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SISTERCHICKS®

On the Loose



Robin
Jones Gunn





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the
Loose*

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For Donna,
my original sisterchick,
who has been with me to Finland and back.
Next time we're buying more chocolate.

For Merja,
my favorite Finnish editor,
who opened her heart and home to us in Porvoo.
Kitos, my friend, for letting me borrow your childhood
memories of Porosaari and for the night of the
unforgettable sauna in Hinthaara.
You sing the high notes better than any sisterchick I know.

And for Meg and Jaynie,
my dear PPCs,
who faithfully grabbed a booth at Branches
every Monday night where we met for months.
Thank you for patiently going over every word of
this story until we got it right or until
Jennifer started mopping under our feet.

Sisterchicks forever!

*“We were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter
And our tongue with joyful shouting;
Then they said among the nations,
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’”*

PSALM 126:1B-2

Prologue

*Kiitos Cottage
Maple Leaf Lake, Washington
October 12, 2003*

When my husband, Jeff, tells this story, he says it started the day I dyed my hair green. He likes to tell how he found me on the bathroom floor with an airline ticket in one hand and a can of root beer in the other, crying my eyes out.

I prefer to start this story where it actually began—more than a decade before the green hair incident. One hot August night in 1982, my dearest friend of all time, Penny, and I were on duty in the church nursery. Seven of the sweaty children in the nursery that Sunday evening belonged to the two of us.

I was rocking my wailing daughter when Penny, in the middle of a diaper change, turned to me. “Let’s make a deal, Sharon. When they graduate, let’s go somewhere. Just the two of us.”

“Where would we go?” I asked.

“Finland!” she spouted.

I stopped and stared to see if she was serious. She was.

I suppose I should back up this story to when Penny and I first met. Penny and Dave were married and expecting their first child. That's when they started to attend our conservative little church in Chinook Springs, Washington. They joined our home Bible study and pulled up that first night on a motorcycle, wearing matching suede jackets with fringe on the arms—but with no Bibles. Penny left her muddy boots by the front door and settled on my tattered couch as still as a tiger concealed in the brush. I'd never had such a potentially wild person in my house before.

The next week, Penny showed up with a burlap sack stuffed with freshly dug-up iris bulbs. She asked if I had a Bible she could borrow, and our friendship was off to a tender, unconventional start. That was twenty-four years ago.

Penny and I were in each other's everyday lives while raising our children. Our husbands swapped tools and went fishing on Saturday mornings. Penny and I never had a fight.

Then Dave landed the job he always had wanted at a big computer company, and the Lane family packed up and moved to San Francisco.

I was lost.

For a month I cried when no one was looking. Our phone bill went into triple digits. Penny kept saying we would get together, just the two of us, but nothing ever worked out. My separation anxiety lasted for two embarrassing years.

This is where my husband picks up the story. Jeff says that out of the blue, Penny decided to go to Finland. He doesn't remember the part about the church nursery where the idea was hatched more than a decade before Penny put wings to her plan. Jeff says he found me curled up against the bathroom wall, staring at the ticket and guzzling root beer.

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I wasn't guzzling root beer. I'm pretty sure I wasn't drinking anything.

Jeff says I was sobbing because I was in shock.

I wasn't sobbing. I was sighing really loud. There is a difference.

Jeff likes to add a punch line here about how I dramatically pulled the towel off my head and—ta-da!—my hair was green.

That part, unfortunately, is true.

For almost eleven years now I've listened to my dear husband's account of the once-in-a-lifetime trip Penny and I took to Finland in February 1993. He loves to embellish, so every time he tells it, the story morphs into something that only vaguely resembles our real adventure.

Last Friday, Jeff had our new daughter-in-law in a state of stunned silence while going on about the night Penny and I accompanied two seventy-year-old women into a Finnish sauna. Jeff said we got all steamed up and then jumped in a frozen lake.

It wasn't a lake. It was just the snow. The snow and a single star. Jeff never includes the part about the star.

I got so mad at him. As soon as everyone left, I said, "I don't want you to tell stories about Finland anymore. You get it all wrong, and it's not even your story. It's my story. Penny's and mine."

A sly grin appeared on Jeff's face, and I immediately knew what he was thinking. He finally had succeeded in pushing me into the corner where a pad of paper and a pen had been waiting for me for years.

So here I sit, in my corner of the world, ready to tell the story the way it really happened...about how Penny and I jumped over the moon.

One



January 1993

Oh, Penny Girl, what have you done? That's what I was thinking when Jeff found me on the bathroom floor sighing. I truly thought Penny had gone too far this time.

For years the amazing Penny had blazed through life like a fearless comet in the vast summer night sky. I followed close behind as a cosmic DustBuster, content to collect her sparkling trail of wonder dust. Whenever Penny ignited a sentence with the words "what if," she took off soaring. I found bliss in the glittering possibilities that fell over my life in those moments.

Truth be told, we rarely did any of the things Penny dreamed up for us. I didn't think we actually would go to Finland. I thought we would talk big, buy travel guides, discuss sensible walking shoes, and in the end, cash in the tickets.

Penny, however, never doubted this adventure.

When she sent my ticket, she wrote with a thick, black marker across the front of the FedEx mailer:

SHARON, DO NOT OPEN! CALL ME IMMEDIATELY!

Thirty-five minutes earlier I had doused my hair with a

highlighting solution, and I knew I should be heading for the shower. But I went directly to the phone and dialed Penny's real estate office in San Francisco.

"Okay, Sharon, go ahead. Now you can open it. Read the itinerary."

The words, "San Francisco, London, and Helsinki," tumbled from my lips.

"And?" Penny prodded. "Did you notice the name on the ticket? Sharon Andrews. That's your ticket. We're going to Finland!"

"Penny, this is crazy!"

"Yep! Crazy like a daisy. February 25. Pack your bags, girl! We're finally going to run away from home!"

"But Penny..."

"We made a deal. You promised you would go with me to Helsinki and back. Remember?"

"Yes, but we were going to go after all our kids graduated. Tyler is the only one in college. It will be, what?...Eight more years before all our kids are out of the house."

"Exactly. And I can't wait that long. Life is too short. We need to go now."

I stammered and stuttered while Penny gave me instructions on obtaining a passport. By the time I hung up and dashed upstairs to the shower, the home coloring treatment had pushed my hair past summer sun highlights all the way to a disturbing autumn moss tone.

The strange part was I didn't have the emotional reserves left to process how I felt about my hair. I wrapped myself in the comfort of my old yellow robe and sank to the bathroom floor, staring at the airline ticket and sighing over the possibilities.

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I had been on an airplane only once. I know that's unusual, but I led a small life. Jeff and I both grew up here in Chinook Springs, a quiet suburb in southern Washington State. We were high school sweethearts and married right after we graduated. Jeff and his brother ran a landscaping business. I was content to keep a tidy home for Jeff and our four kids. That was my life. It was a good life. I wasn't the kind of person who longed to see the rest of the world—or so I thought.

When Jeff found me on the floor, the first thing he said was, "The ticket came, huh? What do you think?"

"You *knew* about this?"

He nodded and repressed that sly grin of his. "Dave called me a couple of days ago. He said Penny wanted to surprise you."

"She surprised me all right."

"You don't look very excited."

"I'm still in shock. Why do you suppose Penny is so determined to hunt down her relatives in Helsinki?"

"She's Penny. This is how she does things."

"I know, but if she's going to go all that way to meet these relatives of hers, don't you think she should take Dave or one of their kids?"

"She wants to take you."

"Why? I mean, if we had this kind of money, I'd put a new roof on the house."

Jeff knelt down and kissed me good on the mouth. "Don't overanalyze all the fun out of this, Sharon. Go. Have the time of your life. Come home happy."

Jeff stood.

I reached for his arm. "Honey? There's one more thing I should let you know." I pulled the towel off my head and

watched my husband's expression as my seaweed surprise made its debut. To his credit, Jeffrey Edgar Andrews held his tongue. Twenty-four years of marriage and four children had taught this energetic husband of mine a few lessons in the fine art of restraint.

All Jeff said was, "Must be January." Then, clearing a chuckle from his throat, he left me alone on the bathroom floor where I sighed some more and pondered my history of January bloopers.

Instead of making New Year's resolutions, I tend to make impulsive blunders. I suspect the dank January mornings in the Northwest bring on this temporary insanity. At the start of each year, I'm overcome with a restless passion to change radically a slice of my life. As soon as I try something, like turning my dishwater-colored hair to a lively summer blond, the madness passes, and I remain quite sane the rest of the year.

One January, after we had been married nine years, I decided I'd had it with our hunk-o-junk couch. As if on cue, I saw a Salvation Army truck pull up in front of my neighbors' house. I trotted over and told the driver that if he wanted, he could come take my couch, too.

Not only did he take my couch, but I also threw in a wobbly amber-colored floor lamp; a dented frying pan; two plastic candleholders; and our blender, which had a peculiar problem. The blender blended even when no one asked it to blend.

Once the blender started to blend at two in the morning, Jeff said it was an electrical short, and all I had to do was remember to unplug it. I always forgot to unplug it. Once we walked into the house with groceries, and there it was, filled with nothing but air, blending away.

I taped a note to the inside of the possessed appliance that

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read, “Needs repair,” and handed it to the driver of the Salvation Army truck. He handed me a receipt and told me I was a “kind and generous person.”

Euphoric over my benevolence and giddy over thoughts of a new couch, I called Jeff to share the great news. Jeff was...well, less than euphoric. I think that was our worst fight ever. It certainly lasted the longest. Seven wretched weeks passed before we finally bought a new couch on credit. Jeff’s mother never forgave me for parting with the blender, which I had forgotten was a wedding gift from her sister.

In the Januarys that followed, I tried to confine my temporary lapses of judgment to areas that affected only me.

Penny used to say she liked it when I showed signs of entering my “New Year’s Fit of Madness” because she could talk me into things I wouldn’t normally agree to, such as the year we took a tap dancing class. We were the only students over the age of nine.

To our credit, we stuck with the dance class all ten weeks. To the relief of our husbands and children, we opted out of performing at the year-end recital.

I had to wonder if Penny calculated to the day when my fit of madness would strike this January. She cleverly timed her purchase of those two transatlantic airline tickets, sent them to arrive the very hour I was most vulnerable, and even prepared my husband ahead of time.

Even though I didn’t think this—her most outrageous dream yet—would last until it was full grown, I didn’t see the harm in playing along with it while it was still kitten-size.

I tucked the tickets into my top dresser drawer, dressed, and went through the rest of the day wearing one of my son’s baseball caps. Curiously, no one at the dinner table ventured to

ask about the hat. Either Jeff had said something to the kids, or my theory about being the invisible mom at our house was more accurate than I had realized.

The next morning I managed to get a nine o'clock appointment with Joanie at the Clip 'n' Curl. I told her about Penny's Helsinki scheme while she worked her magic on my limey mane. She shifted the color back to a blah-blah-blond shade, which was at least within the normal range for human hair.

I tried to tip Joanie a little extra. She slipped all the money back into my hand. "Please. Let this be my treat. You keep your spending money."

"No, Joanie, take it."

"Not this time, Sharon. Save it for your trip. If you want, you can buy me a souvenir."

Wide-winged guilt came swooping in and landed on the roof of my psyche. It was one thing for Penny and me to stir up a big cloud of dream dust, but Joanie shouldn't be turning down money because of it. I left the Clip 'n' Curl determined to pay Joanie double the next time I had my hair trimmed.

Most days, I pull my thin, straight hair up in a clip or a twist of some sort. Since Joanie had done such a nice job of styling it to gently skim my shoulders, I thought I might as well have my passport photos taken.

I drove to the closest mall, which was located twenty miles across the Columbia River in Portland, Oregon. I found a camera shop with a sign that read, "Passport photos while you wait."

The young man snapped my picture before I was ready.

"Are you going somewhere?" he asked, as I wrote out a check for the two small, not-so-flattering photos.

I looked up, startled, and heard myself say, "Yes." As soon

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as the word leaked out, guilt flapped its molting feathers and cawed, “Liar! Liar!”

The young man stood still, eyebrows raised, waiting for the rest of my answer.

“I, um, I’m going to Finland.”

“Cool. That’s like, all the way over in Europe, isn’t it?”

I gave a slight nod, paid for the photos, and went directly to the bookstore on the mall’s lower level where I bought a travel book on Scandinavia. I didn’t know that Finland was next to Sweden. I also didn’t know that Finland bordered Russia. Helsinki was on the other side of the globe, half a world away from Chinook Springs. Did anyone there even speak English?

My next stop was the post office where my husband’s partially deaf uncle has worked for thirty-seven years. Uncle Floyd was eager to help me organize everything and mail off for my passport application. Of course, I had to give him the details with my voice raised, so everyone within a two-hundred-yard radius heard me lie. This time I used words like, “I might be going” and “If it works out.”

Uncle Floyd enthusiastically handed me a ten-dollar bill. “This is for you so you’ll be sure to send lots of postcards home to everyone. Tell ’em to save the stamps for me. And try to get specialty stamps, will ya? Ask for the kind of stamps they don’t use for everyday. Will ya do that for me, Sharon?”

I left the post office biting the inside of my mouth. How could I return the ten dollars to sweet Uncle Floyd after he and the rest of the world discovered this Finnish fantasy was a hoax?

Within three days everyone in my small life knew about the trip and everyone was excited for me. Everyone, that is, except Jeff’s mother, Gloria.

Gramma Gloria and Grampa Max joined us on Friday night for our daughter's high school choir performance. Kaylee was a freshman and prone to wild emotional dips. As normal as that is for a fifteen-year-old, I didn't tend to be the most understanding mother. All I remembered about when I was fifteen was getting my braces off. I think I smiled a lot.

Kaylee seemed to smile at everyone but me.

Right before we were ready to leave for Kaylee's concert, she dribbled the slightest bit of apple juice on her white blouse. I tried to clean it up using the dabbing method with a wet cloth, but of course, that made it worse. The large wet spots weren't drying quickly enough, so Kaylee stormed upstairs, wailing that now she would be late.

Gramma Gloria shook her head. "This should be an eye-opener for you, Sharondear. How would your children manage if you took off for Iceland?"

Gramma Gloria made a hobby of conveniently forgetting the correct names for people and places whenever she wanted to cast a disagreeable light on them. My entire senior year of high school she called me "Sherrill" instead of "Sharon" even though she had known me since I was a child. Once Jeff and I were married, I became "Sharondear." I decided that was better than many other options, so I didn't try to correct her.

"Aw, the kids will manage just fine," Grampa Max said to Gloria, carrying the last of the dinner plates to the sink. "Isn't that so, Ben? You'll get along without your mom for a week or so."

"Twelve days," Gloria corrected him.

"Eleven," I said.

"Right in the middle of track season," Gloria added with a cluck of her tongue.

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My reserved son, who was old enough to vote in national elections, wisely continued his chore of loading the dishwasher and didn't vote on this one.

Grampa Max motioned to our ten-year-old, who was trying to wedge his foot into his tennis shoe without untying the laces. "Come on, Josh. You can ride over to the school in my car. We'll save some seats in the auditorium for these slow-pokes."

I ventured upstairs and tapped on Kaylee's bedroom door. The distraught princess bid me enter. She had tossed the "ruined" white blouse on the floor. The very blouse I had washed, ironed, and sprayed with just the right amount of starch to make it perfect for her tonight. Ninety minutes of loving labor lay crumpled at her feet. Kaylee shot me a wounded look as if the apple juice disaster were my fault.

She had changed into a long-sleeved beige T-shirt that had once belonged to her oldest brother.

"That won't do," I said.

"I knew you would say that. But what else do I have?"

"I have a white blouse you could wear."

"I don't think so!" Kaylee rifled through her summer T-shirts. "I mean, no offense, Mother, but we don't exactly, like, wear the same size, you know!"

Kaylee yanked the beige shirt over her head, and I noticed that not a pinch of baby fat remained on my daughter's torso.

Where did it go?

She had the cutest little waist. Her 34A-size bra appeared too snug.

When did all this happen?

Kaylee was right. Nothing in my closet—not even my skinny clothes—would be small enough to fit her.

“I know you don’t want me to wear a T-shirt, but I don’t have any choice.” She pulled the wrinkled cotton shirt over her silky blond hair.

“I could iron it if—”

“Mom, we don’t have time! I’m supposed to be there in like five minutes!” Kaylee tugged the T-shirt over her black skirt and swished past me muttering, “Now my hair is so messed!”

That evening I watched with new eyes as Kaylee lined up on stage with the thirty other students. Nearly all the girls were wearing T-shirts. I counted only three white blouses in the choir.

Kaylee stood in the front row to the left. Under the bright lights none of the wrinkles in her T-shirt were as pronounced as I thought they would be. She blended right in. No one else in the auditorium would ever know how crisp Kaylee Andrews could have appeared onstage that evening. I wondered if I was part of a vanishing breed of mothers who owned an iron and knew how to use it.

I studied my daughter’s perfect posture, her steady concentration, and the way her mouth delicately opened and her chin rose when she held the long notes.

She was beautiful.

And she was oblivious. Oblivious to her poise and her winsome beauty. All the way to school she had groaned about her impossible hair and moaned that her shoes were too tight. She even said she wished her legs weren’t so long. Imagine!

From where we sat in the fifth row, all I saw was a gorgeous young woman blossoming in the right way at the right time, legs and all. Life would soon reveal the vast, wonderfully rich possibilities available to her. Gifted with an abundance of creativity, talent, and intelligence, my lovely Kaylee could

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become anything. She could go anywhere. Do anything. The possibilities were magnificent, and she was overwrought about speckles of apple juice; about long, silky, naturally blond hair; and about the “curse” of long legs.

When the choir came to the final number, I had to fumble in my purse for a tissue. I couldn't stop crying.

I don't remember what song they sang. Something patriotic that started with four boys in the back row singing in barber-shop-quartet style. On the chorus, my Kaylee straightened her shoulders, tilted up her chin, and sang as if both she and Eve had never had a run-in with apples in any form. She was free when she sang. Free and beautiful. A vibrant young woman.

I cried because my Kaylee was unmistakably fifteen.

And that made me, unmistakably, forty-one.