

ROBIN JONES GUNN

secrets

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

secrets

a novel

ROBIN
JONES GUNN



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SECRETS

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The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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For Marlee Alex

a gentle woman of compassion

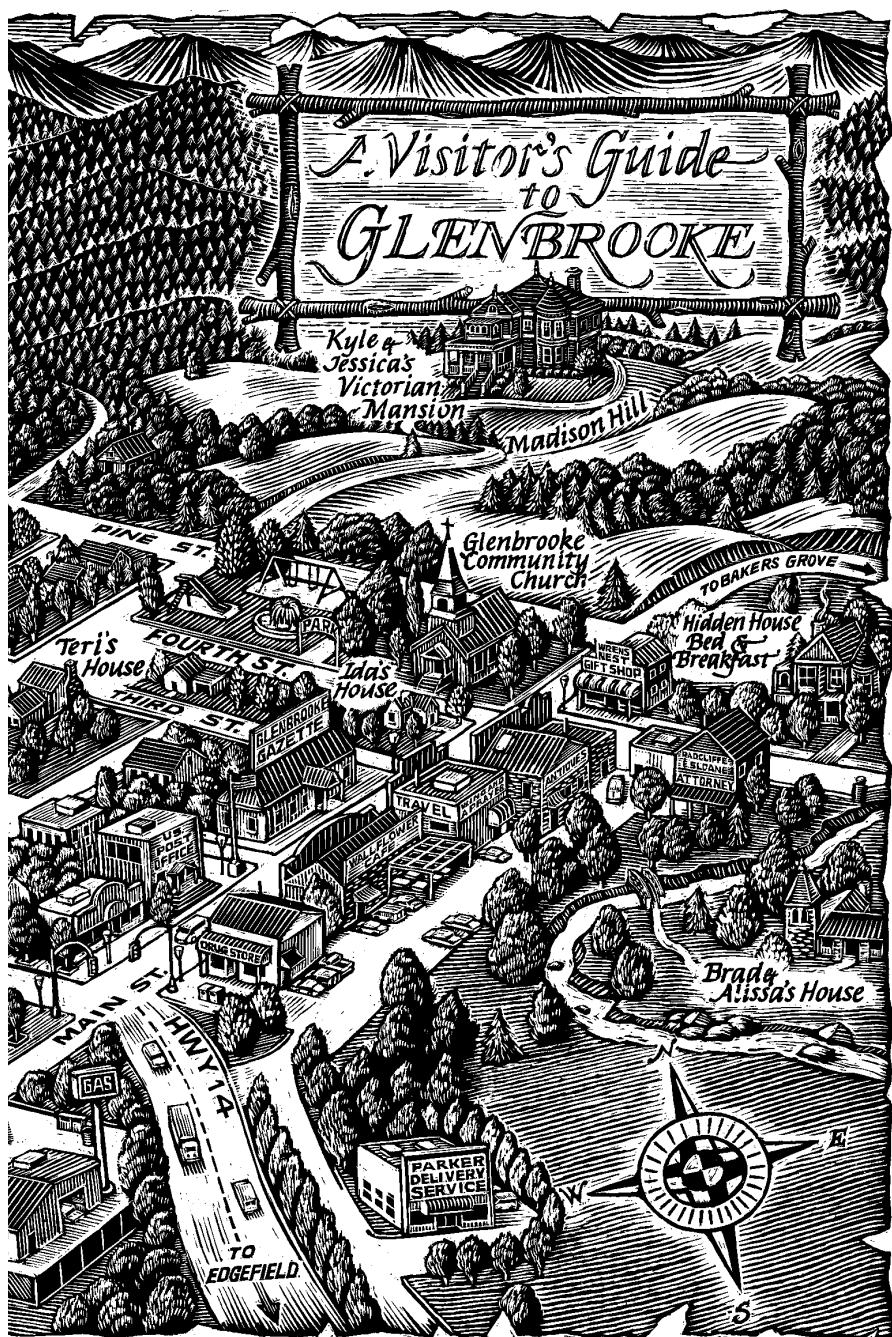
a gifted crafter of words

my dearly esteemed friend

And for my neighbors on Butterfly Court.

I love you guys!





*Would not God search this out?
For He knows the secrets of the heart.*

PSALM 44:21, NEW KING JAMES VERSION

Chapter One



Jessica Morgan gripped her car's steering wheel and read the road sign aloud as she cruised past it. "Glenbrooke, three miles."

The summer breeze whipped through her open window and danced with the ends of her shoulder-length, honey-blond hair.

"This is it," Jessica murmured as the Oregon road brought her to the brink of her new life. For months she had planned this step into independence. Then yesterday, on the eve of her twenty-fifth birthday, she had hit the road with the back seat of her used station wagon full of boxes and her heart full of dreams.

She had driven ten hours yesterday before stopping at a hotel in Redding, California. After buying Chinese food, she ate it while sitting cross-legged on the bed watching the end of an old black-and-white movie. Jessica fell asleep dreaming of new beginnings and rose at 6:30, ready to drive another nine hours on her birthday.

I'm almost there, she thought. I'm really doing this! Look at all these trees. This is beautiful. I'm going to love it here!

The country road meandered through a grove of quivering willows. As she passed them, the trees appeared to wave at her, welcoming her to their corner of the world. The late afternoon sun shot between the trees like a strobe light, striking the side of her car at rapid intervals and creating stripes. Light appeared, then shadow, light, then shadow.

As Jessica drove out of the grouping of trees, the road twisted to the right. She veered the car to round the curve. Suddenly the bright sunlight struck her eyes, momentarily blinding her. Swerving to the right to avoid a truck, she felt her front tire catch the gravel on the side of the road. Before she realized what was happening, she had lost control of the car. In one terrifying instant, Jessica felt the car skid through the gravel and tilt over on its side. Her seat belt held her fast as Jessica screamed and clutched the steering wheel. The car tumbled over an embankment, then came to a jolting halt in a ditch about twenty feet below the road. The world seemed to stop.

Jessica tried to cry out, but no sound came from her lips. Stunned, she lay motionless on her side. She quickly blinked as if to dismiss a bizarre daydream that she could snap out of. Her hair covered half her face. She felt a hot, moist trickle coursing down her chin and an acidic taste filling her mouth. *I'm bleeding!*

Peering through her disheveled hair, Jessica tried to focus her eyes. When her vision began to clear, she could make out the image of the windshield, now shattered, and the mangled steering wheel bent down and pinning her left leg in place.

Suddenly her breath came back, and with her breath came the pain. Every part of her body ached, and a ring of white dots began to spin wildly before her eyes, whether she opened or

closed them. Jessica was afraid to move, afraid to try any part of her body and find it unwilling to cooperate.

This didn't happen! It couldn't have. It was too fast. Wake up, Jess!

Through all the cotton that seemed to fill her head, Jessica heard a remote crackle of a walkie talkie and a male voice in the distance saying, "I've located the car. I'm checking now for survivors. Over."

I'm here! Down here! Help! Jessica called out in her head. The only sound that escaped her lips was a raspy, "Ahhgg!" That's when she realized her tongue was bleeding and her upper lip was beginning to swell.

"Hello in there," a male voice said calmly. The man leaned in through the open driver's window, which was now above Jessica on her left side. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeath," Jessica managed to say, her tongue swelling and her jaw beginning to quiver. She felt cold and shivered uncontrollably.

"Don't try to move," the deep voice said. "I've called for help. We'll get you out of there. It's going to take a few minutes, now, so don't move, okay?"

Jessica couldn't see the man's face, but his voice soothed her. She heard scraping metal above her, and then a large, steady hand touched her neck and felt for her pulse.

"You had your seat belt on. Good girl," he said. The walkie talkie crackled again, this time right above her.

"Yeah, Mary," the man said. "We have one female, mid-twenties, I'd say. Condition is stable. I'll wait for the ambulance before I move her. Over."

Jessica felt his hand once more, this time across her cheek as he brushed back her hair. "How ya' doin'? I'm Kyle. What's your name?"

“Jethica,” she said, her tongue now throbbing. From the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of dark hair and a tanned face.

“I saw your car just as it began to roll. Must have been pretty scary for you.”

Jessica responded with a nod and realized she could move her neck painlessly. She slowly turned her head and looked up into her rescuer’s face. Jessica smiled with surprise and pleasure when she saw his green eyes, straight nose, windblown dark hair, and the hint of a five o’clock shadow across his no-nonsense jaw. With her smile came a stabbing throb in her top lip and the sensation of blood trickling down her chin.

“So, you can move a little, huh?” Kyle said. “Let’s try your left arm. Good! That’s great. How do your legs feel?”

Jessica tried to answer that the right one felt okay, but the left one was immobile. Her words came out slurred. She wasn’t sure exactly what she said. Her jaw was really quivering now, and she felt helpless.

“Just relax,” Kyle said. “As soon as the guys arrive with the ambulance, we’ll get you all patched up. I’m going to put some pressure on your lip now. Try breathing slowly and evenly like this.” Kyle leaned toward her. His face was about six inches from hers. He began to breathe in slowly through his nose and exhale slowly through his mouth. The distinct smell of cinnamon chewing gum was on his breath, which she found strangely comforting.

Jessica heard the distant wail of an approaching siren. Within minutes she was in the middle of a flurry of activity. Some of the men began to stabilize the car while several others cut off the door to have more room to reach her. Soon a team of steady hands undid Jessica’s seat belt, removed the steering wheel, and eased her body onto a long board. They taped her forehead to the board so she couldn’t move her head, and one

of the men wrapped her in a blanket. They lifted the stretcher and with sure-footed steps walked up the embankment and carried her to the ambulance.

Jessica felt as if her eyelids weighed a hundred pounds. They clamped shut as her throbbing head filled with questions.

Why? Why me? Why now, right on the edge of my new beginning?

With a jolt, the men released the wheeled legs on the stretcher and slid Jessica into the back of the ambulance. One of them reached for her arm from underneath the blanket, and running a rough thumb over the back of her left hand, he asked her to make a fist.

Another paramedic spoke calmly, a few inches from her head, "Can you open your eyes for me? That's good. Now can you tell me where it hurts the most?"

"My leg," Jessica said.

"It's her left one." Jessica recognized Kyle's strong voice. His hand reached over and pressed against her upper lip once more.

The siren started up, and the ambulance lurched out onto the road and sped toward the Glenbrooke hospital.

As the stretcher jostled in the ambulance, the paramedic holding Jessica's left hand said, "Keep your fist. This is going to pinch a little bit." And with that an IV needle poked through the bulging vein on the top of her hand.

"Ouch," she said weakly.

She felt a soft cloth on her chin and lips and opened her eyes all the way. Kyle smiled at her. With one hand he pressed against her lip, and with the other he wiped the drying blood from her cheek and chin.

"Can you open your mouth a little? I need to put this against your tongue," he said, placing a swab of cotton between her tongue and cheek. "The bleeding looks like it's about to stop in there. Now if we can only get your lip to cooperate, you'll be in

good shape. We'll be at the hospital in a few minutes. You doing okay?"

Jessica tried to nod her head, but the tape across her forehead held her firmly in place. She forced a crooked, puffy-cheeked smile beneath the pressure of his hand on her lip.

Jessica felt ridiculous, trying to flirt in her condition. Here was the most handsome, gentle man she had ever laid eyes on, and she was a helpless mess.

He's probably married and has six kids. These guys are trained to be nice to accident victims.

The full impact of her situation hit Jessica. She was a victim. None of this was supposed to happen. She was supposed to enter Glenbrooke quietly and begin her new life uneventfully. Yes, even secretly. Now how would she answer the prying questions she was sure to receive at the hospital?

At least she had Mr. McGregor, her old English teacher from high school. He was the only soul she knew in Glenbrooke, and when he had answered her letter two months ago, he had promised her a job teaching at Glenbrooke High and had even offered to find a place for her to live.

"Here we are," Kyle said as the ambulance bumped into the hospital parking lot.

Jessica closed her eyes again. The stretcher was manhandled out of the ambulance, into the emergency room, and behind a curtained area where her IV sack was hung. A white-coated doctor immediately appeared.

The pain surged over Jessica's body again, and she shivered under the bright lights as the doctor and paramedics discussed her condition in their abbreviated lingo. She could tell that Kyle was still by her side because of the constant pressure he was placing on her lip. "Can someone grab a couple of warm blankets?" he asked.

A few moments later Jessica felt a heated blanket being

placed over her. She thought the sensation was the most wonderful in the world.

Forcing her eyes open a slit, she saw another face loom over her. This one was a red-haired nurse wearing blue-rimmed glasses and bright orange lipstick.

"I have just a few questions for you, dear," she said, adjusting the paper on her clipboard and reading the list before her. "What is the name of your insurance carrier? And do you have your card with you?"

"I, I don't have one," Jessica mumbled, her lip now swollen twice its normal size.

"You don't have your card? Then do you know the name of your insurance company?"

"No."

"What *kind* of insurance do you have, dear?"

"I don't..."

"You don't have insurance?"

"No."

"I see. Well, then, are you married?"

"No."

"I need the name of a relative, dear."

Jessica hesitated before finally answering, "None."

"You have *no* relatives?" The woman sounded irritated. "No insurance and no relatives?"

Jessica didn't answer.

"Perhaps we should begin with a few simpler questions. What is your full name?"

"Jessica..." She halted. Giving her last name could ruin everything. Quickly she forced her eyes open and searched for a clue as to what to say. All she could see, with her head still strapped to the board, was a box of surgical supplies on a shelf in the corner of the room. The bold letters spelled out "Fenton Laboratories."

"Fenton," she said through stiff, swollen lips.

"Jessica Fenton," the woman repeated as she filled out her form. "And your address?"

"I don't know..."

"Do you know your phone number or the number of someone we can call?" The voice was patronizing.

Jessica paused. "No."

"Honey, before we can begin treatment, we need some cooperation here. The hospital requires a deposit today of one hundred dollars. Will you be able to pay that, or do you need financial assistance?"

"I'll pay." Jessica was beginning to feel woozy, and the questions from this orange-lipped woman weren't helping any. She forced herself to say, "My purse."

"It must be at the accident site," Kyle said. "Look, Betty, can't you work this out later? She's obviously been through a lot, and once she retrieves her purse she can give you all the information you need. Can't you see she's not up to answering your questions right now?"

"It's hospital policy, Kyle. You know that!"

Kyle left the cotton on Jessica's lip and stepped away from her bed, pulling Betty along with him. Jessica could hear him speak in hushed tones from somewhere in the corner, giving Betty his opinion of hospital policy.

The doctor stepped back over to Jessica's side and began his examination by removing the bloodied cotton and checking her tongue and lip. "Looks okay inside there. We will need a few stitches on this upper lip," he said.

Jessica shut her eyes as the team of medical personnel went to work, first with an injection to numb her lip and then with eight—or was it ten?—precise stitches. She could feel the tight tugs as her lip was sewn up, but that was about the only part of her body that felt no pain, thanks to the local anesthetic.

Another doctor continued the exam while the stitches were put in place. "Does this hurt?" he asked, proceeding to press her jaw, check her ears, and probe her rigid body, poking and jabbing at every tender spot. Everything hurt. Everything except her weird lip, which felt ten times its normal size and useless.

When the doctor reached her left leg, he stopped and ordered she be taken in for X rays as soon as the stitches were completed. As they wheeled her down the hall, Jessica listened for Kyle's voice and tried her best to see him in the blur of medical assistants, but he was gone.

For the next few hours Jessica underwent a variety of tests, X-rays, and pokes. Some kind of pain reliever or sedative had been injected into her IV earlier, and she began to experience the effects of it. She felt sleepy, and everything around her looked fuzzy. At one point, she opened her eyes and noticed a large wall clock with thick, black numbers. It read 6:35.

The next time she opened her eyes and tried to focus on her surroundings, the room was much darker. Jessica realized she was lying in a hospital bed, although she didn't remember being placed there. Everything felt mushy and out of focus.

She fell back asleep until a nurse came in to check on her sometime later. Jessica tried to stretch as the nurse checked her pulse and found that she could focus and think more clearly. She could also feel the pain since the buffer of medication was wearing off.

"How are you feeling?" the young nurse asked.

"I hurt," Jessica answered, her tongue and lip still feeling puffy and painful.

"The doctor will check on you in a few minutes."

He appeared on cue, wearing a white coat, thick-rimmed glasses, and a stethoscope around his neck. "I'm Dr. Laughlin. I have good news for you, Miss Fenton."

Miss Fenton? Oh, right. That's supposed to be me.

"No broken bones. Lots of bruises, some swelling. Your leg will be sore for a few days, but you'll feel fine in about a week. Take it easy and try to rest as much as you can the next few days. I'll need to see you in a week for the stitches." He checked her chart, and before hanging it back on the end of her bed, he said, "I would release you now, but Mr. Buchanan asked that we keep you overnight."

"Mr. Buchanan?" Jessica asked.

"Yes, Kyle. Do you remember Kyle Buchanan? He's one of our local firefighters. He was the first to arrive at the scene of your accident."

Jessica felt like saying, "How could I ever forget that face, that voice!" But all she said was, "Yes, Kyle. Kyle Buchanan. I remember him."

The doctor came closer; now he sounded like a concerned father. "In reviewing your chart, I see you haven't listed an insurance carrier. Do you have any insurance, Miss Fenton? Any relatives we can contact?"

"No, I—"

"Is there anyone you know in Glenbrooke?"

"Yes, Hugh McGregor." Her words came out slurred. "He's the principal at the high school. He hired me. I'm a teacher." She found *p*'s and *m*'s especially difficult to enunciate.

The doctor adjusted his glasses and gingerly sat on the edge of Jessica's bed. "I don't suppose you've heard about Hugh yet."

Jessica imagined the worst.

"He came in two days ago, apparently with a stroke. He's in stable condition but has suffered partial paralysis. He's not able to speak at this point."

"Is he here now?" Jessica asked, trying to sit up and instantly feeling her head swim. "Can I see him?"

“He’s on the second floor. I do suggest you wait until the morning, Miss Fenton. The best thing for you is rest. You have quite a lot of adjusting to do when you get out of here in the morning. The nurse will be in soon to give you something to help you sleep. Good night.”

Dr. Laughlin strode to the doorway, where he stopped and turned around. He smiled sympathetically at Jessica and said, “By the way, welcome to Glenbrooke. I imagine you’ll have my daughter in your class. Dawn. Dawn Laughlin. She’ll be a junior this year. I’m told she’s the most popular girl in school.”

Jessica forced a lopsided smile and tried to nod. The way he announced this bit of news almost sounded as if he were apologizing, which made Jessica wonder what a doctor with a popular daughter would have to apologize for.

“Sleep well,” Dr. Laughlin said, and vanished into the brightly lit hallway, closing the door behind him.

With the pain reliever wearing off, the brunt of her aches and bruises assaulted Jessica in the stillness of the room. But the most painful sensation of all was realizing she was by herself in a hospital bed in a strange town, and her only friend lay in bed on the floor above her, in worse shape than she.

Tomorrow morning she would be released from the hospital, and then what? Where would she go? Mr. McGregor had set up her housing for her, but if he were unable to speak, how would she find out where she was supposed to live? And if she did find the house, how would she get there? Was anything left of her car? And what about all her belongings that had been so carefully packed and wedged into the back seat and trunk?

Another fear slowly crept over her, one that overshadowed all the rest. What if, somehow, in all this, her true identity were discovered? Everything would be ruined. After all her careful planning, all her efforts to cover any tracks that would trace her to this small town tucked away in the Willamette Valley of

Oregon, could be destroyed with one tiny slip-up.

As tears began to form in her eyes, she remembered that today was her birthday. Turning her head into the stiff hospital pillow, Jessica sobbed out her fears and hurts. Never in her life had she felt so completely and painfully alone.