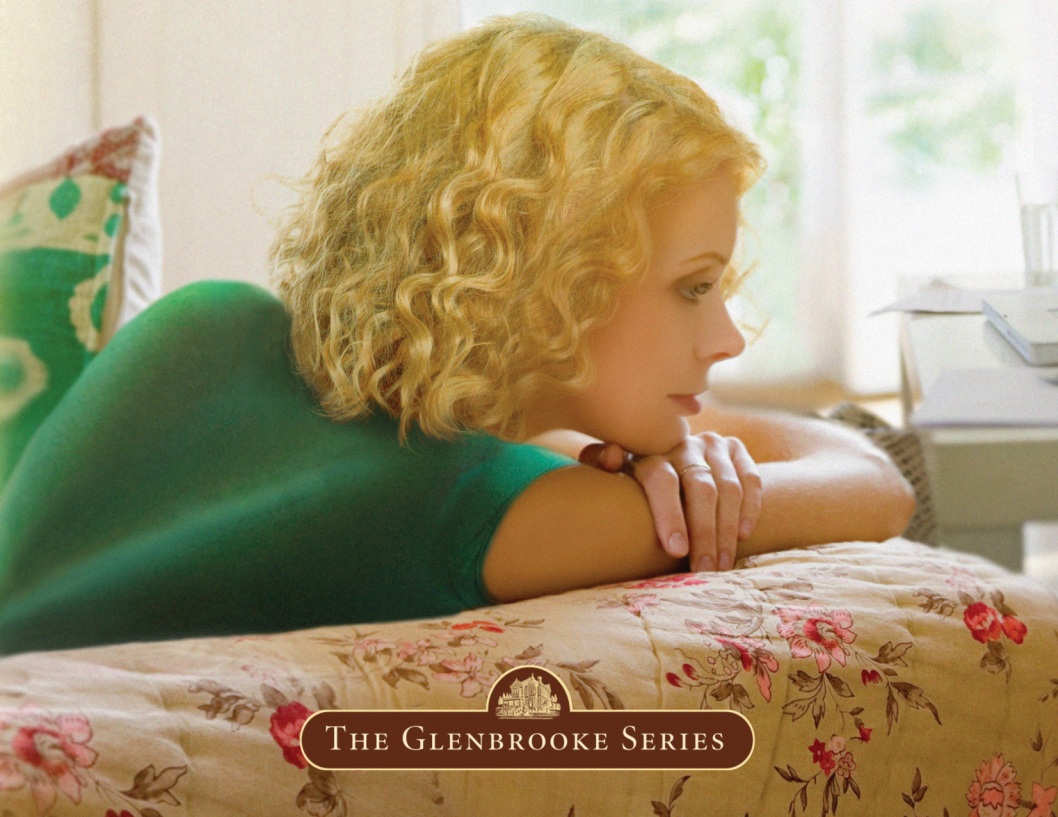


ROBIN JONES GUNN

echoes

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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*For Ross,
the other half of my heart,
who said all the right things
when I came home after a perm disaster.*





A Visitor's Guide to GLENBROOKE

Kyle &
Jessica's
Victorian
Mansion

Madison Hill

Glenbrooke
Community
Church

TO BAKERS GROVE

Hidden House
Bed &
Breakfast

Teri's
House

Ida's
House

WIRE
GIFT SHOP

INDIFFERENT
ELEGANT
ATTORNEY

Brady
Alissa's House

PARKER
DELIVERY
SERVICE



*The voice of the LORD echoes from the clouds.
The God of glory thunders through the skies.*

PSALM 29:3

Chapter One



Lauren Phillips flipped the magazine page and stopped. There it was: The garden gazebo she had been trying to describe to Jeff.

“Would it be okay if I tore this page out?” she asked the hairdresser who stood over her, busily unrolling the perm rods from Lauren’s long hair.

“Sure. That’s an old copy. Did you find a good recipe?”

“No, I found a gazebo.” She held up the picture. “This is where I want to get married.”

“Romantic,” the stylist commented, tugging out another rod. “Looks like the one at Belmont.”

Lauren had heard about Belmont University and the 150-year-old mansion on the campus that was available for wedding rentals. She would have to look into that.

The stylist continued working on Lauren’s blond hair. “Gazebos aren’t especially practical for weddings, you know. Where do all the guests sit?”

Jeff asked the same question last week when she tried to describe the gazebo setting to him. “I haven’t figured that out yet,” she glanced at her watch. “Do you think this will take much longer?” For nearly four hours she had endured the torture of getting a perm. Her tender head was protesting the treatment, and Jeff would be waiting at the restaurant. He didn’t like to be kept waiting.

“Almost done.”

Lauren nervously twisted the large diamond ring on her finger and wondered why she ever thought getting a spiral perm was a good idea. It was her first perm since she was fourteen. Since that experience ten years ago, she had worn her silky blond hair the same way—straight down her back, hanging almost to her waist. Then, a few weeks ago, Lauren’s supervisor at the bank had come to this salon during her lunch hour. She was transformed from drab to dynamite and that had convinced Lauren to live a little and surprise Jeff with a new look.

With a yank, the stylist pulled out the final rod and maneuvered a wide pick through Lauren’s long locks. Suddenly the comb-out stopped, and in a thin voice the stylist called for her supervisor. He joined her, and the two seemed to talk in code, both touching the ends of Lauren’s hair and pulling their fingers through the underside. She wished they would spin her chair around so she could have a look in the mirror.

“Have you been in the pool a lot this summer?” the supervisor asked.

“No.” *It was only the end of June. Why would he ask such a question?*

“We’ll include a bottle of our 911 conditioner for you to use at home,” he said. “Wait two days before you wash your hair.”

Lauren noticed as he walked away that strands of her

blond hair were between his fingers.

"What's wrong with my hair?" Lauren turned herself around to face the mirror before the stylist could stop her. The sight of her reflection was shocking. Instead of soft waves of caramel cascading down, as shown on the model in the *Hairstyles for Today* book, Lauren's hair had turned into wild, crumpled straw, zigzagging from the crown of her head.

"What happened?" she cried.

"Sometimes it takes a day or two for the perm to calm down," the woman said brightly. "You need to give it a little time to relax. Be sure to use the conditioner."

"This is not what I wanted," Lauren said. She fingered the dry ends of her hair and ran her hand over the back. "It's... it's not what I wanted. I want my old hair back."

The stylist unclasped the drape from around Lauren's neck and said, "It should relax in a few days."

Lauren reached for her backpack and walked the ten feet to the register, certain the customers waiting in the front of the shop would all look up at her and burst into laughter.

"Here you go," the manager said, handing her the conditioner. "And I gave you a 20 percent discount."

"A 20 percent discount? Why?"

"As a courtesy, that's all."

Lauren was too numb to ask any more questions. She signed the Visa voucher and filled in the tip portion of the form with a hastily figured 15 percent. "Thank you," she mumbled, bolting for the parking lot.

Why did I leave her a tip? She probably ruined my hair! That's why they gave me the discount. I can't believe this happened!

Lauren quickly unlocked her door, slid into the driver's seat, and jerked the rearview mirror in her direction.

"Oh, no. No, no, no!" she moaned. "My poor hair! What am I going to do?" She ran her fingers through the clump of

hair hanging over her shoulder, and a dozen strands came out. A repeat finger-combing brought out more hair.

Fighting back the tears, Lauren jammed the keys into the ignition and popped her Taurus into reverse. She backed out of the tight parking space. The sound of tires screeching caused her to automatically slam on her brakes. With the rearview mirror still askew, Lauren turned to look over her shoulder and discovered she had missed hitting another car by mere inches.

“Sorry!” Lauren called, rolling down her window and signaling her apology to the woman in the other car. The motorist shook her head at Lauren and sped off. “I said I was sorry,” Lauren muttered, pausing to adjust her rearview mirror. Then, with extra caution, she exited the Hickory Hollow Mall parking lot.

Nearly fifteen minutes later she arrived across town at Giovanni’s Italian Restaurant. She had to circle the block twice to find a parking place. Before jumping out of the car, Lauren scrounged around in her backpack for a barrette, a scrunchie, a rubber band, anything to pull back her hair. She found a long wooden clip and tried to clasp her hair into a ponytail. It was too thick now for the clip. Quickly dividing her hair into three sections, she loosely twisted it into a braid down her back, securing the clip on the end. Another wad of hair came out in her hand.

My hair is ruined! This was supposed to be my big surprise for Jeff, and here I am, almost an hour late, and with my hair falling out!

Lauren entered the Italian restaurant and inhaled the familiar garlic fragrance. She and Jeff met here often. There was something slightly soothing about the surroundings. Lauren spotted Jeff in “their” corner booth and wove her way through the maze of tables.

“Jeff, I am so sorry,” she began.

He looked up and said nothing. His deep brown eyes greeted her flatly, and his straight lips gave no hint of what he was thinking. She hated it when Jeff was like this. As long as she had known him he had only turned stoic a couple of times, but when he did, trying to get him to open up was like digging a ditch with a teaspoon.

Lauren slipped into the seat across from Jeff and cautiously asked, “Have you ordered already?”

“No. I was waiting.”

“I’m sorry I’m so late. You won’t believe what happened.”

The waiter stepped up to the table with his pencil poised on his order pad. “Have you had time to decide?”

“I’ll have the special, whatever it is tonight,” Lauren said.

“Lasagna,” Jeff ordered without taking his eyes off of Lauren. He always ordered lasagna at Giovanni’s. That was one of the things Lauren loved about him. Jeff was steady. Predictable. Dependable. Qualities she wanted and needed in a man.

Lauren used to order the same thing every time, too. Then about two weeks ago, she suddenly grew sick of lasagna. She decided to order things on the menu that she couldn’t even pronounce. It was that “live dangerously” attitude that had prompted her to make the appointment at the hair salon.

“Jeff,” she tried again, “you won’t believe what happened.” Lauren flipped her braid over her shoulder and tried to appear lighthearted about the perm disaster. Several stray hairs floated onto her arm. “I wanted to surprise you. Marie at work—did you ever meet her? She’s my supervisor. Well, anyway, she went to this salon a few weeks ago, and her hair turned out gorgeous. So I decided to do something different with my hair. I went in at two-thirty today. Can you believe it? It took more than four hours for them to give me this perm. You should’ve

seen me with all those rods in my hair. It stuck out to here.” She used her hands to demonstrate. Jeff gave her a polite smile.

“And now I have to wait before I can wash it. I have some good conditioner to use that should help the dryness. It got pretty dried out.” She smiled, trying to convince herself and Jeff that everything would turn out okay once she got home and washed her hair.

“Things always seem to happen to you, Lauren,” Jeff said.

She ignored his comment. Other people had said the same thing to her over the years. It was true. But she didn’t like the image it gave of her being a disaster magnet. “I was tired of having long, straight, boring hair. It was time for a change. You’ll like it. Just wait. You’ll see.”

“I liked it the way it was,” Jeff said.

Lauren took a sip from her water glass. “So,” she said, still forcing the cheery tone into her words, “what’s been happening with you? You didn’t call me last night. Did you have to work late? Did you guys land that account with Harrison Furniture?”

Jeff worked as a marketing specialist for Anchor Advertising in Nashville, and for the last three weeks he had talked about the Harrison Furniture account as being the one that would open doors for him to move up in the company. Jeff was a hard worker, and it was important to him to move up. Earlier that week Jeff had said the Harrison account was a sure thing. This evening he wasn’t responding to Lauren’s questions. He drank the last of his Diet Coke, and with three fingers motioned for the waiter to bring him another. Lauren reached across the table and took Jeff’s cool hand in hers.

“Are you all right?”

“Another Diet Coke, sir?” the waiter inquired. Jeff nodded.

"I'll be right back with that. And your dinners should be about ready."

Lauren held Jeff's hand tighter as he seemed to be slipping away from her. "I found a picture of the gazebo I was trying to explain to you. And the hairdresser said there was a really nice gazebo at Belmont. Have you ever seen it? Maybe we should go over there sometime and have a look."

"One lasagna," the waiter said, placing the steaming boat-shaped plate in front of Jeff. "And one special."

Lauren let go of Jeff's hand and smiled at the waiter. Her gaze followed the white plate as he set it before her. Her smile vanished. "Excuse me," she said as he was turning to go. "What is this?"

"Eggplant parmigiana with scallops in garlic sauce."

"Oh, no," Lauren muttered.

"You ordered the special, right?"

"Yes, but I didn't know what it was. I should have asked. You see, I'm allergic to scallops. I ate some once when I was a child, and I ended up in the hospital. They make my throat constrict." Lauren pinched at her throat for emphasis and let out a nervous laugh. "I know it's strange, but that's what happens. Would it be possible to change my order?"

"What would you like?" the waiter asked.

"I guess lasagna would be fine."

He reached for the plate and repeated, "One lasagna. I'll bring you a basket of bread as well."

"Thank you." Lauren kept her gaze on the waiter a little longer than necessary. She was hesitant to look back at Jeff. Jeff didn't like "scenes" in public places. Or in private places, for that matter. He was very good about making sure everything appeared calm and unruffled on the outside. She liked that about him. It was one of the strengths that drew her to him

when they met. Lauren had grown up with a rather opinionated step-father who embarrassed her more than once in public. She vowed she would never marry a man who couldn't be polite in public. Jeff was always polite.

"Sorry," she offered meekly when her gaze returned to the table.

She caught Jeff's eye only briefly, hating this feeling of needing to defend herself to him. How could she explain why she thought it was a good idea to order the special? Or why it seemed logical to get her hair permed? Or why she was trying new things all of a sudden? She didn't have a reason. At least not one that she understood. Something inside of her was not happy with the way her life was going, and she was eager to talk it through with Jeff. Being a good listener was another one of Jeff's terrific qualities. Lauren knew, though, that for a topic this complex and deep, she had to wait until they were alone. Jeff didn't discuss such things in public.

He reached for her hand and, squeezing it, said, "Don't worry about it."

She gave him a wobbly smile and said, "Thanks for understanding."

"That's what I do best."

The lasagna arrived, and their meal continued quietly, each of them lost in thought. Jeff talked about a new place he had found that had tuned up his car that morning. He mentioned that he was thinking of having the seats of his sedan reupholstered in leather. Lauren listened, smiled, nodded appropriately, and ate her lasagna without any comments. She was eager to get to her apartment where they could really talk.

Lauren arrived at her apartment before Jeff. She started the coffee and turned on the stereo, choosing one of Jeff's favorite CDs. Kicking off her tennis shoes, Lauren stretched out on her sofa and waited for Jeff's familiar footsteps up the stairs to her

apartment. A week ago she had revamped her beat-up garage-sale couch with a rose and hunter green floral cover she had ordered from a catalog. It came with three matching pillows and a rose colored cover which perfectly fit her overstuffed chair.

The new look had transformed her small apartment and made her eager to do some more decorating, letting her artistic side have some fun. She had one end table at the foot of the sofa. It was a rich cherry-wood piece with thin, spindled legs and one drawer with a brass latch. She had snagged it for fifteen bucks at a sidewalk sale because one of the back legs was broken. Jeff had told her to save up for a quality piece of furniture, but she had taken pity on the three-legged table, repaired it with a hot glue gun, and as far as she was concerned, the table was as good as new.

The front door knocker clapped twice. Jeff's knock.

"Come on in," she called and rose to meet him. It was evenings like this when Lauren felt as if she and Jeff were already married. They would drink their french roast together from oversized mugs, sharing their favorite hazelnut coffee creamer and talking until the early hours, planning their future together. It was all calm, steady, and predictable.

Jeff entered with a bouquet of daisies. He had probably purchased them from the young boy who stood on the corner three blocks away, peddling his wares each summer evening.

"How pretty!" Lauren gave him a kiss on the cheek and took the flowers from him. "You're so sweet."

Jeff reached out and drew her to him. He wrapped his arms around her slim frame and buried his face against the side of her hair. His tender embrace lasted only a moment. "What's that smell?"

"The coffee?"

"No, your hair."

"Oh. It's the perm solution. It'll wash out."

"Didn't you say you have to wait before you wash your hair?"

"Two days. But maybe I can wash it tomorrow. It might help it," Lauren said, turning to get a vase from the kitchen counter. She clipped the daisies' ends and dropped them into her favorite royal blue glass vase. They brightened up the whole kitchen.

"How do you like the furniture covers?" she asked as Jeff poured the coffee.

He looked over at the new ensemble and said one word. "Pink?"

"It's not pink. It's rose. Mauve, actually. It's the Victorian look."

"I think it looks pink."

"Don't you like it?"

"Do you?" Jeff countered.

"Of course I do."

"It's just that sometimes you order things you don't really like but you keep them anyway."

"When did that ever happen? Name one time," Lauren challenged, her hand on her hip.

"You know what?" Jeff said, adding cream to the two mugs of coffee. "It doesn't matter. As long as you're happy with it, that's all that counts." He walked away from her with his mug in his hand, leaving hers on the counter. Then, as if he were being defiant about having anything to do with her choice of a "pink" furniture cover, he went over and sat on the floor, leaning his back against the easy chair.

"You can sit on it," Lauren said, grabbing her mug and joining him.

"I'm fine right here," he said.

Lauren settled herself comfortably on her Victorian sofa, propped a pillow under her arm and said, "So tell me what's

going on with the Harrison Furniture account.”

Jeff sipped his coffee and took his time before saying, “I’m unemployed.”

Lauren thought he was joking. “What are you saying? Did Granddaddy Harrison reject the jingle again?”

“Lauren, I was let go yesterday.”

She slowly lowered her mug and met his eyes. “Jeff, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?”

“Anchor was bought out. Nobody in my division knew about it. They’re consolidating with a firm from South Carolina, and both companies will be part of Burrows, James, and Tompkins in New York. Everyone from my department was let go except Garry.”

“Garry? Why Garry? He’s only been working there a few months.”

Jeff ran his finger along his mug’s rim. “Seems Garry was more or less a corporate spy from the New York agency. He used his three months with us to decide who should stay and who should go. He apparently has a whole new team hand-picked for Nashville. I’m not one of them.”

“But it sounds as if nobody from your department was one of his choices,” Lauren said, not sure if the logic would cheer him up any.

“No,” Jeff answered slowly.

“You can find another job in Nashville. The wedding isn’t until February. That gives us, what? Eight months? That’s plenty of time for you to find a new job.”

“It looks as if I already have a new job,” Jeff said slowly.

“What?”

“Garry recommended me for a position in New York. I’d be a fool not to take it.”

“New York?” Lauren said, sinking deep into her bed of roses. “New York?”

"It's a huge career opportunity for me, Lauren." He leaned forward, looking alive for the first time all night. "You could learn to like New York."

"Jeff, I've been to New York. I don't like it. What about all our plans to move to the country? All along we've been talking about moving out of Nashville after we're married. Remember? Some land with a garden and maybe a guest house out back. We could never live like that in New York."

"Sure we could. They have 'country' homes with vegetable gardens in New York, too."

"No, they don't Jeff. Not for miles and miles. You would have to commute hours every day. And we could never afford to buy a house there. This is..." Lauren put her mug on the floor and dropped her head in her hands. "This is not what we planned."

"You mean not what you planned."

"What do you mean by that?"

Dead air enveloped the gulf between them as Jeff paused, and the CD player mysteriously stopped for thirty seconds before starting the next song. It was one of Jeff's favorites. The song began:

*I'm not the kind who takes chances,
But baby, I took a chance on you.
And I'm not saying
You're not worth romancin'
But have we got what it takes
To see us through?
Call me when you wake up
When you smell the coffee
When the scent of roses
Is enough to clear your head
You call me...*

“What are you saying, Jeff?” Lauren asked. Inside her a huge wave of emotion was about to crash over her.

“I don’t know, Lauren. You tell me. Can you live in New York?”