

# ROBIN JONES GUNN

## sunsets

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

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MULTNOMAH  
BOOKS

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SUNSETS

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For information:

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*To Kevin and his indestructible cat, Chloe.*

*May your years together in Pasadena  
be graced with exquisite sunsets.*



And they who dwell in the ends of the earth  
stand in awe of Thy signs;  
Thou dost make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy.

PSALM 65:8 (NASB)

# Chapter One



Coffee,” Alissa muttered, pushing herself away from her cluttered desk, “a tall café mocha, and I need it now. You want anything, Cheri?”

“No, thanks,” her co-worker said without looking up from her computer. “Are you getting this same strange reading on the Mazatlan cruise package?”

“Yes,” Alissa said after checking the computer screen over Cheri’s shoulder. “I got that reading when I tried to access the Alaska cruise package for the Andersens. But I’m not ready to try again until after I’ve had some coffee.”

Cheri looked over the top of her glasses. “We open in five minutes.”

“I know. I’ll be back in four. Don’t sell any cruise packages until then.”

The line at Starbucks was shorter than usual. Alissa examined the pastries in the case. They had Cheri’s favorite lemon bars this morning and lots of other incredible looking goodies.

She started her familiar mental workout. *Croissant. I want a croissant. But I shouldn't. Too much fat. I'll have a muffin. A low-fat blueberry. Or a bagel. I can have a bagel. A bagel with fat-free cream cheese.*

“What can I start for you?” the young woman behind the counter asked.

Alissa hesitated.

The customer behind her spoke up. “Cappuccino and a croissant.”

“Excuse me.” Alissa turned to the casually dressed man behind her. “I was next, and if you don't mind, I'm in a hurry.”

He wore his long brown hair with a crooked part down the middle. A soft cocoa stubble curved across his broad jaw, and his gaze struck her with intense clarity. Green eyes. Green like the grass after it rains.

“So what took you so long?” he said with a teasing smile.

Alissa raised her eyebrows and decided this must be his idea of a joke. Since she had moved to Pasadena seven months ago, she had met plenty of men who acted as if the world were their footstool, and therefore they could put up their feet whenever they wanted. Southern California was full of that sort.

Turning to the woman behind the counter, Alissa said calmly, “I'll have a tall café mocha, a lemon bar, and a cinnamon roll. Thanks.”

There was no point looking over her shoulder as she left Starbucks. The man with the intriguing green eyes wouldn't be watching her. Men used to watch her walk away. She could feel their gazes. Men used to offer to let her go first.

But that was thirty-two pounds ago. It had been far too long since a man had given her a second glance. Not that she blamed any of them. Much had changed in the life of Alissa Benson.

Wistfully, she remembered what it was like to be seventeen, sauntering through the sand at Newport Beach while everyone watched. That had been many summers ago, back when the ends of her long, blond hair had danced in the wind like the mane of a wild horse.

Today, a long, linen blazer covered her rounded hips, and her shoulder length, wavy blond hair was caught up in a twist, clipped flat against the back of her head. She rarely wore her blue tinted contact lenses anymore. Makeup was something she bothered with only on special occasions, of which there hadn't been many lately.

Alissa's live-in companion was a cat named Chloe, and her favorite weekend pastime was reading. At twenty-six she was living the life of a sixty-year-old. And she was safe.

"She's right here," Cheri said, motioning to Alissa as she opened the door. "I'll put you on hold, Mr. Brannigan."

"Line two," Cheri said to Alissa. "And your landlord is on line one."

"Oh, terrific," Alissa muttered. She handed the pastry bag to Cheri. "I picked up a little something for you."

A smile spread across Cheri's face. "Did you bring me a lemon bar? You are a honey!"

"Don't touch my cinnamon roll!" Alissa playfully responded as she slid behind her desk and reached for the phone. "Good morning, Mr. Brannigan. Did your wife tell you I was able to reserve two nights for you at the Heathman?"

With a few clicks on the computer keyboard, she tried to pull up the active file of the Brannigans as he said, "We've decided to stay three nights. Can you add one more night for us?"

The computer screen froze. Alissa tapped on the keys. "Certainly, Mr. Brannigan. May I call you back to confirm that?"

“I’ll wait for your call,” Mr. Brannigan said.

Alissa knew he would. The Brannigans had to be the most active retired couple she knew. In good health and possessing excessive spending money, they traveled constantly. And with Alissa’s efficiency and excessive good manners, she was their only travel agent.

“Okay. Thank you, Mr. Brannigan. Good-bye.”

“Cheri?” Alissa said. “Did we go off-line?”

“I’ve called the repairman. I don’t know what the problem is. I guess all we can do is take messages. Don’t forget your landlord. Line one.”

With a push of a button and a deep breath, Alissa picked up line one. “Clawson Travel Agency. This is Alissa.”

“Ms. Benson,” the landlord said with forced friendliness. “You have not responded to the notice we sent you last month. I have left messages on your machine at home, but you have not returned the calls. I found it necessary to call you at work to ask for a reply.”

Alissa turned away from Cheri and the client who had just entered the shop and was seated in front of Cheri’s desk. “I’m going to need more time to decide.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t any more time. I must know today by five o’clock.”

Alissa heard the click as he hung up, but she kept the phone to her ear as if the answer she needed would come sometime after the dial tone. Her condo complex had been sold a month ago. The new owner required all renters to sign a new lease that included an increase of \$150 a month and a minimum commitment of two years. Alissa had never lived anywhere for more than two years. It was a nice condo but not her dream home. During the past month she had found nothing else in her price range. Yet the two-year commitment scared her. She had already been in Pasadena and at the same

travel agency for seven months. That in itself was almost a record.

She heard a slight rustling sound and realized a customer was now seated in front of her desk. “Okay. We’ll work on that and get back to you then,” she said into the dumb receiver that she still held to her ear. “Good-bye.”

Turning to hang up and greet her customer, Alissa forced a smile back on her face and said, “Yes, how can I—” She stopped. It was the guy from Starbucks. “How can I help you?”

He took a slow sip from his Starbucks cappuccino and looked at her with his grass green eyes. “You’re having trouble with your computers this morning?”

It crossed Alissa’s mind that perhaps this guy had followed her here and somehow overheard Alissa and Cheri say they had computer problems. For a brief flash, Alissa felt flattered that this man had apparently sought her out.

“Alissa?” Cheri called over. “Excuse me for interrupting, but Mr. Brannigan is on the phone again. Do you want to take it?”

“Sure.” Alissa put on her headset. “Excuse me a moment, please,” she said to the green-eyed stranger. “Yes, Mr. Brannigan?”

“My wife wanted me to ask about the special you advertised for the Alaskan cruise, but I forgot when I called earlier. Is there still room on the June trip?”

“I’m having difficulty accessing the information on those cruises this morning. Would it be all right if I called you back this afternoon? That way I’ll know about the extra night at the Heathman as well.”

Alissa hung up and turned her attention to the man at her desk. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you have local access, or do you have to go through a central clearing agency?” Brad asked.

“Excuse me?”

“For the cruises,” he said, getting up and coming over to her side of the desk. “Do you have a local server for your info? Pull up the file. That might tell me.” He reached over Alissa’s shoulder and clicked on a few keys.

His forward approach startled Alissa. First at Starbucks and now this. Who did this guy think he was? “I’m sorry, but I can’t allow you to do this.”

Alissa was glad to see Cheri come over to offer her support.

“Alissa? This is Brad Phillips. I thought you two had already met. Brad works down the street at The Computer Wiz.” Cheri kept her voice professional. “I called him this morning.”

“Oh,” Alissa said, feeling foolish for allowing herself to think this man had come looking for her. She rose from her work station and offered Brad her seat. “All yours,” she said.

Then, reaching for her coffee and cinnamon roll, which Cheri had put on a paper plate for her, Alissa took the customer seat on the other side of the desk. She might just as well make some phone calls.

“All righty then,” Brad said, punching the keys at top speed. The screen miraculously unfroze. “We have lift off.”

Alissa punched in a phone number and spoke into her headset. “Yes, I’m checking on reservations for the Brannigans for the nights of June 10 and 11. Would it be possible to add the night of the twelfth as well?...Wonderful. Three nights confirmed then. Thank you very much.”

“Here’s your problem,” Brad said. “No, wait. Oh, I see. This is a strange way to do this.” He sipped his coffee and stared at the screen, obviously content to carry on his one-sided conversation. “Why did they take this out of binary? It doesn’t have to go that route.”

Alissa reached into her in-basket for a list of apartments

she had been calling the last few days. She started at the top and phoned each one that wasn't already checked. Her questions were simple, "Do you have any immediate openings? What is the price range?" She circled four potential apartments on her list and planned to visit them on her lunch hour.

Brad's running mono-conversation came to a halt. "I think we've got it here. What date was Mr. Brannigan interested in? And that was the Alaska cruise, wasn't it?"

"Thank you. I can take it from here." Alissa said.

"Oh, right," Brad said. "Strict customer confidentiality around here." He got up and offered her the chair with the same gesture she had used on him.

"You're back in business," Brad said, tossing his empty coffee cup into the trash. His friendly smile lingered in Alissa's direction only a moment before he stepped over to Cheri's desk and began to work on her computer.

Alissa checked on Mr. Brannigan's cruise. The program functioned perfectly. Even Mazatlan was coming up.

After gathering the information for her customer, she took her half-eaten cinnamon roll into the back room and shoved it into the small refrigerator. Glancing at her reflection in the microwave oven, she pushed up her glasses. She didn't like the feeling that had followed her back here. It was a cloud of hopelessness. A low buzzing in the deepest corner of her heart reminded her that she had lived hard and fast during her high school years, and now she was used up. The locusts had stripped her emotions bare. She didn't consider herself worthy of the attention of a man, any man.

*Come on. Snap out of this slump! Don't take yourself down this path. Put a smile on your face.*

She did, but it hardly seemed to matter. When Alissa returned to her desk, Brad was gone. She noticed a slip of paper next to the computer. The note read, "Duplex for rent"

followed by a phone number. It wasn't her handwriting. She guessed Cheri or their boss, Renée, had left it since both knew she had been apartment hunting. Renée only worked afternoons. Perhaps she had left it yesterday, and Alissa hadn't noticed it with all the commotion this morning.

It didn't matter. It was another lead for an apartment, something she desperately needed. She called and made an appointment to have a look that afternoon.

It ended up being her last stop after four discouraging apartment complexes. The duplex was situated in an older part of town, down a quiet, tree-lined street. That was reason enough for Alissa to feel hopeful.

But when she pulled up in front, she felt certain this dream duplex would be out of her price range. The building resembled twin cottages complete with shuttered windows and flower boxes. It looked like something she had seen in a small town in Europe. Lots of greenery, lace curtains on one side, and stepping stones around to the back made the scene very inviting.

Next door, to the right, stood a grand, villa-style house. It was white with a blue tile roof and two verandas off the top story. A colorful variety of flowers lined the walkway.

"Hello. Are you Alissa?" A middle-aged brunette with a toddler girl on her hip stepped out of the large house.

"Yes. You must be Genevieve."

"Yes, and this is Mallory. I'm sorry I was in such a hurry on the phone. I didn't give you much information."

Alissa noticed Genevieve's accent. People had told Alissa that she, too, had a "potpourri" accent from all the places she had lived. She wanted to ask Genevieve where she was from but hesitated. She was cautious, not wanting to be impolite. That was how her proper Bostonian grandmother had taught her to behave.

“It’s this side over here.”

Alissa was pleased to see Genevieve was gesturing toward the unit with the lace curtains. “Is it available right away?”

“That’s what I didn’t have time to explain to you. My husband, Steven, and I are the landlords, but we actually have a tenant already. Shelly Graham. I don’t suppose you know her?”

Alissa shook her head.

“Shelly’s a flight attendant. Since she’s gone so much of the time, I’m helping her find a roommate.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize a roommate was involved.”

“I apologize for not making that clear to you over the phone.”

Alissa didn’t want to walk away. From the outside, at least, this was far more desirable than anything she had looked at all month. “What about the other side of the duplex? I suppose that’s taken?”

“Yes, it is.”

Mallory laced her pudgy fingers in her mother’s thick, shoulder-length hair. It was the color of dark brown sugar. Alissa noticed how pretty Genevieve was. Here it was the middle of the day and she was at home with a toddler, yet she wore gold hoop earrings and makeup to highlight her clear, gray eyes.

“How did you hear about the duplex?” Genevieve asked.

“Someone left me a note at work. I’m not sure who it was.”

“We haven’t advertised,” Genevieve said. “It’s all been through referrals. I wonder who it was?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Have you found another place?” Genevieve asked.

“Not yet, but I have a few options.” Alissa thought of the one small apartment she had just looked at that was immediately available if she wanted to sign a six-month lease. It was a dark downstairs unit with badly stained rose-colored carpet.

But it was the only one on her list that allowed pets. And she would never give up Chloe.

“Do you allow pets?” Alissa ventured.

“Small ones, yes. Shelly had a kitten when she first moved in but gave it to our girls since she was traveling so much.”

“Whiskers.” Mallory said, then hid her face in her mom’s neck.

“My cat’s name is Chloe,” Alissa said, trying to draw out the little girl.

“Would you like to have a peek inside the duplex?” Genevieve asked.

Alissa agreed, and as they walked up to the front entrance, Genevieve said, “It would actually be like having a part-time roommate since Shelly is gone so much.”

“Like Daddy,” Mallory chimed in and hid again.

“My husband is a commercial pilot. He flies a route to the Orient.” She turned the key in the front door, which Alissa could now see was a two-part, dutch door. It added even more charm to the unit. As they stepped inside, she caught her breath.

“The furniture is like mine! Did Shelly buy the wicker pieces at Pier 1 Imports?”

“I don’t know.”

“And this poster of Portugal. I have one of the same place.”

“I would say there’s a good chance you and Shelly would get along. The unit has two bedrooms and a dishwasher but only one bathroom. My favorite feature is out here.” She led Alissa through the spacious living room and out the back door. “This is our garden.”

Alissa stopped and tried to drink it all in from the small landing that opened to lush green grass. Tall trees provided a canopy from the June afternoon heat. A brick trail lined a neatly kept rose garden and led to a wooden archway that

housed two small benches facing each other. To the right side, toward Genevieve's home, lay an intricate maze of colorful flowers lining the brick walkway. A swing hung by long ropes from a thick-trunked tree, and a small wading pool glimmered in the sunny spot of the common yard.

"This is beautiful," Alissa said.

"Thank you. I love to garden."

"This is more than a garden," Alissa said. "This is..."

"This is home," Genevieve stated.

With a catch in her throat, Alissa swallowed and nodded. It had been a long, long time since she had felt like anywhere was home. Yet she had to agree. If any place on earth felt like home, this was it.

"I'll take it," she heard herself say.