

A woman with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a purple sweater, is seen from the back and side, looking down a stone path that leads into a dense, sunlit forest. The path is made of flat stones and is flanked by lush green grass and wildflowers. The trees are tall and thin, with sunlight filtering through the canopy.

ROBIN JONES GUNN

woodlands

a novel



THE GLENBROOKE SERIES

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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To my exceptional friend, Anne de Graaf, who prayed.

And to Liz Curtis Higgs,
with whom Anne and I shared cheesecake
at 2 A.M. in a Toronto hotel room
when heaven broke through.





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

Teri's House

FOURTH ST.

THIRD ST.

GLENBROOKE
GAZETTE

TRAVEL

BACKLIFE
BLOOMER
TORNEY

Brady
Alissa's House

PARKER
DELIVERY
SERVICE



5

TO
EDGEFIELD

GAS

HWY 14

MAIN ST.

DRUG STORE

POST OFFICE

TRUCKS

WHEELS &
GIFT SHOP

*“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty, he
will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy, he will rest in his love,
he will joy over thee with singing.”*

ZEPHANIAH 3:17

Chapter One



Hey batter, batter, batter—swing!” Leah Hudson leaned over the counter of the Snack Shack at the Glenbrooke Little League ball field and yelled. “Swing, batter, swing!”

The young batter swung and missed.

“Stree-ike three!” the umpire called.

Leah checked the scoreboard. Bottom of the ninth. Score tied 7 to 7. The Edgefield Pirates took the outfield as her beloved Glenbrooke Rangers hustled up to bat.

Leah smiled. She took a sip from her can of Dr Pepper and flipped her feathery blond hair behind her ears. “It doesn’t get any better than this,” she murmured to herself, gazing at the lavender sky. The retiring sun had left a dozen pale pink streak marks on its way home. A flock of chattering wrens flitted overhead.

Little blond-haired Travis ran over to the Snack Shack with a golden retriever bounding behind him. Chinning himself up

on the counter, the almost five-year-old asked, "Can I have a Sno-Kone, Auntie Leah?"

Leah was "auntie" to lots of children in Glenbrooke. She had lived there all of her twenty-seven years. Twenty-seven single years. Twenty-seven years of helping everyone else raise their children.

"Here you go, Travis," Leah said, handing him the rainbow Sno-Kone. He smiled and produced a fistful of money.

"Tell your mom I'm coming over early on Saturday to help with the Easter egg hunt, okay?"

"Okay," Travis said. Without looking back, he trotted to the bleachers with the retriever beside him.

That's when Leah noticed the guy in shorts. He leaned against the side of the bleachers with a large Dairy Queen shake in his hand. His black shorts and forest green knit shirt were the uniform of the Parker Delivery Service, which made almost daily deliveries to the admitting desk of Glenbrooke General Hospital where Leah worked. She knew all the delivery guys. This one had to be new. She would have remembered those legs. No one in Oregon had legs that tan this early in spring.

A cheer rose from the home crowd, and Leah realized she had missed a hit. The tallest of the Glenbrooke Rangers dashed to first base while the Pirates fumbled with the ball in the outfield. The runner made it to third base before the ball was back in the pitcher's mitt.

"Come on, Rangers!" Leah yelled, as the next batter stepped up to the plate. "You can do it! Bring him home!"

Her voice must have really traveled because the delivery guy with the bronzed legs turned halfway around and watched her instead of the game. Leah allowed her gaze to linger in his direction a little longer. She strained to make out any distinct facial features, but his baseball cap cast too much shadow for

her to come to any real conclusions. She was pretty sure she had never seen him before.

Leah turned away when another young customer came up and asked for a candy bar. Just then, a cheer rose from the bleachers.

“What happened?” She didn’t have to wait for an answer. The whoops and hollers from the bleachers indicated that the Rangers had just scored a run. Dozens of parents stood and cheered for their kids. Leah knew almost everyone.

She felt a familiar twinge of pain as she watched the parents’ joyous outburst. It was the same ache she felt whenever she realized she was on the sidelines while all the women her age were holding babies or hugging their husbands or both.

Leah glanced again at the uniformed delivery guy. He had squatted down and was using both hands to rough up the golden retriever behind the ears.

Look away, Leah, look away! Don’t do this to yourself.

A well-used recording played in her psyche right on cue. The voice was that of her oldest and least favorite sister. The words had been spoken a long time ago, yet Leah never had forgotten them: “You have neither the frame nor the frame of mind to ever attract someone stable.”

Leah’s three oldest sisters were willowy blonds, like their mother. They all married before they turned twenty-two. The next two sisters had inherited their father’s height as well as his thick, brunette hair and milk-chocolate brown eyes. Both of them had married intelligent men and had moved to the East Coast.

Somehow Leah managed to be the only daughter who inherited what she considered the lesser qualities of both parents. She had her father’s round face and candy apple cheeks and her mother’s long neck. Her eyes were a cloudy gray, and

she had worn glasses starting in the second grade and contacts since ninth grade. Her blond hair, which she had inherited from her mother, was the only attribute she liked. She had her mother's short stature but her father's strong, muscular frame. The years she had spent transferring her heavy father from his sickbed to his wheelchair had done her figure a favor by giving her great muscle tone. Perhaps that would be her only reward for being the daughter who stayed in Glenbrooke to care for her elderly parents, which she did faithfully until they both passed away a year ago.

Leah's Glenbrooke friends were her family now. She knew better than to be deluded about the possibility of marriage and family over some guy with tan legs. A guy who obviously loved dogs. And Dairy Queen shakes. And Little League games and gorgeous spring evenings.

Oh, stop it, will you! Leah chided, forcing herself to turn away from the delivery guy by the bleachers. She tried to focus on the price list sign behind her. One of the *rs* in "burrito" was crooked. She fixed it and brushed a spider web from the top right-hand corner of the sign.

Another blast of hurrahs echoed from the bleachers. Leah turned to see the Rangers galloping out to the field, tossing their caps and mitts into the air.

She let out a loud cheer. "Way to go, Rangers!"

The exuberant crowd came rushing in her direction, looking for post-game refreshments. Leah snapped into action, reaching for canned drinks in the ice chest and counting out Pixie Stix. The faster she worked, the louder the crowd grew—and the larger. Just when she had appeased nearly all the parents from the bleachers with their toddlers, the players on both teams joined in the mob, waving tickets from their coaches for free treats.

The side door of the Snack Shack trailer opened, and with-

out looking to see who it was, Leah said, "Hey, we have to keep that door shut, you guys."

"I thought you could use some help," a deep voice said.

Leah looked up at the delivery guy, who was now standing beside her. She realized again the disadvantage of being only 5'4". It meant she constantly had to look up to men. That had been a problem for her more than once and in more ways than one.

"Ah, well, okay," she stammered, feeling her apple-round cheeks begin to blush. "I guess."

He had the gentlest, deep blue eyes she had ever seen. And the whitest smile. Or was it just his rich tan that made his eyes and smile stand out?

"Who's next?" he asked.

A chorus of eager sugar hounds responded with one, high-pitched note of "Me!"

"Point to them one at a time," Leah suggested. "The yellow tickets are worth a dollar each. The blue ones are fifty cents. And if you can get them to form a line, you'll do better than I have."

A shrill whistle pierced the air. Leah nearly dropped the Sno-Kone she had just finished making for her customer.

"Line up! Single file. Let me see two lines here. That's it. You guys are awesome. Now what can I get for you?" he asked, pointing to the first sweaty face in the line.

Leah looked on in amazement. "How did you do that?"

"Years of practice," he said. "Where are the drinks?"

"In the ice chest. I only have cans. The ice over there is for the Sno-Kones."

"Do you have frozen Snickers bars?" Leah's next customer asked.

"No, sorry. I'll be sure to freeze some before the next game. Do you want an unfrozen Snickers instead?"

He nodded, and she handed him the last one.

"Nope," Leah heard her partner say to his next customer above the rising noise level. "Looks like that was the last one. How about a Hershey's bar? Or what else do we have here? A Milky Way?"

Leah had orders for five Sno-Kones in a row, followed by a burrito, which she tossed in the microwave while scooping up two popcorns and passing out a few candy bars. And then the customers were all gone. In record time.

"How do these tickets work?" the guy asked, examining one of the yellow slips of paper.

"They're marked with the player's name and the coach's name. The players can pay into a snack fund when they sign up for Little League so their coins don't fall out of their pockets while they run around the field. All I have to do is sort them and give them to the coaches, who pay me back."

"Buchanan," he read on one of the slips. "Would that be the same Buchanan with the golden retriever?"

"Yes, Kyle." Leah scanned the nearly empty field and spotted Kyle in the twilight. "Do you see him over there by home plate? He's the coach. How did you know?"

"I read the dog tag." He graced Leah with a gentle smile and then turned to go. "Maybe I can still catch him."

Leah felt the need to say something more. Her handsome prince was leaving, and she didn't have a clue as to his identity. His work boots definitely weren't glass slippers, and neither of them looked as if it was about to fall off.

"Hey, thanks!" she called out, as he opened the door to exit. "Sure you don't want a free Sno-Kone for your trouble?"

"No," he said with a wave over his shoulder. "Thanks!"

"Thank you," Leah called out. And then he was gone.

"Sure you don't want a free Sno-Kone for your trouble?" Leah repeated under her breath. "Oh brother, what kind of line was that?"

Leah pulled herself back into reality by sorting out blue and yellow slips and beginning her routine to close down the Snack Shack. Her gaze wandered out to the ball field twice as she cleaned up. The first time she saw her mysterious stranger talking to Kyle, but on the second glance they were both gone. She turned the crank that rolled down the front window of the Snack Shack and unplugged all the electrical appliances. Balancing her keys and the cash box on top of an ice chest containing the leftover frozen burritos, Leah locked the outside door of the Snack Shack and headed for her car.

The field appeared empty now. Only three cars remained in the dirt parking lot. A cool breeze came sweeping through as soon as the sun set, a reminder that spring wasn't here yet. Leah climbed into her Blazer but before turning the key in the ignition she looped her arms over the steering wheel and stared at the first star that had risen in the clear night sky. She knew it was probably a planet since it was so bright. Venus, most likely.

Venus. Isn't that supposed to be the planet of love? What if I make a wish upon a planet—the love planet—instead of a star? Will I have a greater chance of my wish coming true?

Leah thought of the promises she had made to herself since her parents had passed away. She had been so determined to start fresh and to build a new identity for herself. Unfortunately, all her Glenbrooke friends seemed to have a set image of her. And their expectations had remained the same making it difficult for her to change.

However, this tan-legged delivery guy with the deep blue eyes didn't know who she was. He didn't have any expectations. He didn't know she had been her father's last hope for a son.

Most of Glenbrooke had heard her father tell the story of how he chose the name Leah for his sixth daughter. The book

of Genesis contained the account of Jacob's first wife, Leah. Jacob had worked seven years to earn adorable Rachel's hand in marriage, but he was tricked into marrying Rachel's less desirable sister, Leah. When Jacob woke the morning after his wedding, he turned to see that "behold, it was Leah" next to him and not his long anticipated Rachel.

Leah could hear her father's voice echoing in her imagination. *"Saddest verse in the Bible, Genesis 29:25. 'Behold, it was Leah.' Yup, after five daughters, when I saw her I felt just like Jacob, and I said, 'We'll call her Leah.'"*

Early on Leah learned that if she worked hard—as hard as a son would have worked—she could please her father. So she became his tomboy and was one of the first girls in Glenbrooke to play Little League baseball on this very field.

Leah wondered if that bit of news would impress the mysterious newcomer. Or did he prefer soft-spoken women with manicured nails? He had said he had experience getting kids to line up. Did he work with kids? He definitely appeared to like dogs. That was a good sign.

Gazing up at the bright planet, Leah whispered, "I wish... I wish..."

It was no use. She had stopped wishing a long time ago. She didn't dare permit herself to speak aloud the silent wish that had long lay nestled in her heart. The dream, the wish, for someone to love and for that someone to love her back. The unattainable dream of one day handing a Sno-Kone to her own son and at long last being the mother in the bleachers who yelled the loudest when her boy was at bat.

Leah blinked and swallowed quickly. Bright Venus was still shining down on her.

Yeah, well, for all I know, I'm looking at Pluto, not Venus. What happens if I wish on Pluto? Does a floppy-eared dog with big feet show up on my doorstep?

Leah glanced at her watch. “Yikes! What am I doing sitting here talking to myself?” She started her car and headed for home. But first she had an important stop to make at the grocery store.