

ROBIN JONES GUNN

wildflowers

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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*For my sister-in-law, Kate Gunn Medina,
who for more than twenty-five years
has bestowed generously on me
love and friendship.
You are a treasure.*





Camp Heatherbrook

Waterfalls

Seth and Leah's Cabin

50 Acres Woodlands

Jonathan & Shelly's Cabin

Genevieve's Home

LINCOLN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Leah's House

Jessica's Cottage

Glenbrooke General Hospital

Glenbrooke Historical Society

Little League Field

MARGOLD LANE

ELM ST.

SECOND ST.

FIRST ST.

MAPLE ST.

MARKET

MARKET

A Visitor's Guide to GLENBROOKE

Kyle & Jessica's
Victorian
Mansion

Madison Hill

Glenbrooke
Community
Church

TO BAKERS GROVE

Hidden House
Bed & Breakfast

Ida's House

Brady & Alissa's House

PINE ST.

FOURTH ST.

THIRD ST.

GLENBROOKE
GAZETTE

TRAVEL

WEEKS
GIFT SHOP

PAUL CLIFFE
BLOOMER
ATTORNEY

U.S. POST OFFICE

DRUG STORE

PARKER
DELIVERY
SERVICE



5

GAS

HWY 14

TO
EDGEFIELD

“I was asleep, but my heart was awake.”

SONG OF SONGS 5:2, NASB

Chapter One



Genevieve was dreaming. She knew she was dreaming because this was the third—no, the fourth—time the same dream had invaded her sleeping mind. The dream always started the same way: She was standing inside her newly acquired Wildflower Café, looking out the window at all her Glenbrooke friends who had gathered to celebrate the grand opening. She was ready to open the door and let them in when she paused. Scanning the smiling faces, she searched for her husband, Steven. But Steven wasn't there.

Steven was never there.

Pressing her eyelids tighter, Genevieve gripped the edge of her dream world and held her breath, willing herself not to wake up. She desperately wanted a new ending to this dream, a conclusion that was different from the way this scene had ended in real life.

A little more than two months ago, when Genevieve stood inside the Wildflower Café the same way she now stood in her dream, the phone had rung. Steven was calling to say he was stuck in Chicago. Heavy snowfall had delayed all flights that day, and he wouldn't be able to fly out until the next morning. She told him she understood. She said she didn't hold it against him.

Yet in her subconscious she kept returning to that moment, waiting in her dream for the phone to ring. This time she would tell him what she really thought. She would let herself cry and tell him it wasn't okay for him to be stuck in Chicago. The snow wasn't a good enough excuse. He had done this to her one too many times.

Genevieve knew that in dreams people could fly on rocket ships or clouds or with wings they had suddenly sprouted. Snowflakes could turn into giant soap bubbles. In dreams, even a weary airline pilot could ride all the way to Glenbrooke inside one of those magic soap bubbles and arrive at the front door of the café at just the right moment.

With all her might, she tried to make the desired ending come to her in her dream. But it was no use. Her dream cut off, as it always did, like a broken reel of a home movie. Once again she was stuck in the darkness, hoping against hope that she could rethread the puddle of dream film gathered at her feet and start up the unresolved scene in her subconscious one more time. But it didn't work. She was stuck.

Genevieve opened her eyes and drew in a deep breath. *Get over it, Genevieve. Let it go. This is the way things are.*

She blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the bedroom's

darkness. On the rooftop of their warm home pattered the persistent Oregon spring rain. Beside her, Steven slept.

Steven Ahrens, the steady airline captain who had swept Genevieve up into his life more than twenty years ago slept soundly, as he always did. He lay on his back with his left arm above his head and his right arm on his chest. In the faint glow from the digital alarm clock, Genevieve watched her husband's frame as each unhurried breath came after the other. In his sleeping and in his waking, Steven lived his life at a predictable, unruffled pace. Routine was everything. And everything was routine.

Genevieve listened as the rain tapped on the window. She thought about how she had hoped their life would be different when they moved to Glenbrooke. Opening the Wildflower Café was possibly the biggest event in her life, aside from giving birth to their three daughters. Why couldn't Steven have been there with her at the grand opening? Why did she continue to coax a different ending out of her subconscious? She couldn't change the past.

Fluttering on the edge of sleep, Genevieve told herself she didn't want to change everything about the past. Half awake, half asleep, she hovered over a reflecting pool of memories. Her heart had flown often to this familiar place where the earliest images of her love for Steven glistened with pristine clarity and beckoned her to draw closer.

In her mind's eye, Genevieve saw herself swimming in Lake Zurich on that brilliant summer afternoon so many years ago. She was eighteen on the outside and perhaps younger than that in her heart. Her slim frame emerged

from the brisk water, and she hurried to the towel she had left on the grass beside her girlfriends. The towel was there, but her friends were gone.

Standing on the corner of her towel was a fair-skinned young man who asked in very poor French if she knew the time. His build was medium and muscular. His fine, short hair was combed straight back. He had a perfectly straight nose that topped the *O* he formed with his lips like an exclamation point.

Genevieve guessed he was American and answered him in English. His face warmed with a shy, grateful expression. He took off his sunglasses, revealing deep blue eyes, blue like the sky above the clouds. He smiled at her, and Genevieve was smitten.

The memory shifted to a sidewalk café only five blocks from Lake Zurich where Steven was trying his first taste of raspberry strudel with heavy cream. Genevieve wore a pale yellow summer dress and sipped a demitasse of Turkish coffee. Wisps of her thick, brown hair danced across her forehead as she sat across from this fascinating, twenty-four-year-old man, and she used her well-practiced English to tell him what it was like to grow up in Zurich.

His steady eyes seemed to memorize every detail of her face. He listened to her with an expression that said, “You are the most captivating woman I’ve ever met. Ask anything of me, and I’ll do it.”

What she asked of him, without a single word, was for her first kiss. What he gave her with that kiss was a kingdom. His kingdom. His life. And into the life of this soft-

spoken man with the warm, steady gaze, Genevieve contentedly had tucked herself like granulated sugar folded into a bowl of whipped-up egg whites.

Now, in the sanctuary of their bedroom, Steven turned toward her in his sleep. His straight nose was only inches from her as his steady breath fluttered over her eyelids. She was so close to him yet Genevieve was so far away. Even the memories of their love's first awakening brought no warmth to her spirit. All the doors to her heart were shut, and all the shades were pulled down tight.

When Genevieve entered the back door of the Wildflower Café at seven-thirty that morning, she felt weary from all the wrestling she had done in the night. She noticed that a few slender sunbeams had managed to slip past the heavy rain clouds. The sunbeams blazed their way through the window above the large kitchen sink, warming her forearm as she washed her hands. Perhaps Glenbrooke would have some sunshine today after all. It made her feel hopeful.

Leah Edwards, Genevieve's assistant, charged through the swinging door from the dining room with her usual energy. "Hey, good morning! I didn't expect you this early."

"Steven is taking the girls to school. I thought I'd start on the brownies."

Leah's short blond hair was tucked under a baseball cap, which was her favorite substitute for a chef's hat. When Genevieve catered Leah and Seth's wedding six months ago, a fast friendship formed between the two women. Genevieve

soon discovered that she would never have been able to make this dream café a reality if it hadn't been for Leah's choice to leave her former career at the hospital and join her.

"Has it been busy?" Genevieve quickly dried her hands and pulled an apron over her head.

"No, just the regulars. Oh, and someone who wants to see you. He's at table four."

"Who is it?" The only opening from the kitchen to the dining room was a swinging door, so Genevieve couldn't see who was at table four.

"He said his name was Richard Palmas. He wants to interview you." Leah popped two slices of rye bread into the toaster.

"Interview me? Why?"

Leah flipped two fried eggs on a plate and handed it to Genevieve, motioning for her to include the toast. "He's writing a book on great cafés of the Northwest. I'm guessing he wants to include the Wildflower in his book. Here, these eggs are for Dr. Norton. And don't butter the toast. I'll cover the kitchen while you go meet Mr. Palmas."

Genevieve delivered the breakfast, greeted an elderly couple at table seven, and warily made her way to table four. A middle-aged man in a black, V-necked sweater and jeans greeted Genevieve with expressive eyes.

"Would you like more coffee?" she asked.

"No thanks. You must be Genevieve. I'm Richard Palmas. How are you this morning?"

"Fine." Genevieve noticed that he had been taking detailed notes.

“Did your associate tell you I’m writing a book on the best cafés in the Northwest?”

“Yes.”

“When would be a good time for me to ask you a few questions?”

“Around nine o’clock would be good. It usually slows down then.”

Richard glanced at the eight unhurried customers in the small café. Raising an eyebrow, he said, “Is this your morning rush?”

“Yes. Such as it is.” Genevieve felt her neck warming. “This is our morning rush.”

“Then I will take another cup of coffee,” Richard said. “And some breakfast while I wait.”

“I’ll bring you a menu,” Genevieve said.

“No.” Richard touched her arm lightly before she could slip away. “I don’t need a menu. Bring me whatever you would consider your house specialty.”

Genevieve smiled tentatively. She hoped he couldn’t tell how uncomfortable she felt. “Does an omelet sound good to you?”

Richard tilted his head and gave her a confident grin. “Sure. Make it the best omelet on your menu.”

Genevieve slipped back into the kitchen, thankful for a place to hide. “Are you ready to switch places?” she asked Leah.

“Sure. I went ahead and mixed up the brownies, but I haven’t started the soup yet. The broccoli is in the sink. Do you know if we have any more decaf tea bags? I couldn’t find any this morning.”

“I’ll check on it. Anything else?”

Leah balanced two plates on her left arm. “Did I tell you yesterday about the fan over the stove? It keeps turning off and on. It might be a short. I left it off all morning.”

“Okay, I’ll have it checked.”

Leah slid into the dining room with the pancakes while Genevieve gave her thick, brown hair a twist and secured it with a clip at the back of her head. *Don’t let yourself feel intimidated by this man. It’s only an omelet. You’ve made hundreds of omelets before.*

As omelets go, the bacon, cheese, and mushroom omelet Genevieve prepared was respectable. Not award-winning, but certainly respectable. Leah served the omelet to Mr. Palmas while Genevieve made the broccoli cheese soup and cooked the other breakfast orders. Nine o’clock arrived, and only three customers, who were finishing their morning coffee, remained. Genevieve turned the kitchen over to Leah. She decided to leave on her white apron and walk into the dining room as if Richard Palmas were any other Glenbrooke customer.

It would have worked except that from the moment she entered the dining room, he seemed to be scrutinizing her every move.

“I heard you grew up in Switzerland,” Richard said before she had a chance to sit down.

“Yes.”

“And you lived in Pasadena before moving here a year ago.”

Genevieve nodded.

“I also heard you’re married to a commercial airline pilot.”

“That’s right.”

“Interesting. You must travel a lot.”

“No, not very much. We have three daughters. Our oldest is in college now, but the other two keep me close to home since Steven is gone so much of the time.” Genevieve adjusted her position on the chair and chided herself for divulging so much personal information. She tried to redirect the questions to the café. “How was your omelet?”

“Better than most.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Did I hear correctly that the café is closed on Sundays?”

“Yes, our hours are seven to four on weekdays and eight to two on Saturdays.”

“No dinners then, only breakfast and lunch.”

“That’s right. Only breakfast and lunch.” Genevieve noticed how hard her chair felt. A cushioned pad would make a world of difference. She noticed, too, that the round table at which they sat was too large for them to have a quiet conversation. She felt as if she had to speak louder than she liked to be heard over the heater’s hum and the echoing clatter of dishes in the kitchen.

“How long have you owned the café?”

“About two months.”

“I imagine you have plans to make additional changes.”

“Yes, well...we have some ideas, but...” Genevieve felt her throat tightening. The only changes she had been able to afford were the sturdy tables and chairs that replaced the

wornout tables and vinyl booths. She still was working on putting up new pictures to cover the walls where baskets of faded artificial flowers had once hung. It was the best she could do with her budget. She wasn't about to admit to this stranger, or anyone else, that the café had come nowhere near breaking even during the last two months.

Richard closed his notebook and looked at Genevieve with his mesmerizing, green eyes. "I'll be honest with you, Genevieve. I would like very much to include your café in my book, but I think I've come prematurely. Could I return in a couple of months? I'd like to see you again—that is, I'd like to see what you've done by then. I think your rating will be higher once you've had a little more time to settle in.

Genevieve drew in a deep breath and tried to sound calm. "I appreciate your interest in the café. However, I can't guarantee that things will be much different in a few months. You might save yourself some time if you left this café out of the book."

Richard seemed humored by her direct response. "More is involved in such a decision than you might think. You see, my publisher requires that I include a café from this area. Each region needs to be represented, and as you may know, very few cafés are left around here. That is, cafés that would qualify for what I'm after."

He leaned closer, across the too-wide table. "The location of this café is perfect for tourists, especially with the antique store that opened up at the end of Main Street. I considered including this café several months ago when I started to collect information for the book. But my first visit

here last fall was pretty discouraging. I had hoped that with all you have going for you, as well as your European background, you might be the one to finally bring some sparkle to this place.”

Genevieve parted her lips, but no response found its way out. *Was I just insulted? Or is this man politely challenging me to make something more of the café?*

“I’ll be back in a few months.” Richard stood and reached for his raincoat. “When I return, feel free to dazzle me.”

With that, he turned and walked out the door.

Genevieve stayed in her uncomfortable chair and watched Richard Palmas stride past the front window.

“How did the interview go?” Leah came over and leaned against the table.

“It went,” Genevieve said flatly.

“Is that good or bad?”

“I don’t know. He said he’s coming back in a few months, after we have a chance to settle in more.”

“That’s good,” Leah said. “Have you read any of his books?”

“No.” Genevieve didn’t like the way he had mixed all her feelings into a swirl. Especially when she had so little energy left for emotions of any kind.

“He’s pretty well known,” Leah said. “I didn’t know who he was, but Brad was in here earlier, and he recognized him. Brad said that Richard Palmas has a line of books called *All the Best*. He writes a column with that same name for a newspaper in Seattle. His books have a rating system for the hotels and restaurants he evaluates. Brad said one of his

‘best’ ratings can make your business fly and one of his ‘worst’ ratings can break you.”

“Well.” Genevieve rose and pushed in her chair. “We don’t need his evaluation to make our business fly. Our customers are all local. They aren’t going to stop coming here just because someone from Seattle says our desserts are great but our chairs are uncomfortable, which they are, by the way.”

Leah said, “Hold that thought.” She slipped over to the register to help one of the customers.

Genevieve stepped over to the chair where Mr. Palmas had been sitting. She lowered herself with a Goldilocks sort of test in mind. Yes, the chair was too hard. It was just as uncomfortable as her chair had been.

Why didn’t I ever notice this before? I guess I never sat out here for very long. Why haven’t the customers complained?

Genevieve knew the answer. These were loyal locals who stopped in every day. Some of them would come for their morning coffee even if they had to stand in the corner because there were no chairs.

People don’t take their time here. They run in and run out. If we could get some cushions on these chairs, the customers might linger and order dessert. That would push up our profits.

Purging her mind of Mr. Palmas and his supposedly powerful evaluation, Genevieve set her thoughts on improving the café. This was one area where her emotions were still free to soar.

I have to find a way to turn things around. I can only draw from the café bank account a few more months before I’ll have to

admit defeat. And if I admit defeat here, what will that mean about the rest of my life?