

SPECIAL PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE



LOVING
GEORGIA

A SUMMER ROMANCE

”
FIERY, ROMANTIC,
HEARTBREAKING

- C.TILLOTSON

”
IT'S HOT COCOA
IN WORD FORM

- F.KILMARI

It's hard to put another book in your TBR pile...

So here's a cheeky preview of Loving Georgia to convince you it's worth it. I hope you love it as much as I do! XX

- Grace Dewitt

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Grace Dewitt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with large loops and a prominent initial "G".

Chapter One

Georgia Sullivan couldn't remember a day when she hadn't been in love with the sky. From her little corner, everything seemed like it would be okay. Perhaps that was why she didn't leave the little quiet town of Woodside. It had everything she needed: water and sand, the mountains and a river, food and friends. There were no promises out there that ever tempted her to stray from her happiness.

Today, she sat basking in the sunshine, contemplating the change of season almost on her doorstep. It was almost time for the warmth to be ever-present, for skirts to fly softly in the ocean breeze, for ice cream to melt down tourist hands. It was the time Woodside came alive. People flocked to the small town, taking residence in the holiday homes littering the many beautiful beaches.

Georgia loved her town, and she loved the summer, but she wished they would stop invading Woodside. She wasn't a fan of all the people, all the time, walking through the streets, laughing obnoxiously. What happened to quiet laughter? To taking in the moment with a gracious smile? It almost made her feel like in another life she'd been a senile old woman sitting on a rocking chair, cursing at the young ones skating by. It wasn't all that farfetched. Georgia couldn't help but wonder, if she never found a compatible lover, would she end up like that again? Georgia's mother always said she'd been born a few decades later than her soul was made for. It had taken Georgia 26 years to understand what she was talking about. She knew now.

Her fingers twiddled with the hem of her skirt, toes fidgeting in the running water. Sometimes she found herself yearning for some company to enjoy the quiet things in life, to sit there beside her, eyes closed and head in the clouds. But everyone always dreamed of a

louder life. The bustling action and the traffic jams. Georgia didn't have time for that.

A rustling beside her pulled her from her distant thoughts. Georgia's long-time friend Kelly English swiped at her own palms, pieces of grass and dirt falling on to her lap. A chunk of blonde hair fell from Kelly's misshapen claw clip, causing a groan to slip out.

'You okay there, Kel?' Georgia asked with a small grin.

Kelly swiped her hair back with raked fingers, pulling it tight as she attempted to clasp it back in the very clip that was about to crumble into a thousand pieces. 'No,' she grumbled. 'The stupid thing is broken.'

'So let your hair down.' Georgia shrugged, pulling the once pink clip from Kelly's hair. Blonde strands fell against Kelly's back, and Georgia's fingers wove softly through the strands, untangling and removing little sticks and leaves.

'Mike liked it down. I hate Mike.' Kelly glared at the small creek.

Georgia paused. Had she overstepped? 'Everything okay with Mike?'

'I left him.'

The girls sat in silence as they thought back to the days of Mike and his brother Jake. Jake was a mean drunk, but he never touched her, but Mike, on the other hand, tended to throw things. Sometimes at people.

'Is that why you cut your hair?' Georgia asked quietly, playing with the ends of her own.

'Yeah.' Kelly tried to smile at her friend but could only muster a grimace. 'Figured he wouldn't want me back if I didn't meet his beauty standard.'

'Oh Kel.' Georgia pulled Kelly in for a hug.

They rocked back and forth gently in the cooling air. Ideas of how to help Kelly slipped in and out of her mind, but none seeming quite right. A drop of moisture connected with her skin through her skirt, and another, and another. This time accompanied by a small sniff and a sigh.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ Georgia tucked a large strand of Kelly’s hair behind an ear to get a better read on her. To watch the minor flickers of emotion scatter across her features.

She shrugged. ‘Not really. I just ... I want to move on. I want to forget all about Mike. I want...’

Georgia glanced back at Kelly, who was staring out at the trees lost in thought. ‘You want?’ She tapped her fingers lightly against Kelly’s knee. ‘What do you want Kel?’

‘I want to chase my dreams. I want to travel. I want to find real love, but not romance. I want to travel with you and fall in love with the world.’ She laughed softly, ideas multiplying in her head.

‘So, let’s do it.’ Georgia grinned. ‘We could finally go to Italy, sip wine and flirt with Italian cooks. Or go to Morocco and ride a camel into the desert!’

Kelly looked at Georgia seriously for a moment, head tilted and a small frown in her brows. ‘Would you really do that with me?’

Georgia leaned forward, clasping her friend’s hands in her own. ‘I would do anything for you. You’re a sister to me, that’s never going to change. Just because I left that life behind, doesn’t mean I’m not going to be here for you.’ Her chin wobbled.

Time slipped by as the girls swapped memories, a laugh and a sigh with the mixed feelings they brought up. The cooling air around her broke their reminiscing by the creek, and Georgia shook her head with a shiver, pulling her toes from the cold water. The orange flowers in her skirt crinkled around her legs as she pulled herself up to head back to the cottage.

Kelly hauled the orange gingham blanket over her shoulder as she trailed a few steps behind. ‘I should get going.’ Kelly handed the blanket back to Georgia with a soft smile. ‘Thank you for today, I really needed it.’

‘Always.’ Georgia held her friend close. ‘I wish you came over more often.’

‘Next week then?’ Kelly winked.

'I'm going to hold you to that.' Georgia chuckled, pulling her hands into her cardigan as the wind swept by. They exchanged another hug before Kelly drove away.

She stood there watching the dust settle as the calm quiet fell back into place around her. The cottage felt more whimsical in the quiet, more settled, more her speed. This was what she had bought the cottage for.

Her cat, Mister, met her at the cottage side door with a rattle and a meow. She bent down to scratch his cheek, only to topple backwards as he jumped into her lap before she was stable. Her laugh trickled around the kitchen, a soft sound against the terracotta tiles.

'What am I going to do with you, huh, Mister?' She stroked his cheek, smiling to herself. That cat was better company than a partner could ever be. She didn't doubt that for a second.

The soft glow from the sun began to slip away as night crept upon them, a crescent moon bright in the sky. A shiver echoed through Georgia's bones as a slight chill began to wind around her ankles.

A rumble drifted into hearing distance, creeping louder until headlights shone through her window. Who was here that late? Nobody should see her cottage unless they were purposefully coming to see her and the house.

It had to be the worsening of Aunt June's condition. Georgia thought she'd have more time before someone would come knocking, asking about the legality of the cottage.

Sucking in her anxieties, Georgia pulled herself upright and wiped her hands on the olive towel hanging from the edge of the sink. Whoever it was would need to come to the door and ask their questions; Georgia wasn't going to go out of her way to speak to someone she wasn't expecting.

With intent, she placed the leftovers of lunch on the bench and contemplated having the same meal for dinner. But the plan had been for a hot meal, and the second sandwich made at one p.m. wasn't going to cut it. Thankfully, before she could convince herself not to cook dinner, the pending knock sounded on the wooden front door.

‘Can I help you?’ Georgia opened the door wide enough to see the stranger, but not wide enough to beckon them in. ‘I wasn’t expecting someone so late.’

‘Can I come in?’

‘Why are you here?’ She asked the question in a different way, not happy to let the man in when she didn’t know his intentions. ‘Is it about Aunt June?’

‘How do you know June?’ he asked, gesturing for her to let him inside.

‘Thank you for coming out here, but I don’t have time to talk right now.’ She nodded at him, closing the door and locking it soundly. She waited a moment to see if he would give up and walk away.

Instead, a sigh slipped under the door, and a fist rested against the door trim. She watched him through the viewing pane as he stared towards the creek, biting his lip in thought. He turned back to the door to try again, catching Georgia ducking beneath the glass before she could pretend she wasn’t watching.

‘I need you to move out of the cottage. You probably have a deal with June but she’s getting sicker. I need the place so I can look after her.’

‘Sorry, come again?’ Georgia yanked the door open wide, staring at the man in shock. ‘It’s my cottage, you can’t just take it from me.’

‘June isn’t going to last much longer, and that means whatever deal you have going on with her is almost done. It might as well be now. How long do you need to be gone?’

‘I don’t know who you are, and I think you may have the wrong end of the stick.’ Georgia tried to explain the situation to the man, but his ears didn’t seem to be listening. ‘We can talk about this tomorrow if you like. Over some tea.’

‘How old are you?’ He looked her up and down with a distant smile, a chuckle brewing in his throat. ‘Who drinks tea these days?’

‘I won’t insist you drink the tea, but I will have some myself. Would ten a.m. work for you?’ Georgia clasped her hands in front of her. She always found it better to be inviting than to be distant and

cold. Being obstinate and difficult was not going to help either of them with whatever this was.

He thrust his hand in his back pocket and narrowed his eyes at her. 'I'm leaving town tomorrow, but I'll be back by the weekend after. I need this place to be empty by then.'

'Even if that were an option, John, it's not something I am going to do for you. This is my place, and I won't give my life up for a man that demands it without a care for me.' Georgia shrugged. The action knocked her hair from its bun, and brunette tendrils fell around her shoulders.

'My name isn't John.' He frowned.

'Okay, Bruce.' She grinned. More sass had slipped into her tone than she had intended. She became serious again. 'Is Aunt June really getting that bad?'

The concern twirling with sadness in her eyes had him pause; he had assumed the deal between them would be a simple one of convenience. Emotion intertwined in the deal would make any final decision about the property that much harder.

'My name is Jeremy.'

'Ah.' Her eyes flashed with recognition. 'Aunt June talks about you a lot. She will be delighted to see you.'

'You spend too much time with her if you speak like that without a second thought.'

Georgia tilted her head, biting her lip as she watched the emotions flit through his brown eyes. Aunt June talked so lovingly about this man, but he seemed so different from the picture June had painted in her mind. Words were spoken of brown eyes full of joy and dreams, but these eyes seemed so tired and lost. A lifetime of exhaustion captured in the brows of a man only thirty years young.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Jeremy.' Georgia tapped her fingers gently on the wooden door before slipping inside and closing the stained timber behind her. A work of love and dedication, that door had been a nightmare. She'd almost had to call it quits, but she'd gotten there. Now it was the entrance to her home, proud with history.

‘Fine. But I want you to consider leaving. I’ll discuss it more tomorrow.’ He walked away, pausing to look at the door for a moment before starting the truck and backing out of sight.

Georgia got lost in her thoughts as she cleaned and chopped the radishes that she’d pulled from the garden only hours before. These ones were a little smaller than the last haul, but they would do for the meal she had planned. She hadn’t liked the words he had spoken with such authority. This was her house. She had paid it off at the start of the year, slightly under market value, but June hadn’t been interested in raising the price. You do good things for family, she’d said.

Mister watched from the living room as she plodded away in the kitchen, tossing salad leaves and sprinkling her favourite vinaigrette as a final flourish. He leapt from his spot as his bowl was set on the ground, and silence surrounded them as the food was devoured.

It was clear that the man, Jeremy, was from the city. It was written into his features, his expressions and the authority he assumed he had over something he knew nothing about. Georgia didn’t understand the draw of the city. It was full of noise and long, tiresome queues and rubbish. So much rubbish everywhere. Did they not know the allure of the outdoors? Of peace and quiet?

As confident as she was in the agreement she’d had with June and the papers they’d signed, there was an air of uncertainty overshadowing her night. Her usual elderflower and lemon tea didn’t have the same relaxing tones that it usually did. The evening dusk didn’t calm her like it should. Anxiety swelled in her chest, and the thought of losing the place she called home had her praying to the spirit of her mother that everything would be okay.

She tossed and turned through the night, unable to find the comfy position that usually came so naturally. Mister gave up keeping her company after the third nudge in the ribs, taking comfort in the old yellow armchair in the corner of the bedroom. It was their favourite reading spot in the winter, but tonight, Mister found it was better than a restless sleep.

Sunshine peeped through the sheer white curtains, slowly creeping down the wall until Georgia sighed. Fighting the morning wasn’t going

to do her any good, not as long as she was waiting for the ball to drop on her home, her life, and her comfort.

If she was smart, she would have had a lawyer consult on the decision between June and herself, but she'd relied on trust, love, and faith. June was meant to have at least another decade, if not two left in her step. Apparently, God had other plans.

The moment she'd pulled the lavender sheets back up the bed and fluffed the matching duvet, Mister stretched his legs with a yawn. Georgia smiled, having hoped he would follow her into the kitchen to keep her company during the morning hours, but as she glanced back into the room, he was tummy side up in the middle of the bed, basking in the pure sunshine. Georgia shook her head with a small snort of laughter. A cat would always be a cat.

Coffee and toast didn't seem to hit the spot with the stress gnawing away at her stomach like a woodpecker at the prettiest tree. There were hours till Jeremy was coming over and Georgia had to find a way to keep herself busy. The creek sang her name, but she wanted to stay close to the cottage. It was irrational to think the man could destroy it, but she'd be more uncomfortable under the trees than she would be trying to sleep last night.

Georgia took in one slow breath and pushed all the stress out in one large exhale. She knew staying put and thinking about the whole situation was going to drive her wild. Stress was something she'd fought to overcome. It was a work in progress. Staying busy was her best option right now. There were chores to be done, but chores were only done best with tunes wrapping around the history of the walls keeping her warm.

Mark Knopfler's sweet talent lingered throughout the house, following her to the laundry machine and back to the living room, from the kitchen to the bedroom and back to the living room. Everything was started, but nothing got finished. A typical chore day for Georgia.

A knock broke her thoughts, and she sighed as she glanced at the clock. She could have sworn it was only eight o'clock a few minutes

ago, but by the shine of the benches she knew she'd been cleaning for more than a half hour.

'Morena John, please come in.' Georgia secured the door with the rock she'd been using for years, allowing a sweet morning breeze to wander into the living room.

'Jeremy,' he corrected her. 'It's Jeremy.'

'I know.' She grinned, filling the jug with fresh water. 'Would you like tea even if it is an 'old woman's' drink?'

'Do you have coffee?' He wrinkled his nose, taking his time to look through the cottage she loved so much. 'You've done a lot with this place. It used to be ... cold and drab.'

'It's amazing what a little bit of love can do,' her words came slowly as she fiddled with the gas on the stove. 'Did you say you wanted coffee?' she asked, eyes dancing in the sunlight.

'How do you know June?' He held up a picture of June and Georgia grinning with their winning bingo cards. 'Are you related to my grandmother?'

'Is that your way of asking if we are related?' Georgia asked with a coy twinkle in her eye. A little flutter woke in her chest, surprising her.

This man was rude and indignant. He thought he could move her around and she would easily follow. He was in for a rude surprise if he thought he had any control over the property here.

Jeremy stuttered for a second, glancing at her standing beside him. A jolt shot through his chest when she bit her lip in thought, finger trailing along the photo frame he was holding. Another bolt resounded in his chest when those pink lips teased a whisper of a smile.

'That was a great day,' she spoke.

Jeremy glanced the photo, waiting for her to continue. He wanted to hear her talk about the memory but also wanted her to look back at him, or even to kiss him. It was the light in her eye in memory that had him standing silently.

'After art class, June asked me to keep her company because her friend Robin didn't want to play bingo that day. We won the first game but lost the rest of them, pretty miserably if I'm being honest.' She was lost in her memories, tearing up slightly.

‘Is that how you met her?’ he asked.

‘No. That was, I think, the fourth time we played bingo? She dragged me to the art class too.’ Georgia shrugged, tapping the white photo frame twice before her attention was stolen by the whistling jug. ‘How long has it been since you saw Aunt June?’ She blinked a few times, shaking her head and smiling at Jeremy in curiosity. ‘I’ve lived here for almost six years, and I can’t recall you stopping by.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ He glared at her, roughly placing the picture back on the table and moving farther into the living room. The urge to kiss her was gone.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.’ Georgia apologized quickly, raising her hands in an action of surrender.

He rolled his eyes, watching as she rushed to the whistling jug to prepare two cups of hot coffee. ‘I’ve been a few times. You must have been away.’ His tone carried tension in his defence.

She moved with a calm grace despite rushing to something, in a way that Jeremy couldn’t quite describe. It shouldn’t make sense, and it wasn’t a combination that worked in the lifestyle he was used to. It was like the woes of the world couldn’t touch her, not out here in the sleepy town in a cottage surrounded by flowers and love. June had always wanted more for the cottage than to let it go to ruin, and it looked like she had finally gotten her wish. The place looked fantastic. Jeremy knew that was because of the love that seeped out of Georgia at every waking moment.

‘Here.’ She brought him back to reality, nudging him towards the dining table pushed into the corner. It was flanked by full bookcases on both sides, but the triple wooden window in the middle made it feel like it was many times bigger than it was.

Georgia settled into the round corner seat, tucking a leg underneath her swiftly. ‘Why do you want this place? You seemed amazed that it’s even habitable,’ she asked, voice coated in honey.

‘June told me the place was being rented out. I assumed it was up to standard.’

‘I used to rent it.’ Georgia nodded slowly. ‘But I bought it from her. She has the papers, it’s all legal. I hope you can understand that I

won't be moving from my house. However, I do understand that you need somewhere to stay.'

He watched her with pensive eyes, unhappy with the route the conversation was taking. He'd hoped she would have told him that she had somewhere she could move to, and the place would be all his.

'I can't offer you the whole home, but I can offer you the pull-out bed as a respite from June's house. She has many spare rooms which would be much comfier, but I know that at times it might become too much. On those days, you are welcome here. It can be your home as well as mine,' she offered, extending the olive branch with bated breath.

'That's not what I was hoping to hear.' He sighed, spinning the spoon around the glazed clay mug. 'You really own this place?'

Georgia had an assortment of mugs, some old, some new, most of them made by hand. The ones they were using today were only a few months old. She'd made them at a clay centre with Kelly. Kelly was yet to claim her mugs from the box in the kitchen cupboard, but every time she came over, she always forgot the mugs on the counter.

'I do. Last payment went through at the start of the year. I help June with her gardens and around the home when I can as a thank you, and I will until she's gone.' Georgia smiled sadly, leaning back in the seat and staring out the window. 'She offered me a place to stay when I had nothing left. I can't ever thank her enough.'

'Are you not a Sullivan?'

Georgia narrowed her eyes at Jeremy. 'How do you know that?' She shook her head, not waiting for an answer. 'That's not the point. I don't have anything from what you might know the Sullivans to be.'

He stared at her in confusion. The Sullivans were known in this area of the country. Grant Sullivan was a construction developer who had financially helped the area many moons ago. The family kept the tradition of developing the area and keeping money in the area. Being a Sullivan was no small thing.

'I don't speak financially or about a roof over my head. I mean of dreams, of hopes, wants and life. I didn't have anything left in me. I was ready to take my last day, but June invited me to bingo. She's

helped me since,' she clarified, voice lowering to a whisper. 'I love my life and I love June. I don't want to think of a day without her, but I know that its coming. You're her family, blood and all. That means with all that I owe her, I should help you.'

Jeremy kept a solid stare fixated on Georgia. Her words felt genuine, but with the situation at hand he couldn't help but doubt the place of sincerity. Women were good at that, twisting words into a way that worked for them to get what they wanted, and he never knew until it was too late.

A large weight lifted from his shoulders as the coffee hit his system. This was better than he was used to, complexity laced the bitter notes, sweetness lingering on his tongue.

'This is amazing.' He smiled at her genuinely for the first time. Comfort was a pride feature of this cottage of hers, and he was beginning to find himself at home. Though he was not.

They came to a compromise about their living situation. He wanted to doubt her, and a part of him did, but her words made sense. June would need him, and he would need an escape sometimes. She promised she would try to make the house as inviting as she could, but he had to know that this was her home, and she would be here. And the bedroom, that was hers.

'I'll be seeing you, Jeremy. Stop by when you're back from the city, maybe I can show you some sweet spots down by the creek. They're amazing in the sunshine.' Georgia walked with him to the front door, bending down to swipe her hand lovingly across Mister's black and white coat.

'I grew up here, you know,' he said, glancing back at her. 'I know most of the spots you're thinking of.'

'Perhaps.' She grinned. 'Perhaps they're better with some love and some fresh perspective.'

A sense of wonder washed over him. This woman in front of him radiated love, grace, peace. Something he always believed was a dream, things people made up. You never saw that in the city - everything was go, go, go. It made him want to stay in the moment, stay in the cottage and soak in the sunshine she was offering.

But he didn't know her from a bar of soap. She was the woman June mentioned often, whispers of something hidden in the old lady's words. He knew what she'd meant, and she knew he wasn't looking. The ring on another woman's finger said so.

Instead, he bid her goodbye. She watched from the front porch, red skirt dancing in the soft breeze. Her hair sat on her head in a braid curled around her crown, an image he wanted to keep in his mind as he started the long drive home. After a while, all he could think of were her calm green eyes and those pink lips he knew would be oh so soft.

There was something about Georgia that he couldn't deny. She had the finances to her family name to really make something of herself in a huge city and set herself up, but she was happiest at home in the garden with a cup of coffee and a sunrise. He didn't get that. But he wanted to. He wanted to get what she saw in that life, and he wanted to have a slice of it for himself.

He couldn't wait to go back to that sleepy little cottage at the back of June's property.

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