



Golden Crown Literary Award winner

GERRI HILL

Love Waits

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About the Author

Gerri Hill has eighteen published works, including 2009 GCLS winner *Partners* and 2007 GCLS winners *Behind the Pine Curtain* and *The Killing Room*, as well as GCLS finalist *Hunter's Way* and Lambda finalist *In the Name of the Father*. She began writing lesbian romance as a way to amuse herself while snowed in one winter in the mountains of Colorado and hasn't looked back. Her first published work came in 2000 with *One Summer Night*. Hill's love of nature and of being outdoors usually makes its way into her stories as her characters often find themselves in beautiful natural settings. When she isn't writing, Hill and her longtime partner, Diane, can be found at their home in East Texas, where their vegetable garden, orchard and five acres of piney woods keep them busy. They share their lives with two Australian Shepherds and an assortment of furry felines. For more, see her website: www.gerrihill.com.

CHAPTER ONE

Gina Granbury rested her chin in her palm, her eyes scanning the drawing she'd been tinkering with for the last two hours. Their deadline was approaching but there were only so many ways to advertise pre-owned cars. She dropped her pencil and shoved the drawing away in frustration.

“Why don't you let Darrell give it a try?”

Gina shot a wry glance at Tracy, her business partner. “Because he uses a computer for all of his designs, that's why.”

“So do you.”

“Not until I have my ideas down with pencil first,” she said as she leaned back with a sigh. “These college kids nowadays, they don't have to have an original thought. They just copy and paste images and then call it good.”

Tracy laughed. “You're only cranky because you hate car ads. You always have. Why did you take on this account in the first place?”

“Oh? So you think we’re thriving enough that we can be selective in our choices?” Gina stood and held up her coffee cup in a silent question. Tracy shook her head.

“Business has been fabulous, and you know it. And since it’s you who hates car ads—yet you took on this one—why don’t you just give it to Darrell and let him do his computer thing and call it good?”

“Because I’m stubborn.”

“And it has nothing to do with the deal he gave you on your new Jeep?”

Gina childishly stuck her tongue out at Tracy, then slipped into the tiny corner kitchen, suspiciously eyeing the coffee that had been brewed some five hours earlier. Her semi-addiction to coffee had its limits. She took a water bottle from the fridge instead. Leaning against the counter, she gazed out through the kitchen door opening to the office. They’d started their agency six years ago, building it up ever so slowly. The first two years had been lean and they’d talked about quitting, yet they hung on. Their big break came when a new restaurant opened up in their small city. A young couple with a dream of duplicating their parents’ authentic Mexican food recipes—they couldn’t afford one of the larger, more established advertising agencies. Antonio and Norma had come in off the street and pitched their idea to them. The couple wanted to serve delicious, authentic food in an atmosphere that was fun and vibrant. Gina and Tracy had worked nonstop for months, coming up with print and radio ads, each one fresh and original—and enticing. They had to be. There was a Mexican food restaurant on every block. She’d come up with the catch phrase about two a.m. one morning when sleep eluded her. *Is your old Mexican food place holding you like a ball and chain? Don’t let it weigh you down. If you really want to have a ball, bounce over to Antonio’s Café and Cantina, where the fun never stops!*

She smiled and shook her head. It was as corny as hell, but Antonio and Norma loved it. Apparently, so did the public. The place had been jam-packed on opening night, and like the ads promised, the fun hadn’t stopped yet.

The same was true for their business. After that successful campaign, more and more of the local businesses started coming their way. So much so that they'd been forced to hire another designer—Darrell. That freed up Tracy to use her marketing skills for their own business, soliciting new accounts while Gina and Darrell designed the ads. The new strategy was paying off. Tracy was bringing in so many new accounts, they'd actually talked about hiring a fourth person.

The slamming of the front door brought her out of her musings and she pushed off the counter, going to see what had Darrell so animated.

“Gorgeous, I tell you. He was absolutely *gorgeous*.” Darrell spun around, smiling brilliantly at Gina. “Yes, I’m in love.”

“Again?” she asked dryly.

He put one hand on his hip, dramatically arching it in her direction as he looked down his nose at her. “At least one of us is not afraid of love,” he said.

She ignored his comment as she went back to her desk. “You better be careful, Darrell. This city is not that large. You’re going to run out of boys to date pretty soon.” She picked up the car ad and handed it to him. “Do something with this, will you?”

“Used car dealership? How boring.”

“Pre-owned,” she corrected.

“Oh, yes. That makes *all* the difference.” He shoved the day’s stack of mail at her. “Your turn to sort.”

She waved the mail at Tracy. “Isn’t it your turn?”

Tracy held out her hand. “Give it here. I swear, you two act like it’s a chore to sort the mail. Either it’s a bill or a check, or it’s junk.” She pulled out a bright green envelope and held it up. “This is addressed to you.”

Even though Gina lived in the apartment above their office space, she rarely got mail. She was strictly online and paperless. She took the green envelope and stared at it, the return address bringing in a flood of memories. She turned it over in her hands, then nervously tucked her dark hair behind her ears before breaking the seal.

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty-four years earlier

Gina dribbled the basketball blindly, her eyes never leaving the cheerleaders as they practiced on the other side of the gym. She pretended to eye them all, but it was only Ashleigh Pence who held her interest.

“Yo, Gina. You going to pass the ball or what?”

Embarrassed, she turned, firing a one-handed bullet at LaQuita, nearly knocking her down from the force. “I’m going to pass the ball, of course,” she said as she jogged past her.

The whistle blew and she stopped dead in her tracks, waiting for Coach Beam to yell at her.

“Gina! I don’t care if you are our top scorer. You sit your butt on the bench the rest of practice. I won’t have showboating.”

Gina sulked as she walked over to the bench, wishing she could keep her mind on basketball—her one love—instead of Ashleigh Pence. Even now she found her eyes straying across the gym, picking Ashleigh out of the group of nearly identical

looking skinny blond girls.

Having gone to Catholic school through the eighth grade, she'd never laid eyes on the girl before. Now that they were at the same high school, she found herself running into her constantly, each time more distressing to her. Her hormones were alive and kicking but instead of directing her to boys, they led her directly to Ashleigh Pence. She rolled her eyes. A *cheerleader*, for God's sake. A *popular* skinny blond cheerleader. And Gina was all legs and arms, having grown five inches over the summer, all the while working on her basketball skills, knowing a scholarship was the only way she'd get to a university. Her folks had told her if she didn't get a scholarship, she'd be going to a community college instead.

So with hormones raging, she avoided the boys, most shorter than her anyway, and she avoided the popular girls, already knowing at this young age where her preference was. She tried to fade into the background as much as possible, never wanting anyone to know her secret. However, making the varsity team as a freshman wasn't exactly the way to avoid notice.

But making the varsity team had its perks. The cheerleaders went to every game, home and away.

She flicked her eyes again across the gym, her heart stopping completely as Ashleigh Pence stared back at her, her gaze as intense as Gina's.

CHAPTER THREE

Present Day

“Earth to Gina. Hello?”

Gina looked up, blinking several times, trying to focus on Tracy. “What?”

“I said, who is it from? You’re as white as a sheet.”

Gina turned away, dropping the envelope and accompanying invitation on her desk. “It just...took me back is all. Twenty-year high school reunion,” she said.

“Twenty? Good Lord, how old are you?”

Gina picked up the stress ball she kept on her desk, tossing it at Tracy who caught it expertly. “I’m the same age as you are.”

“God, are we that old? Twenty years out of high school?”

“Afraid so.”

“Well, are you going?”

Gina shook her head. “No.” She shrugged. “I haven’t seen any of those people since the day we graduated.”

“I know. I think that’s the point. You go to catch up and see

who's made a success out of themselves and who let themselves turn into old, fat, frumpy married women."

Gina laughed. "And you would fall into the latter category," she teased. She caught the stress ball without looking as Tracy tossed it back at her in mock anger.

"I'm not fat. And married with two kids does not make me old and frumpy."

"No. But your poofy hairdo and your insistence on wearing those formal business suits do."

"So I should dress like you? Shorts and flip-flops?" She eyed Gina's attire with just a hint of envy. "There are certain rules one has to follow in the business world, Gina, even if we do live in a coastal town. I am the face of our little company when I am out and about mingling with the money shakers of this city."

"And you do it very well." Gina tossed the ball back at her. "I also know you love it."

Tracy grinned. "Yes, I do." She squeezed the stress ball between her hands, her perfectly manicured nails grazing the surface. "So, this high school reunion thing. Why won't you go? It could be loads of fun. You haven't been back to your hometown in forever, have you?"

Gina pulled her chair closer to Tracy's desk, then slouched down in it, her long bare legs stretched out in front of her. *Dare she even consider going back?*

"You remember back in college when we first met?"

"Of course."

"I was dating a girl from high school."

"Oh, yes. Your first love. What was her name?"

Gina swallowed. "Ashleigh. Ashleigh Pence."

"That's right. But you broke up with her, didn't you?"

Tracy leaned closer. "That's when you turned into a whore dog, right?"

Gina narrowed her eyes. "I hate when you call me that."

"Yes, the truth hurts."

Yes, it did. She looked away. "It would be weird, that's all. You know, to see her again."

“Gina, sweetie, that’s twenty years of water under the bridge. That’s the point of going back to these things. To reminisce and to see these people you dated in high school. And then to be so thankful you didn’t settle down with one of them. Trust me, these high school reunions are what make you appreciate your current life.” Tracy tossed the ball back at her. “I went to my tenth reunion. The guy I was madly in love with was there with his wife. He was mostly bald and had a beer gut. His wife was eight months pregnant and looked like she worked as a prison guard.” Tracy wrinkled up her nose. “Gross. To think I wanted to marry that guy.” She grinned. “That night, Sammy and I had the best sex in years.”

“I coulda gone without hearing that.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know. And I may decide to go. It would be a good excuse to see Aunt Lou again.”

Actually, she hadn’t seen Aunt Lou since her father’s funeral six years ago. And she hadn’t been back to Calloway since the day she’d left for college. To her surprise, her parents had sold their house and moved to San Antonio that fall. And more shockingly, they divorced a year later. She was angry at both of them and resented them terribly for not only selling her childhood home, but for breaking up the family. It was a chasm in their relationship that they never really got over. Of course, her mother’s disapproval of her lifestyle didn’t help either. Yes, she had finally accepted that Gina was gay, but no, she wasn’t happy that her only child would never marry and give her grandchildren, a fact she reminded Gina of nearly every time they spoke, which wasn’t often. Aunt Lou, on the other hand, had always been understanding and accepting. Even though they didn’t see each other, they spoke on the phone frequently.

“Hey, Gina. What do you think?”

Gina turned her eyes to the large monitor that hung on the far wall. It was where they projected their designs, bouncing ideas off each other. Darrell had whipped up the car dealership ad in record time, using an environmentally friendly theme—recycle,

reuse—to urge potential car buyers to adopt these pre-owned beauties instead of buying new.

“It’s perfect.”

“Maybe we can get him to hang a *Go Green* sign in his lot.”

“Somehow I don’t picture Bubba Clarkston as a *Go Green* type of guy.”

Darrell grinned wickedly. “Then maybe I need to go over there and flirt with that cute son of his. Maybe I could persuade him.”

“And maybe you’ll get shot,” Gina said, tossing the stress ball at Darrell.

He dropped it.

*We hope you enjoyed this
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