



OVER 350,000 SISTERCHICKS NOVELS SOLD!

# SISTERCHICKS<sup>®</sup>

## *in Gondolas*



# Robin Jones Gunn





SISTERCHICKS®

*in*  
*Gondolas*

Robin  
Jones Gunn



MULTNOMAH  
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

SISTERCHICKS IN GONDOLAS!

published by Multnomah Books

© 2006 by Robin's Ink, LLC

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-59052-505-0

*Sisterchicks* is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Cover image of women by Kim McElroy Photography

Background cover image by Pete Turner/Getty Images

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from:

*The Holy Bible*, New King James Version (NKJV)

© 1984 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Other Scripture quotations are from:

*The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson

© 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000

Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

MULTNOMAH and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission.

For information:

MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 ORACLE BOULEVARD, SUITE 200

COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80921

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gunn, Robin Jones, 1955-

*Sisterchicks in gondolas!* / Robin Jones Gunn.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59052-505-1

1. Women travelers--Fiction. 2. Female friendship--Fiction. 3.

Venice (Italy)--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3557.U4866S5628 2006

813'.54--dc22

2006006118

Printed in the United States of America

2012

10 9 8 7 6 5

## OTHER BOOKS BY ROBIN JONES GUNN

### SISTERCHICKS® NOVELS

*Sisterchicks on the Loose*  
*Sisterchicks Do the Hula*  
*Sisterchicks in Sombreros*  
*Sisterchicks Down Under*  
*Sisterchicks Say Ooh La La*  
*Sisterchicks in Gondolas*  
*Sisterchicks Go Brit*  
*Sisterchicks in Wooden Shoes*  
*Take Flight! a Sisterchicks devotional*

### THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

*Secrets*  
*Whispers*  
*Echoes*  
*Sunsets*  
*Clouds*  
*Waterfalls*  
*Woodlands*  
*Wildflowers*

### YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

*The Christy Miller Series*  
*The Sierra Jensen Series*  
*The College Years*  
*The Katie Weldon Series*  
  
*Gardenias for Breakfast*  
*Under a Maui Moon*  
*Canary Island Song*  
*Cottage by the Sea*  
*Love Finds You in Sunset Beach, Hawaii*

### NONFICTION

*Praying For Your Future Husband*

For two amazing Sisterchicks I met thirty years ago:

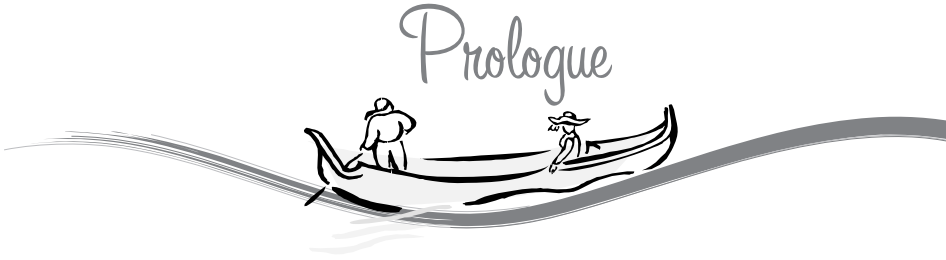
Ruby, my bunk bed mate in our dorm room in Austria  
back when our hair was its original color.

Cooking with you last summer in our Venetian palace  
was golden. I love the way we can always pick up  
our conversations where we left off, no matter how many  
years or miles have filled the pauses.

And Kate, my sister-in-law, who loved me from day one.  
I love you back, more than I ever show.  
Thanks for being more than a relative;  
you are a true friend and a Sisterchick forever.

*“God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.  
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,  
you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word, you let me catch my breath  
and send me in the right direction....  
My cup brims with blessing.”*

PSALM 23:1-3, 5B (THE MESSAGE)



I *don't think* I would have gone to Venice if I hadn't had a crazy thought five years ago that woke me at three o'clock one morning.

I was used to wacky, middle-of-the-night thoughts, but not like this one. Usually I created mental memos such as, "Send Aunt Becky's birthday card by Tuesday, or it won't arrive in time." In my head I would respond, "Okay," and fall back asleep.

Other times the thoughts came fragmented like, "car insurance." Those were the ones I hated because I'd lie alone in the darkness wondering, "Am I behind on a payment? Or was I merely dreaming about a late-night commercial with some dancing lizard telling me I was paying too much for my current coverage?"

When I discussed these annoying, sleep-robbing

thoughts with my sister-in-law, Sue, she responded, “Welcome to menopause.” Then she told me that she keeps a notepad and pen by her bed and another one in her purse at all times. “That way, if I do go completely insane, at least I’ll have left a trail for the medical community to follow, sort of like bread crumbs.”

Taking her advice, I put a notepad by my bed. That’s why I can still remember the persistent thought that woke me and set this adventure into motion. The 3 a.m. revelation was simple: “You’re not done yet.”

That was it. I wasn’t “done.” Done with what, I didn’t know.

I wrote down the thought, but then, instead of falling back to sleep, I considered all the things I had started but never finished. The list was long. Very few events in my life had unfurled the way I had thought they would. I was too old to start over but too young to roll over and play dead. Such is the muddle of midlife, I told myself. I shouldn’t elevate my expectations this far along in my quota of years. I should be winding down, right?

But at 3 a.m. that particular spring morning, I wasn’t “done” yet. And I didn’t know what that meant.

Sleep wouldn’t return, so I slipped out of bed and made a cup of tea. The sound of the newspaper thumping against the front door of my condo told me the world around me was waking. In a few hours I would leave for work. During the hectic pace of my position as a checkout



## *Sisterchicks in Gondolas!*

clerk at Abbot's Grocery, I would scan dozens of cans of soup and tomato sauce. I would weigh Red Delicious apples (code #4782) and dripping bundles of romaine lettuce (code #4623). I would say, "Have a nice day" more times than any human should have to say that phrase, and I would forget any thoughts that had come to me in the night.

Then, in the wee hours of the next morning, the same thought returned and woke me again. This time I sat up in bed and said aloud, "What? What isn't finished?" All was silent except for the whirl of the ceiling fan over my bed.

I fell back asleep. My unremarkable life continued at its usual pace for two more weeks.

Then a letter came from Sam, a friend from college who was now the director of an international mission that was based in Europe.

*Jenna, would you consider traveling to Venice in July? We need someone to cook at our mission leaders' retreat. You keep coming to mind. We were given two comp airline tickets from the U.S. so you can bring a friend. The retreat is only for four days. You may stay at the palace the remainder of the week at no charge. Please respond ASAP.*

I read the note again. Venice? Why me? Why now?

I wasn't a very good cook. Sam knew that because I worked on the kitchen staff one summer at a camp he and his wife ran in Austria. But that was during college. A life-

time ago. Sam and Austria and cooking all happened when I was young and naive and had lofty plans for my life. Then I fell in love, and, ignoring advice from friends and family, I spontaneously got married. I had a beautiful daughter and an unwanted divorce all before I was twenty-seven. That was when my life grew small.

Now I was being invited to be part of something outside the small boundaries of my broken, limited life. And in Europe, no less. Was this the unfinished business?

Sam's invitation stirred something deep within me. I realized that no matter what age we are, a profound sweetness glides over the human spirit when we are included in a small circle by an old friend. It's a humbling thing to be chosen.

I cried for the first time in a long time, and then I called my sister-in-law. Sue was the friend I chose to take with me to Italy.

She was coming up for air after the worst two years of her life. Because she never had been to Europe, she understandably was hesitant about leaving home, but she finally agreed. We left behind everything familiar about our lives in Dallas when we boarded that airplane and flew to Italy.

Neither of us expected the transformations that began in us during our week in Venice. Our luxurious makeovers started with morning walks to the *panetteria*, where we bought our daily bread. Our nails were "manicured" by

## *Sisterchicks in Gondolas!*

eager pigeons that we fed from open hands at San Marco Square. Instead of cucumber slices over closed eyes, we opened our eyes wide inside the grand, Byzantine churches and drew in the scent of honeyed candles. We meditated on God and life while listening for the echo of footsteps on the ancient tiles.

So much changed inside both of us on that trip. Sue and I look back and refer to that summer as the summer we were ambushed. Neither of us saw the blessings coming. They just came—and kept coming—and bowled us over.

Sue now has a term for what happened in Venice. She says we were “victims of grace.” I like that. Both of us had been victims of a lot of other stuff over the long years. How sweet of God to make us victims of grace when we were old enough to appreciate what that gift cost Him.

Yes, we were transformed in Venice. We both are convinced that what happened to us never would have happened in Dallas. Not that God can’t change a heart and a life in Dallas—or anywhere else—but they don’t have gondolas in Dallas. And for our transformation, we definitely needed a gondola.

# One



**F**rom the minute—and I do mean the very minute—that Sue and I exited the Santa Lucia train terminal an unexpected sense of confidence filled me. My journeys during college had taken me all over Europe with only a backpack and a list of the low-priced youth hostels. But I'd never come here, to *Venezia*, the city that Italy wears proudly like a diamond-studded broach on the cuff of her tall boot.

I led the way down the steps and into the open plaza on the edge of the Grand Canal, feeling like a wayward daughter who had finally come home. Venezia in all her morning glory rushed to greet my senses like a big, fat Italian mama holding out her tawny arms in a welcome.

Sue, however, dipped her chin and gazed at Venice the way one respectfully smiles upon the elderly, not sure whether to sit or to stand in their presence.

“That must be where we buy tickets for the *vaporetto*,” I said, forging ahead to the ticket booth. Sue let me do the talking as I bought our passage for the floating public transportation that would take us to the corner of Venice where we would stay for the next week.

“Do you have the map?” Sue rifled through her shoulder bag.

“Right here.” I handed it over.

Sue unfolded the map, and I drew in a deep breath of glimmering morning air.

“It’s not the way I thought it would be,” Sue said, looking at the map and looking up at the buildings across the canal.

“How did you think Venice would be?”

“Well, not so old and run-down, I guess.”

“I think that’s part of her charm.”

“Her?” Sue questioned.

“Yes,” I said unapologetically. “Her.”

Sue shot me a skeptical glance as our *vaporetto* pulled into the dock. We boarded along with a string of locals and a few luggage-lugging tourists. The built-in bench seats on the floating bus were occupied, so Sue and I stood beside a young man who was wearing a pressed and starched chef’s jacket.

I pulled sunglasses from my shoulder bag and set my gaze on the welcoming sight of the sun-baked block buildings.

## *Sisterchicks in Gondolas!*

“I didn’t have enough time to check the map and see where our stop is,” Sue said. “Do you think it’s very far from here? Do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember. It’s not far.”

Sue leaned to the side, resting her hand on her luggage and looking as if she was trying hard to appear relaxed.

Another young man, also in a chef’s jacket, hurried to catch our vaporetto before we left the dock. The late arriver greeted the man beside me with a handshake and a rousing, “*Buon giorno!*” The two men stood close, shoulders back, hands in motion, as they exchanged an animated dialogue of staccato words. I loved eavesdropping on them even though I couldn’t understand anything they said.

As the vaporetto began its journey down the Grand Canal, a cool breeze set to work, stitching white lace to the crests of the calm waters.

“Isn’t this gorgeous?” I murmured more to myself than to Sue.

“Do you want me to take a picture?” Sue dug into a zippered pouch of her suitcase. “Maybe we could ask someone to take a picture of both of us? How’s my hair? Is it a fright?”

Sweet Sue’s pomegranate red hair was not only her most noticeable asset but also sometimes her greatest liability. This morning a gaggle of wayward rouge-hued strands had taken flight and were veering off in a variety of directions, conducting their own unguided tours of eye-level Venice.

“It could use some attention,” I said delicately. “Don’t worry about the pictures. We’ll have plenty of chances later.”

Sue smoothed her hand over the top of her head, as she tried to assess the damage inflicted by our all-night flight. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a hairclip and wrestled with her tangles.

I tucked a few flipped tails of my low-maintenance, unmemorable brown hair behind my ears and noticed an older woman standing across from us who was intrigued with the way Sue was taming her personal shrew. The woman had been in line behind us at the ticket booth. I smiled, but she had her gaze fixed on Sue.

We motored past an unending row of personality-plus buildings that lined the Grand Canal. Most of the four-story boxes were painted in muted earth tones. They showed off their comely window arches, intricate balconies, and deep plaster gashes with as much pride as any soldier who had been wounded and decorated after battle. Clearly, these brave, still-standing offspring of Venezia had earned their medals of honor for years of faithful service and courage in the line of duty.

“*Ca’d’Oro?*” The older woman tapped Sue on the arm. “*Avete un biglietto di Ca’d’Oro?*”

Sue’s stunned expression gave away that she had no idea what the woman was asking. Blessedly, the clean-scrubbed chef leaned toward us with a chin-up gesture and asked, “Do you want *Ca’d’Oro?*”

## *Sisterchicks in Gondolas!*

“Oh, y’all speak English!” Sue turned into her charming Southern self.

“Yes, of course. Do you want Ca’d’Oro? It’s the next stop. She is saying you bought tickets for Ca’d’Oro.”

His accent was mesmerizing. I wanted to say “what?” just so he would keep talking to us. But I knew Ca’d’Oro was the name of the stop where we were supposed to disembark. And, apparently, so did the woman with the keen eye for details.

“Yes, this is our stop,” I said. “Thanks for your help.”

“Yes, thanks, y’all.” Sue smiled at the chefs and the attentive woman. “*Gracias* for being so nice.”

“*Grazie*,” the chef instructed her. “*Italiano* for ‘thank you’ is *grazie*.”

“*Grawts-ee*,” Sue repeated, first to the young man and then to the woman. The chefs grinned and exchanged glances. I wondered if Sue had any idea how undeniable her Texas accent was or what a rarity she must be with her remarkable red hair.

The vaporetto came to a stop. Sue and I stepped off the boat, following several other pedestrians down an alley, and entered a broad thoroughfare. I pulled out a copy of the e-mail that had the directions to where Sue and I were to meet Steph, the woman who had the keys to our apartment.

“If this is *Strada Nuova*,” I said, “then we should go right and watch for *Campo Apostoli*.”



“Campo Apostoli is a restaurant, right? Or you said maybe it’s a hotel.”

“I’m not sure. The directions just list Campo Apostoli, as if it will be obvious when we see it. Let’s head this way and find out.”

Sue hesitated.

“It’s okay; don’t worry. I have Steph’s mobile phone number if we get lost.”

“Do you know how to use an Italian pay phone?”

“Probably. I don’t know. We’ll find out. Come on.” I picked up the pace, challenging Sue to keep up.

A surprising number of pedestrians passed us. I wouldn’t have expected so many people to be out early Sunday morning. Some of the strolling people were dressed in casual attire, but most were in nice outfits—“Sunday-go-to-meetin’-clothes” as some of our friends in Dallas would say.

“Did you notice how you and I are the only people on the thoroughfare with luggage?” Sue asked.

“Are we? Well, I don’t imagine we’ll see a lot of other tourists since the place we’re staying is in a residential area.”

“How did these friends of yours find this place?”

“I don’t know. They have their annual strategy retreat in a different place each year, so it’s possible this is their first time in Venice.”

“I hope we find more people who speak English.”

## *Sisterchicks in Gondolas!*

“I have an Italian phrase book if we get stuck. Don’t worry, Sue. We’ll find our way.”

Sue didn’t look convinced. At that point, I was feeling comfortable enough for both of us. Energized, actually. Venice was new to me yet somehow sweetly, faintly familiar. I felt as if a part of me that had been hibernating for decades was awakening and beckoning me to open my eyes wide to all that was around me.

We approached an open area—a piazza—and headed for the shade of a scruffy-looking tree with a generous canopy of leaves. It was the first tree I recalled seeing so far. I smiled at the brave tree, imagining how it must have sprung from the uneven cobblestones hundreds of years ago, and the inhabitants had celebrated the fledgling by declaring a ban on building within a modest fifty-yard radius of the welcome intruder. It was a protected tree. Rare and honored. And all who gathered under the shade of its branches must surely appreciate it for its singularity.

Sue pointed to a café on the corner. “Do you suppose that’s it? Is that *Camp-o Apo*—whatever it was?”

The curved letters painted on the outside of the storefront read “Paolo’s.”

“No, I don’t think so.” I looked around. The walkways radiated from this hub in four different directions.

“Maybe he knows where we can find Campo Apostoli.” I nodded toward a gentleman in a dark suit. He was seated

on one of the park benches beneath the tree's shade, reading a newspaper.

"Are you actually thinking of going over there to ask him, Jenna?"

"Actually, I was thinking you should go ask him."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

Moistening her lips, she looked at me and in a low voice said, "I asked you for this, didn't I? When you invited me to come, I said I would join you in this insane undertaking as long as you agreed to throw me in the deep end, and that's what you're doing, isn't it?"

I nodded. "You can do this, you know."

She drew in a deep breath. "We'll find out, now, won't we?"

With her determined chin leading the way, Sue took small steps toward the stranger. I followed close behind, thinking how much I admired my brother's wife. She was a strong, courageous, and underestimated woman. I was thrilled when she had caught a glimpse of those qualities in herself and, without my prompting, had made the "deep end" request before we had left home.

I figured this was my first chance to make good on that promise.

"Excuse me, sir," Sue said, and the man lifted his eyes to study us. She spoke slowly and loudly, as if he could understand her better if she treated him as someone who

## Sisterchicks in Gondolas!

was hard of hearing. “Do you know where we might find a place called Camp-o A-po-stal-ee?”

He looked at Sue as if she were a strange little red-feathered bird that had landed on the cobblestones before him and now stood there helplessly peeping with her head cocked.

Reaching for the e-mail in my hand, Sue pointed to the words and stated, “Camp-o A-po-stal-ee.”

An expression of recognition on the man’s face was followed by a nod. “Qui,” he said, pointing to the bench and making a circle with his finger around the small plaza area.

“Kwee?” Sue repeated his single, definitive word.

“Si. Qui. Campo Apostoli. Qui.”

“This is Campo Apostoli?” I asked, putting together the pieces. “This little park is Campo Apostoli?”

Now he was the one tilting his head and looking at me like a curious bird. “Si,” he said. “Qui. Campo Apostoli.”

“Oh, of course,” I said. “I remember now. A *campo* is like a plaza. This must be it then.”

Giving him her sweetest smile, Sue tried out her first Italian word. “Grawt-see.”

He gave her a grimaced response.

“It’s my accent, isn’t it?”

I nodded. She tried again. “Grat-see.”

The man held up his hand with all his fingers pinched together at the tips and touched the edge of his lips. He spoke in slow, exaggerated Italian and measured out the

word, “Gra-tsye,” effortlessly, putting a spin on his “r.” Again he repeated the word with the accent on the first syllable and continued to expressively use his hand. “Gra-tsye.”

Sue tried again, this time involving her hand in the process, as if she were trying to pluck the word from the edge of her lips. “Graw-tsye.”

The man turned to me, as if we were students in his open-air classroom, and it was my turn to recite the morning lesson. He didn’t know that my Midwest background, along with my fascination with accents, would make this an easier task for me than for Sue.

“Grazie.” I found the word carried a familiar feeling on my tongue, even though it had been ages since I’d last tried it.

“*Bella!*” he declared with a clap of his hands.

“You little show-off!” Sue teased.

A loud clanging sound echoed from Paolo’s café in the corner of the piazza. We turned to watch as a stocky man in a white shirt rolled up a metal awning. He then went to work, removing chairs that had been stacked during the night and placing them around the outdoor tables.

“Looks like the café is opening. Do you want to wait over there? We can sit at a table and order some breakfast,” I suggested.

Sue nodded, and I said “*ciao*” to our gracious teacher.

He repeated a long sentence in Italian that I hoped was polite.

## Sisterchicks in Gondolas!

“What does ‘chow’ mean?” Sue asked. “I’ve heard that before.”

“‘Hello,’ ‘good-bye,’ ‘see you later.’”

“You really should do all the conversing, Jenna.”

“Why? Because I can say *grazie* and *ciao*? Those are the only words I know.”

“And *camp-o*. That’s three times as many as I know. And people here understand you. They just look at me like I’m the most pitiful thing they’ve seen in a month of Sundays.”

“No they don’t.”

I stepped up to the counter of the open café. In front of us was a freezer and under the frosted dome were several shallow metal bins of something that I felt happy to see after all these years. Gelato. Rich, creamy, dense Italian ice cream.

“Buon giorno,” the man in the white shirt greeted us.

“Buon giorno,” I repeated. “Two gelato?” I held up two fingers like a peace sign.

“*Due*,” he said, instructing me by holding up his thumb and forefinger and pointing them to the side like a gun. I remembered then how Italians counted, always starting with their thumb as “one.”

“*Si, due gelato, per favore.*” I turned to Sue. “What flavor do you want?”

“What do you mean, ‘flavor’? What are you doing? You’re carrying on now in full sentences. I’m lost.”

“Oh. Sorry. Gelato. Italian ice cream. The world’s best ice cream, to be precise.”

“For breakfast?”

“Sure, why not? We’re on vacation. We can eat ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if we want.”

“Okay,” Sue said slowly. I realized how quickly I could take charge. I had promised Sue I wouldn’t overpower her on this trip. Being a single mom for so many years had placed me in the role of the designated leader almost every day. I was entering a new season of life; it was time to pull back. Relax.

“Would you like ice cream or something else?” I asked Sue.

“No, ice cream is fine. It’s milk, right? I’ll tell myself it’s a breakfast drink, only frozen.”

“What flavor do you want?”

“I don’t know. What flavors do they have?”

I knew I didn’t want to try this man’s patience so I suggested chocolate.

“*Ciocolato?*” he said, going to work with the metal scooping paddle in his hand, sliding the server into the creamy chocolate.

“*Chalk-o-lot-o?*” Sue repeated. “Well, I’m happy to know that the word ‘chocolate’ is so similar in our two languages. That could be the only word I manage to remember all week!”

“Then it’s a good thing it’s one of the more essential

words.” I reached for several euros to pay the waiter. “And sorry about running ahead of you there. You will let me know when I’m getting too bossy, won’t you?”

“Jenna, that wasn’t bossy. Don’t worry; I’ll let know you when you’re bossy. Not that I think you will be. I just didn’t realize you were going to start carrying on in complete Italian paragraphs with every man we met within our first hour in Venice. You move fast, girl!”

I laughed, and Sue gave me “the smile.” The one with which she looks directly at me with her warm, brown eyes, and everything about her expression and posture says, “We’re sisters. Sisters by marriage. Sisters of the heart. Sisters in a spirit of irrevocable bonding. That’s not going to change. Not now. Not ever. But even if we weren’t sisters, I’d still like you. I’d still want to be your friend.”

I held my cup of chocolate gelato and fought back an urge to give way to a flood of tears.

I know. How pathetic, right? Crying over frozen milk. Actually, even though I’m sure a touch of jet lag was involved, I think the real reason I wanted to cry was because of the way Sue accepted me just the way I was. That had not always been the case. We had experienced a long history of family disconnection, which is why I still found her acceptance of me so startling. Every time she looked at me like that I felt I was being offered a tender gift in the second season of life. And for every woman, but especially, I think, for



single moms, friendship is such a welcome gift.

“*Chock-o-lat-o*,” Sue repeated as she headed for one of the outdoor tables. “I have to remember that word.”

“You will,” I said, pulling myself together. “You’ll remember this.” The comment might have been more for me than for Sue. I had a feeling I would remember this morning for the rest of my life.