

ROBIN JONES GUNN

clouds

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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CLOUDS

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*To Beckie Melli, who walked with me
in the hushed woods that led us to St. Annakapella.*

*And to my dear grandma, Gertrude Rudi Clawson,
who has prayed for me since the day I was born.*

*Thank you both for teaching me
to treasure my godly heritage.*





A Visitor's Guide to GLENBROOKE

Kyle &
Jessica's
Victorian
Mansion

Madison Hill

Glenbrooke
Community
Church

Hidden House
Bed &
Breakfast

Brady
Alissa's House

PARKER
DELIVERY
SERVICE



5

*Sing to God, sing praise to his name,
lift up a song to him who rides on the clouds.*

PSALM 68:4, RSV

Chapter One



Shelly Graham placed her hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly. A creak echoed from the hinges, and she smiled. Everything about this room felt familiar, friendly, welcoming. She stood in the doorway and surveyed her childhood bedroom. Two twin beds with white wrought-iron frames stood their ground as they had for more than twenty years, like faithful soldiers guarding the window between them.

Shelly noticed the new blue-and-white bedspreads Mom had bought after Shelly and her sister Meredith had both moved out. The painted pine desk in the corner was the same as it had always been. The white wicker chair hadn't been moved from beside the closet. Even the color of the room was the same: sky blue. On the ceiling, the white clouds Meredith had painted there eight years ago hadn't moved an inch in their journey across the solid, latex-covered heavens. Shelly gave these familiar images only a sweeping glance.

It was the window that beckoned to her. Sheer, ivory curtains

billowed in the afternoon breeze. The cobalt blue glass vase that held a giant snatch of color from Mom's garden rested on one of Grandma Rudi's lace doilies. The vase was placed in the center of the old pine bed stand that stood under the inviting window. Shelly drew closer. The daisies, snapdragons, and carnations shivered their greetings as the breeze came through the open window, brushed past the bouquet, and, with invisible, feathery fingers, touched Shelly's long hair.

She stood before the window, eyes closed, face tilted toward the breeze. The sun slipped over the neighbor's rooftop and spilled its hot gold all over Shelly without the slightest apology. She didn't mind a bit the way it instantly stained her white shirt a glorious, pale yellow. She remembered this feeling. She remembered these fragrances.

From down the street came the ripple of children's laughter. The squeals escalated when the faint melody of the ice cream truck came the children's way. Shelly couldn't see it, but she knew the white ice cream truck had just rounded Sycamore Drive and was headed up the hill to Duchess Place.

437 Duchess Place. This was home. Just as it had been from the day Shelly was born until five years ago, when she moved from Seattle to Pasadena, California, and began her career as a flight attendant. And now, due to a transfer, Shelly was home again.

She opened her eyes and gazed out the window at the Renfields' house next door. Nothing had changed there either. It was still gray with white shutters and that wonderful oval attic window that faced her bedroom. For years a rope had run between her bedroom window and the oval attic window. For years a green plastic bucket had hung from that line. The bucket carried messages, candy, and secret treasures from one best friend to the other.

“Jonathan,” she whispered. Shelly could almost see his face there in the attic window, his light, sand-flecked brown hair, about the same color as hers; his gray, stormy eyes; and the mouth that never stopped smiling.

Shelly tried to remember the codes to their secret whistles. She puckered up and blew. Two short, one long whistle, with the long one a note lower. That meant “Come to the window.” She tried again, this time blowing one long, one short, and one long, with the short one a note higher. Her whistle echoed off the side of his house, and she remembered its meaning. “Meet me at the tree house,” she said softly.

There were other signals, other whistles. But she had forgotten them, just as she had forced herself to forget so many other things about Jonathan.

A wash of uneasiness came over her. Without meaning to, she had opened a treasure chest of memories that had been locked up for many years. Shelly wasn’t willing to open it any farther. Instead, she tried to tuck all the memories neatly back inside the chest where they belonged. Only it seemed the chest was refusing to be shut and was spilling its wealth all over the hardwood floor of her childhood bedroom.

There, shining in her mind, was the memory of her third birthday party. It was time for the cake. The candles were lit, and all her little friends were singing. She was just about to blow out the birthday flames when Jonathan Renfield leaned forward and, with one mighty puff, blew them out first.

Shelly remembered crying and refusing to be consoled. Her mother had tried to explain that the party was for Jonathan, too, since his birthday was three days after hers. It didn’t matter. As far as Shelly was concerned, this was her party, and Jonathan should go have his own party and blow out his own candles at his own house.

Her dad had captured the scene on his old movie camera and had it transferred to a videocassette along with Shelly's fourth birthday party. This birthday was celebrated with Jonathan also. Only this time the mothers had wisely provided two cakes. Jonathan and Shelly both stood on their chairs and blew out their own candles. Then they turned and, unprompted, gave each other a not-quite-on-target kiss. The parents had laughed hard. Jonathan had smiled that unstoppable grin of his, and Shelly had adjusted her gold birthday crown for the camera.

A gentle rapping on the door brought Shelly back to the present. "How's it going up here?" her mom asked, stepping into the room. Shelly felt as though her mother had just stepped on the spilled-out memories, squashing them as she walked across the floor.

"You okay?" Mom asked. Ellen Graham was a tower of a woman, in stature and in character. At five foot eleven and a half, she stood several inches taller than any of her four daughters. Shelly was the third in birth order and resembled her dad more than her three sisters did. Mom was strong, old-fashioned in her ways, as practical as a pair of loafers, and as soft as a cupcake. She made the perfect pastor's wife, and for thirty-one years she had proved that.

"It's strange being back here," Shelly said, facing her mom and noticing that she had changed into a skirt and pastel blue blouse. "Are you going to church?"

"No, we're having dinner at Meredith's. Did I forget to tell you?" Mom looked out the window as if trying to see what Shelly had been gazing at. Shelly knew her mother didn't see anything.

It wasn't that Mom hadn't tried to see the things Shelly had seen throughout her life. Maybe Mom tried too hard. She had the same difficulty with Meredith. Mom never quite saw what

Shelly and Meredith did. The two girls were the dreamers and the opposites of Megan and Molly, the two older Graham daughters. All their lives Shelly and Meredith had been kindly left to their own world of imagination.

"If you're too tired from your trip to come to dinner, I'm sure Meredith will understand."

"No, I'm fine. When are we supposed to be there?"

"Meri said about seven. She has some big news for us."

Shelly looked at her mom for a hint. "Did she meet someone?"

"She didn't say." Mom sat on the bed and surveyed the room. "Are you going to be okay here? Would you like the room changed around?"

"No, I love it just like this. What else did Meri say? Any clues at all?"

Mom shook her head.

"What if I unload the car and trailer tomorrow?" Shelly sat on the opposite bed and faced Mom. "Most of it is going to have to be stored in the garage anyway."

"That's fine. How are you feeling about this move? I know it won't be easy for you to adjust to being back home. Dad is as busy at church as he always was, and I have a full calendar, too. If anything, the three of us will probably have to schedule time to see each other."

Shelly smiled. When she did, the worry lines in Mom's broad forehead began to disappear. Shelly's smile had that effect on people. It was one of her most distinctive features. Her full lips and wide, straight teeth gave her a smile that blasted out, "Apple pie, Mom, America!" It was a nice feature to have as a flight attendant. She could put elderly passengers at ease and make crying babies coo.

"I'm going to be fine, Mom. I really appreciate you and Daddy letting me move back in. It's only until I straighten out

my finances and get on a regular flight schedule. I'll hardly be home at all."

"We're glad you're here," Mom said. "And you know you're welcome to stay as long as you want."

"Thanks." Shelly brushed away the insecure feeling that floated around her. None of her three sisters had ever had to move back home. Megan and Molly were both married and lived on the East Coast. Meredith worked in Seattle and had her own apartment across town.

The sun's warmth and the closeness of the room were lulling Shelly to sleep. She stretched out on her once-familiar bed and said, "I think I'll take a short nap." The motionless clouds on the ceiling stared back at her.

"Sounds like a good idea," Mom said. "Would you like me to wake you?"

"Sure. Wake me about twenty minutes before you're ready to leave, okay?"

"Will do." Mom rose and stopped at the door. "Would you like the door closed or open?"

You never could remember, could you? Meredith is the one who likes the door open; I like it closed.

"Closed, please."

The door shut softly, and Shelly was alone with her thoughts. She rolled onto her side and curled up. Her memories wouldn't let her sleep.

She closed her eyes and there, painted on the inside of her eyelids, was the tree house. It was the day after Jonathan's dad had finished the masterpiece in the woods at the end of Duchess Place. Ten-year-old Jonathan stood at the entrance and called down to her, "What's the matter, scaredy-cat? Afraid to come up here?"

"No!"

"Then why don't you grab the rope and climb up?"

“Because...”

“Because you’re scared, that’s why.”

“I’m not scared of anything,” Shelly yelled back.

“Yes, you are. You’re scared of heights.”

He was right. She had gotten spooked one time when she was five. She had been standing at the top of the Seattle Space Needle looking down on the world below. Some kid twice her age leaned over and said, “If you get too close to the glass it’ll pop out, and you’ll fall all the way down.”

“Come on, Shelly Bean!” Jonathan had pleaded with her. “You’ve gotta see all the neat stuff my dad built in here.”

Shelly remembered that moment as a turning point in her life. She had trusted Jonathan more than anyone, and with that on her side, she grabbed the rope and pulled herself up to the first step. Holding tight, she climbed the thick planks nailed to the tree trunk and entered through the trap door in the floor.

“Look,” Jonathan had said, unimpressed with her major accomplishment. “There’s a secret compartment.” He pulled one of the wallboards to the side and revealed a small, built-in box in which he had already stored two Milky Way candy bars, his favorite.

Her memories flipped a few pages to high school. She and Jonathan were sitting together in biology lab. She had set up an elaborate prank and was waiting for Jonathan to discover it. He brought his frog in its tray over to the lab table and was preparing to finish the dissecting project. But he stepped away long enough for Shelly to rig the frog with a nylon string so she could give it a tug from the next table over, making the frog’s leg kick.

Jonathan kept talking to everyone and took forever to get to his frog. When he finally did, Shelly pulled the string. The leg flexed. Jonathan froze. She pulled again, harder. This time the frog seemed to leap from the pan. Jonathan let out a yelp

and jumped back, knocking over his chair. His arm caught on the string, which yanked Shelly's finger hard, causing her to screech. The whole class burst out in laughter, but their teacher docked both of them half a grade on their frog-dissecting projects.

As a peace offering, Shelly had put a Milky Way in Jonathan's locker that afternoon with a note that said, "Sorry." After school she found the empty wrapper in her locker with a note on it saying, "Yeah, right. Just you wait, Shelly Bean."

She knew he was only kidding. Jonathan was quicker to forgive and forget than anyone she knew. He was also as steadfast as the Seattle rain.

In the quietness of her room, Shelly could feel the afternoon heat dissipating as the breeze brought with it a soothing sweetness. The garden flowers were releasing their fragrance confetti into the evening air, and the wind was the messenger assigned to bring the intoxicating scent to Shelly.

Instead of examining any more of the bounty in her treasure chest of memories, she forced herself to stop. *Why are you doing this to yourself? You've been fine for more than five years. What happened, happened. You can't change anything, so why are you even thinking about it?*

"Shelly," Mom called, tapping lightly on the closed door, "time to wake up. We'll leave for Meri's in twenty minutes."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll be down in a few minutes." She rose from the bed, still feeling the heaviness of her suppressed memories. They would go away soon. They always did. All she had to do was ignore them.

Shelly opened the closet door and checked to see if she needed hangers. No. Hangers were there waiting for her. Mom had thought of everything. The dresser drawers would be empty, but she double-checked to make sure. They were empty. So was the drawer in the end table.

That's how she wanted her thoughts to be, emptied of the past. Cleaned out. Ready to be filled with new thoughts, new memories made in this room, this house, this neighborhood. Jonathan was gone. It would be best if his memory disappeared as well.

But curiosity caused her to push back the sheer curtains and take one last look out the window. Craning her neck, she saw it. Just on the other side of the screen, protruding from the corner of the window ledge, was the large eyebolt her dad had affixed there so long ago. Through that loop had passed the thick, prickly rope, and from that rope had hung the green plastic bucket that had traveled those twenty-seven feet between Shelly's bedroom window and Jonathan's attic window more times than anyone could count.

All that remained was the bolt. No rope. No bucket. No Milky Way bars at midnight. And no Jonathan.

No Jonathan, Shelly reminded herself. No Jonathan.