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SISTERCHICKS[®]

in
Sombreros

Robin



Jones Gunn



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Praying For Your Future Husband

To Julie, my “almost twin” sister, who planned my surprise birthday party when I turned sixteen and never pinched me on the underside of my arm.

Well, maybe once.

I’m so glad we figured out how to be friends early on.

I don’t know who I’d be without you.

To Janet, who cruised with me to Mexico, dined on dancing ladies over tea in Ensenada, and endured my moaning after the spa treatment that made her skin well and gave my skin welts.
I’d share sombreros with you any day, dear *hermanachica!*

*“God can do anything, you know—
far more than you could ever imagine or guess
or request in your wildest dreams!
He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us,
his Spirit deeply and gently within us.”*

EPHESIANS 3:20



Prologue

*M*ost of my life I secretly admired my sister, Joanne. But until high school, I didn't like her. And it wasn't until we were in our forties that I treasured her.

We're only sixteen months apart in age. Joanne is the older one. Blond and sweet, with a great laugh. I was known as the bossy baby sister, always ready to make a fuss so I would be noticed.

Our mom used to dress us in matching outfits and tell people, "They're almost twins, you know." Joanne and I hated that. How can you be "almost twins"? Aren't twins supposed to have a lot of similarities? Joanne and I have only two—the same creamy, fair skin and the same funny nose.

By the time I was eight, I had grown a full inch taller than Joanne. That was the year we moved from Saskatoon to British Columbia, and everyone who met us assumed I was the older

of the two Clayton girls. I know Joanne shrunk a little every time someone called her Melanie, while I reveled in finally receiving top billing.

When Joanne got her driver's license, our quirky power balance was upset again because I was suddenly at her mercy if I wanted to go anywhere. We argued all the time.

That is, until my sixteenth birthday.

I asked Joanne to drive me across town to a friend's house, but a sassy look crossed Joanne's face, and she said, "I don't know, Melanie. What's it worth to you?"

I snapped back with, "I don't know, Joanne. What's it worth to you not to show up at school Monday with two black eyes?"

Instead of being intimidated, my sister laughed at me. She drove the whole way with a snicker just begging to burst out from her lips. I was so steamed that, when we pulled up in front of my friend's house, I turned to Joanne and said, "When I get my license, I'll never drive you anywhere, even if you have two broken legs and plead with me to take you to the hospital."

Joanne only laughed more.

I slammed the car door and marched up to the house, vowing never to speak to my sister again. Just then the front door swung open, and all my closest friends yelled, "Surprise!" Joanne was standing behind me, grinning like a goose. The surprise birthday party had been her idea down to the last detail.

Stunned, I turned to her, and with an apology that encom-

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passed my entire malicious career as a sister, I whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Joanne teared up and said in a sincere but playful voice, “Me, too, Melly Jelly Belly.”

I hugged her in front of my waiting friends. “Thanks, Joanna Banana.”

And that was it; we became friends.

We always had shared a bedroom, but after that we shared our clothes and makeup as well as our secret crushes and dreams for the future. Joanne wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to be something more glamorous like an interior decorator or a pastry chef and took a variety of classes at the community college, changing my major each semester.

I tried on a variety of careers and was as surprised as anyone when the one that stuck was running the front desk at a dental office, which is what I do even now. That’s where I met my husband, Ethan. He came in for a root canal and left with my phone number. That was almost seventeen years ago.

In that same time span my saintly sister graduated with honors from nursing school in Toronto, dedicated herself to long hours healing the infirm, sent generous gifts to my two daughters on their birthdays, and spent five years in India. She worked at a safe house that rescued juvenile girls off the streets who had been sold into prostitution. Now you can see why I admire her.

After Joanne returned to Toronto, I often wondered if she regretted not marrying Russell what’s-his-name while she had

the chance. It's the sort of question one sister can ask another, but I'd never come right out and asked her.

We fell into a routine with our relationship after we both passed forty. She would call every few weeks and ask about Ethan and the girls and if I had seen Mom and Dad. I'd answer in short sentences, and then I'd ask about her job and her dog, Russell. Yes, she named her schnauzer Russell. After Russell what's-his-name, I presumed.

I kept thinking that during one of those predictable phone conversations I would say, "How's Russell?" And when she started to talk about her schnauzer, I'd say, "No, I mean the *other* Russell." Then I'd find out what really happened and why she took off for India for so long.

But I never quite managed to pull that one off.

That was, until last year, when Joanne and I unexpectedly crossed another bridge between friendship and sistership. Or maybe I should say we set sail on a ship that took us to a new place as sisters because that's literally what happened.

I would never have taken off on such a lark, if the choice truly had been mine. But it wasn't.

I look back now and realize that in the same way we don't choose our relatives, I think it's also true we don't choose the best moments of our lives. God chooses them for us, the same way He chose two sisters like Joanne and me, who are "almost twins," to turn us into the best friend neither of us ever thought we had.



*L*ast November, on the last Saturday of the month, I stood in the garage untangling a string of twinkle lights and thought, *Who came up with the term Father Christmas?*

At our house, it's more like Mother Christmas. I'm the one who knows where all the decorations are stored. I organize the festivities, buy the gifts, address the cards, initiate the parties, and single-handedly festoon the house. Without the information stored in my brain and without the loving labor of my two hands, Christmas wouldn't come to our humble abode in Langley, which is a suburb of Vancouver.

I always start with a long list of what needs to be done and tell myself to start earlier than I did the previous year. Untangling the lights on November 29 was a pretty good running start.

That was, until Aunt Winnie called.

“Melanie, dear, you must come over at once. My lawyer is here, and he doesn’t speak a word of Spanish.”

“Aunt Winnie, what are you talking about?”

“The letter. It has your name on it. You have to be here when the conference call comes through. The call with Joanne. This is most disturbing. Please don’t dawdle.”

She hung up without saying good-bye, and I growled at the phone. Untangling Aunt Winnie had not been on my list that day.

“What’s going on?” my husband asked, as I stomped down the hall.

I repeated the cryptic message and pulled a change of clothes from the closet. Jeans and a sweatshirt weren’t appropriate attire to visit Aunt Winnie.

“Sounds strange,” Ethan muttered. “Even for your wacky aunt. What do you think she’s trying to pull?”

“Who knows? She was completely rattled.”

“More than usual?”

“Yes, more than usual.”

I slipped into my gray wool skirt and tried to straighten the permanently creased waistband. “And she’s not wacky, Ethan. Please don’t say that in front of the girls.”

“Right. Not wacky. Eccentric. Isn’t that what you told the girls?”

“Yes. Is this blouse too wrinkled?” Before Ethan could answer, I pulled it off and grabbed the tried-and-true black turtleneck.

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“I thought your aunt was on a cruise to Alaska.”

“No, she leaves sometime next week for Mexico, not Alaska. Alaska was last July. Panama Canal was in October.”

“That woman goes on more cruises than anyone I’ve ever met. Why can’t you tell her you’ll come see her when she comes back from her cruise?”

“Her lawyer is there, Ethan. What am I supposed to do? If you had heard her on the phone, you’d be on your way over there, too.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. I’ll call if there’s any reason for you to come. Joy has her Girl Guides meeting at two o’clock, and Brianna is babysitting at four, but I should be back by then.”

Ethan looked at me skeptically. “If you’re not back by five, do you want me to order pizza for dinner?”

“No, I’ll be back before then.” I brushed past Ethan and reached for my purse. “If you really want to help, you can finish untangling the Christmas lights and pull out all the bins with the decorations.”

I backed out of the driveway, chiding myself for being so brusque with Ethan. He was right; Aunt Winnie was wacky. She was demanding. I didn’t know why I was defending her instead of siding with my husband. My only comfort was that Winnie would be on her cruise next week, and I could concentrate on what I needed to do at home.

Turning right onto Highway 1, I sped up for the forty-minute stretch into Vancouver and made a mental list of all the

possible reasons her lawyer was there.

I wonder if Aunt Winnie is in some sort of financial trouble.

One of the enigmas of my aunt was that no one in the family knew where her money came from or how much she had. Uncle Harlan had passed away three years ago. He and my father were brothers and came from a long line of simple, rural-type Canadians. The money that had funneled into Harlan and Winnie's forty-eight-year marriage came from some undisclosed source on Winnie's side.

Arriving in Vancouver as a mist of chilling rain dotted the windshield, I cut across town on King Edward Avenue and headed for Aunt Winnie's luxurious apartment with its spectacular view of English Bay. As the elevator took me to the tenth floor, I straightened my skirt and checked my posture.

"Is that Melanie?" Aunt Winnie sang out as Mei Lee, her housekeeper, welcomed me inside the permanently rose-scented apartment. Today tinges of burnt toast lingered in the air.

I noticed that the mahogany furniture had been rearranged to make a clear path through the Victorian-style living room for what Aunt Winnie called her "Scoot-About." Several weeks ago she saw the motorized wheelchair advertised on TV and picked up her phone to order one. I wasn't convinced she needed the assistance, but she was enamored with her new device.

"Hello, Aunt Winnie." I went to her side and pressed my cheek against hers. "How are you feeling?"

Her tightly curled silver hair framed her oval face like the

crocheted lace on the throw pillows that lined her sofa. She held out a piece of paper to me. “Most disturbing news I’ve had in a month. No, six months. Most upsetting.”

The stationery, I noted, was from El Banco del Sol in Mexico. The only words in English were my sister’s and my names, which appeared in the middle of a sentence at the top of the page.

“What does this say?” I asked my aunt.

“I have no idea. Tea?” Aunt Winnie rang a small silver bicycle bell attached to the right handle of her Scoot-About. It was the sort of bell my girls had on their tricycles years ago, the kind that makes a cheerful brring-brring sound with a flick of the thumb. On the front of her Scoot-About hung a woven wicker basket, also of the tricycle variety, complete with pink and lavender plastic streamers.

I was glad Ethan hadn’t come with me. No matter what Aunt Winnie had to say, I’m sure my husband wouldn’t have been able to see past the basket with the plastic streamers.

“Does your lawyer know what this letter says?” I asked.

“No, I told you: He doesn’t speak a word of Spanish. That’s why he left. To get it translated. I sent him downstairs to make a copy and insisted he leave the original letter with me. I knew you would be proud of me for thinking of that. He will have the letter decoded by the time he calls us in...” She glanced at her ornate grandfather clock. “Twenty minutes.”

“And that’s the phone call Joanne will be in on,” I surmised.

“The very one.” Aunt Winnie triumphantly flicked her thumb against the silver bell.

Mei Lee, ever the efficient housekeeper, appeared with Aunt Winnie’s Royal Albert teapot and matching china teacups on a tray. She set the preparations before us with a plate of Nanaimo bars, Aunt Winnie’s favorite teatime dainties.

“You don’t speak Spanish, do you?” Aunt Winnie asked Mei Lee.

“No.” The petite woman shyly dipped her chin.

“But you do speak Chinese.” Winnie shook her finger. “If Harlan had bought his summerhouse in Hong Kong, we would have been coming to you for advice. How is the fishing in Hong Kong?”

“Very nice, I’m sure.” Mei Lee left the room as I put the pieces together.

“Uncle Harlan owned a summerhouse in Mexico? Is that what the letter is about?”

“Oh, that awful, ugly fish. It was hideous! He insisted on having it mounted. Melanie, will you pour, dear?”

“What fish are you talking about?”

“The one Harlan caught.”

“In Mexico?”

“Yes, of course, in Mexico. That’s why he wanted the summerhouse.”

“And the summerhouse is in Mexico.” I held out her cup of tea with a quarter teaspoon of sugar already stirred in, the way she liked it.

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“Naturally. Thank you, dear. I only went there once, you know.”

“You only went once to Mexico?”

“Harlan’s summerhouse.”

“And exactly where is Uncle Harlan’s summerhouse?” This was the first I’d heard that my uncle had such a place.

“Haven’t you been paying attention at all, dear Melanie? His summerhouse is in Mexico.”

“Yes, but where in Mexico?”

“Some town with a Mexican name. What about this teapot, Melanie? Would you like this one after I’m gone?”

On a “normal” visit, Aunt Winnie’s erratic communication skills drove me nuts. Today I thought I was going to scream. As firmly as I dared, I said, “Aunt Winnie, you said you thought the letter referred to your summerhouse. What—?”

“Oh, it wasn’t mine!” she yipped. “It was Harlan’s house. I couldn’t take the heat. Dreadful! He loved it. But I don’t know why we’re discussing this. Harlan sold the summerhouse years ago. After his first heart attack. Did I already promise you this teapot?”

“Yes, Aunt Winnie, you did.”

She reached for her famous ledger, which I noticed she now kept handy in her little wicker basket. She had started the ledger because every time I came to visit, she gave an inventory of her belongings and offered me first grabs on anything I liked.

I used to say, “Oh, I couldn’t ask you for that” or “I’m sure

you have many more years left to enjoy it.”

My polite approach gave her fits, so about eight months ago I started to say, “Why, yes, thank you very much. I would love to have that someday.”

That response prompted her to buy the ledger, and today she wrote down the Royal Albert teapot under my name for the second time.

“You know,” she said with a funny little sniff. “It’s beach-front property. Gorgeous white sandy beach. Miles and miles of it. I have photos here somewhere.”

With her hand on the control switch, Aunt Winnie puttered across the room. She stopped the Scoot-About in front of her antique secretary, stood up, and bent over to pull a box out of the lower drawer. Settling back in the padded seat, she rang her bell and merrily motored the distance of eight feet, back to where I sat on the couch.

“Palm trees.” She opened the box and filed through the photos. “Blue water and so many fish. I said I’d never go again, and I never did.”

She looked up at me with a blink of surprise behind her glasses. “Harlan and I fought like cats over that fish of his. Do you know that it took twenty years before he finally took the bloated thing off the wall?”

Tilting her head she added wistfully, “Funny, I miss it. Hmm.”

The phone rang, and Winnie called out, “Mei Lee!” For emphasis she added a brring-brring of her tricycle bell.

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“That will be my lawyer,” Winnie said. “You talk to him, Melanie. He said he wanted you to be on the phone with Joanne.”

Mei Lee handed me the phone, and what followed was a fifteen-minute conversation that left me speechless. As soon as I hung up, Aunt Winnie squawked, “Well, what did he say?”

“The letter is from a bank in Mexico.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. What does it mean?”

“It seems Uncle Harlan listed Joanne and me as the beneficiaries of his summer home.”

“Beneficiaries? I told you, Harlan sold the beach house. Eight years ago. After his first heart attack.”

“According to your lawyer and the bank in Mexico, Harlan didn’t sell the house.”

“Are you sure? How preposterous!”

“It’s true, Aunt Winnie. Your lawyer has all the documentation.”

“Then why did it take those people three years to get around to telling me this?”

“It took a long time to get all the paperwork through the right bank in Mexico. The property still is owned by Uncle Harlan, but since he’s gone, it’s now deeded to Joanne and me.”

“Imagine that,” she said with a curious sounding “piffle!” at the end of her sentence. Holding out two black-and-white photos, Aunt Winnie nodded for me to take the square-shaped pictures from her. I guessed them to be from the sixties, due to the white trim around the borders. One photo showed a

stretch of white sand and what had to be aqua blue water.

“That’s what you see from the front,” Winnie said. “White sand, like I said.”

The second picture was of Uncle Harlan wearing only a pair of shorts and dark midcalf socks with sandals. He had a floppy straw sombrero on his head and was pouring a bucket of water on a three-foot-high palm tree.

“Harlan had a groundskeeper, you know, but he planted this palm tree himself. Said he needed a place to hang his hammock.”

I studied the photos, wishing they showed more of the house and grounds and surrounding area. “By any chance do you remember the name of his groundskeeper?”

“No idea. I think it was a Mexican name. Is it hot in here to you?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Imagine! That Harlan of mine left you the beach house. One last trick up his sleeve. That man! No great surprise that he wanted the two of you to have the place. He knew I would never go there. I suppose it’s yours then. Just like that. No papers to sign?”

“Joanne and I have a lot of papers to sign. I asked your lawyer if he could have the bank in Mexico mail everything to us so that Joanne and I wouldn’t have to go down there. He’s checking into it.”

“Mail the papers? I should say not! Such important papers. Why would you want to do that? I for one certainly don’t care

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to wait three more years for another letter written in Mexican. No one around here can read it!”

She rose from her Scoot-About and pointed her finger at me. “You must go! To Mexico. And I have the ticket.”

Aunt Winnie had spoken. She reached for her phone and began to make calls.

I didn’t arrive home until after five that evening. Ethan had strung the lights and the front of the house looked cheerful. He was in the garage when I pulled in, so we stood on the cold cement floor as I told him the whole story. The concluding shocker was that Aunt Winnie had decided not to go on her scheduled cruise to Mexico next week.

“She had the travel agent transfer the reservation out of her name and put Joanne and me as the passengers.”

“Your aunt isn’t going on the cruise at all?”

“No, she said it was her Christmas gift so that Joanne and I could go sign the papers at the bank in Mexico and enjoy a little luxury at the same time.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Wow. It’s just beginning to sink in.”

“What did her lawyer say about all this?”

“He came back over after the conference call and gave me some additional documents. He said it was a ‘smart, proactive expression’ for Joanne and me to go because we were bolstering Aunt Winnie’s confidence.”

“Confidence in what?”

“I think he meant her confidence in naming Joanne and

me as joint managers of her estate once she is gone. He said she is still 'in process' over that decision."

"What was he saying? You're going to be written out of her will if you don't go?"

"I don't know. The whole thing is bizarre. I can't figure out why Uncle Harlan listed me as the primary beneficiary."

"That's easy. He liked you better than Joanne."

"Maybe he thought I was the oldest. Although, it doesn't really matter because the lawyer said Joanne and I both have to sign in front of a notary before the bank will release the rights on the deed. Once the paperwork is clear, we can sell the house and split the profit."

Ethan leaned against the workbench. "What if you want to keep the house and the property?"

For the first time in that crazy, carousel-spinning afternoon, I stopped and let the possibility sink in. "I don't know. What would we do with beachfront property in Mexico? We need the money more than we need a vacation spot we could never afford to go visit."

"You don't have to make that decision right away, do you? You're just going down to Mexico to sign over the ownership, right?"

"Right."

"If it turns out to be some great mansion on the best beach in Mexico, you and Joanne can decide then if you want to keep it."

"Yes, that's my understanding." I kept my voice calm, but

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inside I was beginning to grasp some of the thrilling possibilities I could detect in my husband's eyes.

"What are you thinking, Ethan?"

He gave me a charming grin. "This is wild."

"I know. It is." I paused and added, "Is this all too crazy?"

"Too crazy for what? Too crazy for you or too crazy for your wacky aunt?"

"Too crazy for us. For me. For now."

"No, it's not too crazy. Besides, it didn't sound like you had a lot of choice in the situation. Your aunt made the arrangements, right? You need to go. When do you leave?"

I reviewed the rushed schedule: fly to California on Monday, meet Joanne on the cruise ship, cruise to Mexico, go to the bank, sign a few papers, then cruise back to Los Angeles, and fly home on Thursday.

"Sounds like it's a done deal," he said.

I felt little shivers run up my arms. They weren't chilly shivers caused by the cold garage floor. They were thrilly shivers. I was boarding a luxury liner headed to sombrero-land in two days!

"Are you and Joanne going to play shuffleboard and learn to tango or something?" Ethan asked.

"Tango?"

"Isn't that what people do on cruises?"

I laughed. "I have no idea what people do on cruises."

"Looks like you're about to find out."

We headed into the house with our arms around each

other. Ethan added as an afterthought, “Why don’t you bring back one of those Mexican blankets? The ones with the stripes.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah, show me where you keep the pizza coupons. The delivery guy should be here any minute. Maybe I can place a standing order with him for all the days you’re going to be gone next week.”