course.” Mom sat gingerly on the edge of the couch closest to me and arranged her dress.

“What book?” I asked Christopher and Adam directly. Mom had a lot of talents, but writing wasn’t one of them, and I’d seen enough book deals to know publishers didn’t just hop on planes for fun.

Christopher and Adam glanced at each other in confusion, so I repeated my question.

“What. Book?”

“I believe it’s untitled,” Christopher answered slowly.

Every muscle in my body locked. There was only *one* book Gran hadn’t titled or sold that I was aware of. *Mom wouldn’t dare...would she?*

He swallowed, then glanced toward my mother. “We’re just finishing up some signatures and picking up the manuscript. You know Scarlett wasn’t fond of computers, and we didn’t want to chance something as precious as the only existing original copy to the gods of shipping.”

They shared an awkward laugh, and Mom joined in.

“What book?” This time I asked Mom, my stomach pitching.

“Her first...and last.” The plea in her eyes was unmistakable, and I loathed the way it managed to slice into my heart. “The one about Grandpa Jameson.”