

ROBIN JONES GUNN

Becoming Us

A Novel



**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

Becoming Us

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

BOOKS BY ROBIN JONES GUNN

SERIES AND COLLECTIONS

Christy Miller

Sierra Jensen

Christy and Todd: The College Years

Katie Weldon

Christy and Todd: The Married Years

Christy and Todd: The Baby Years

Glenbrooke

Sisterchicks

NOVELLAS AND HALLMARK MOVIES

Finding Father Christmas

Engaging Father Christmas

Kissing Father Christmas

NONFICTION

Praying for Your Future Husband: Preparing Your Heart for His

Victim of Grace: When God's Goodness Prevails

Spoken For: Embracing Who You Are and Whose You Are

A Pocketful of Hope for Mothers

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

ROBIN JONES
GUNN

Becoming Us
A Novel



MULTNOMAH

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

BECOMING US

Scripture quotations and paraphrases are taken from the following versions: New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1952, [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The Living Bible copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-7352-9075-4

eBook ISBN 978-0-7352-9076-1

Copyright © 2019 by Robin's Nest Productions Inc.

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard; cover photography by Schon & Probst

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

MULTNOMAH® and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gunn, Robin Jones, 1955—author.

Title: Becoming us : a novel / Robin Jones Gunn.

Description: First edition. | New York : Multnomah, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018035288 | ISBN 9780735290754 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780735290761 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Domestic fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Contemporary Women. | FICTION / Christian / General. | FICTION / Family Life. | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3557.U4866 B43 2019 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018035288>

Printed in the United States of America

2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs



*To my creative sister, Julie, who has taught me how to be
a haven maker in every season of life. And to my darling
nieces, Amanda and Ashley. Thank you for making every
gathering a time of beauty and sweetness.*

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Chapter 1

I had no problem finding Jennalyn's house that windy night in early December. The two-story charmer stood out from the other Costa Mesa ranch-style houses on Ventura Street. I even made it as far as the welcome mat by her front door before a rising sense of panic pressed in on me, causing me to stop and draw in a deep breath.

You don't have to do this, Emily. You can leave now. No one inside knows you're here.

My gaze went to the meandering red ribbon that looped through the fresh evergreen wreath hanging on the door. The wreath had an artistic assortment of bright silver bells, clusters of holly berries, and strategically placed starfish—a charming blend of beachy, artistic, and classy. Just like Jennalyn.

Nervously, I pulled her handmade invitation from my shoulder bag as if another glimpse at it would bolster my courage.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs



It was all so cute. The idea, the invitation, and now the charming wreath on Jennalyn's front door.

Why did I say I would come? I can't do this. I won't fit in with these women.

My feet didn't move. In my pounding ears, I could hear the echo of my husband's calm voice right after we moved to California. He had to coax our daughter out of the car on her first day of fifth grade.

"You gotta be brave, sweetheart. You've gotta take the first step. Truth is, I don't know anyone in this wide world who wouldn't want to be friends with you. Go on, you can do this."

Audra took that first step, and she had made lots of friends at school over the past three months. Now it was my turn. If Trevor were standing

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

beside me, I knew he would slip into his most adorable southern drawl and say, “Go on, Emily, darlin’, ring the bell. You’ll be glad you did.”

You better be right, Trevor Winslow. You better be right about a lot of things.

I rang the doorbell and waited. When the door opened, cheerful Christmas music spilled out. Jennalyn’s dark, silky hair hung over her shoulders, and she smiled at me in her welcoming way.

“I’m so glad you came! Come in.” She offered me a pregnant mama side hug.

I held out my plate of cookies with an apology. “They’re not homemade. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay.” She took the plate and led the way past the garland-festooned staircase. The fragrance of fresh pine mixed with cinnamon and cloves hung in the air.

I could hear the other women’s voices coming from the large open area at the back of Jennalyn’s beautiful home. They were laughing the way friends laugh when they know each other well.

I hung back slightly, my heart pounding. The conversation paused when we entered. I counted the women seated on the plush sofas. There were only three, but they were all looking at me.

“This is Emily.” Jennalyn placed her hand on my shoulder. “We met at the grocery store a few weeks ago and ended up having such a great conversation, I knew I wanted to include her for our Favorite Things party.”

A chorus of greetings followed as each woman said her name. I gave a nod and a “hi” and placed my gift gifts on the end of the long marble kitchen counter where the other gifts were. Jennalyn added my plate of cookies to the snacks.

“Would you like something to drink?” One of the women had stood and was now coming toward me. Her long hair had a pretty nutmeg-brown

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

tint to it and was tucked behind her ears. Her oval face seemed to be framed like an open window with the curtains pulled back to each side.

"I was going to make some hot tea," she said. "We have cold drinks too."

As she came closer, I read in her distinct blue-green eyes a gentle sincerity. Or maybe it was compassion, as if she instinctively knew how nervous I was.

"Tea sounds good," I said.

"Do you like peppermint tea?"

"Yes. Sure. Anything."

"I'm Christy. I know it's hard to remember names when you hear them all at once."

"Thanks."

She motioned to the other women on the couch. "So, again, that's Tess. And Sierra is in the chair."

My eyes went to Sierra first because of her beautiful, wild, curly blond hair. She wore a stack of gold bangles and beaded leather bracelets that shimmered and clinked together when she lifted her slender arm to wave at me. She reminded me of a mermaid.

"I love your sweater," Sierra said. "It looks hand knit. Is it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." There was no way I was going to admit to her that I'd found it at a local junktique when I was hunting for lamps for our small apartment.

Sierra patted the underside of the simple scarf-like cocoon strapped to her front. "This is Ella Mae. She was four weeks old yesterday." Sierra folded back the tie-dyed fabric so I could see the downy head of her little one.

I hadn't realized she was cradling a newborn in her wide scarf. I smiled back but couldn't manage a comment because a lump had swelled in my throat. I blinked so I wouldn't tear up.

"Do you like honey in your tea?" Christy poured the boiling water into a white china teapot shaped like a pineapple.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

“No thanks.”

“I’m the same way. I like my peppermint tea unsweetened. Now, if we were having English breakfast tea,” Christy confided, “I’d have both milk and sugar in it. And at least two cookies for dunking.”

“At least two,” Jennalyn chimed in. “Although I think we’ll all need more than just two cookies tonight, by the looks of this assortment.”

Christy and Jennalyn were treating me as if we were already friends. I wished my emotions hadn’t gotten so elevated.

Jennalyn reached across the counter to uncover the plate of cookies I’d brought.

“Oh!”

I couldn’t tell if Jennalyn’s exclamation was one of surprise and delight when she saw my contribution, or if she was appalled. I stayed fixed on her expression as she examined the thumbprint cookies. They each had a chocolate kiss in the middle, popping up like an elf’s cap. At least that’s what Audra said they looked like when she helped me pick them out at the grocery-store bakery that afternoon. That’s why my daughter had taken it upon herself to meticulously cover each kiss with green frosting and add a tiny red candy dot on top.

“How clever.” Jennalyn, the artist, understood my daughter’s attempt right away. “Christmas elf caps. These are adorable!”

I noticed that Christy was observing the lopsided cookies the way I had, with polite skepticism.

“Hey!” Sierra called from the couch. Her sleeping baby stirred, and she lowered her voice. “I vote that you guys bring the cookies over here and share the bounty.”

“Great idea.” Jennalyn went to the coffee table and cleared her artistically arranged decorations, looping the expensive-looking table runner over the back of a kitchen chair and carefully transferring the nativity set.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Tess stood to help transfer the cookies to the coffee table, and I was surprised at how tall she was. She carried herself as if she had runway experience. As she gracefully reached for the plates of cookies on the counter, I felt short compared to her.

I also realized I was the only one in this group who had short hair. Problem hair, as my mother used to call it. My baby-fine strands never grew up nor had they managed to grow out. My light brown, wavy hair fell to just below chin level. Most of the time I felt like I looked as if I'd gotten caught in a springtime shower without an umbrella. I think that's why I always noticed other women's hair. My four sisters-in-law had often said they envied my flat stomach and shapely legs. For me, I admired other women's hair.

I watched Tess out of the corner of my eye and wondered what it would be like to have thick, dark hair like hers. She wore it folded into a loose braid that hung down her back and then fell to the side when she bent to put the first few plates within easy reach for Sierra.

Tess caught my gaze and smiled. I smiled back. Her pale blue eyes stood out in a mesmerizing way against her toasty brown skin. She was stunning in an exotic, complicated way.

I took a seat next to Christy on one of the leather sofas. As the other women chatted, I drew in a slow breath. Christy was kind and a little shy. Jennalyn was outgoing and hospitable. Sierra was the free spirit in the group who had no trouble speaking her mind.

Tess would be the mystery. That was fine with me. After being the only introvert around Trevor's big clan for all the years we had lived in North Carolina, I found it nice not to be the only quiet woman at a party.

"Emily, how did you come up with the idea for the elf-cap cookies?" Sierra asked.

"It was my daughter's idea. She decorated them."

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

"Clever girl. How old is she?" Sierra asked.

"Ten. Well, almost eleven."

"What's her name?"

"Audra."

"What a pretty name." Tess spoke for the first time. Her voice had a warm, lilting tone. "Audra," she repeated as if my daughter were a storybook character.

Sierra helped herself to a second cookie. "Do you have only one child?"

My stomach tightened. I don't think Sierra intended for the word *only* to stand out in her question, but it did.

"Yes. Just one." I put the cup of peppermint tea to my lips and hoped the subject would change. My heart was racing again.

"Ella Mae is our first," Sierra said. "Jordan would love to have a dozen. I wouldn't mind that. I came from a big family, so I'm hoping we have lots more. Babies are amazing, aren't they? Such a gift."

I nodded and took another sip of tea.

"Do you think you guys will have more?" Sierra asked.

A circus of emotions ran through me, doubling the uncertainty I had felt on the doorstep earlier. My hand wobbled as I held the teacup to my lips. I swallowed before making a noncommittal sort of "Mmm" sound in answer to Sierra's question.

"Does anyone else want tea?" Christy lifted the pineapple teapot. "I think there's enough for one more cup."

"Sure," Sierra said. "I'll have some. It's decaf, right? Unless, Tess? Do you want the last cup?"

"I'll make another pot." Christy rose from the couch.

I used the opportunity to quietly excuse myself and retreat to the powder room. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I let out a long, slow breath.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Why is this so difficult? These women are nice. What is wrong with me?

Putting my clammy hands in the sink, I let the cool water run over my wrists, grounding me, calming me. In the mirror, my solemn brown eyes seemed to be evaluating my reflection the way I'd evaluated all the other women. It had been easy for me to find something I liked in each of them. Why couldn't I show myself the same kindness?

I'm not ready to have these kinds of conversations. Not with these women. Not with anyone. I need more time. I can't do this.

I folded the guest towel and adjusted it on the countertop.

I need to leave. Now.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Chapter 2

I returned to the great room and saw Jennalyn standing next to the kitchen counter. My plan was to discretely tell her I wasn't feeling well, which was true. I sidled up next to her, ready to make a quiet excuse and equally quiet exit.

Jennalyn looked up. "Perfect timing! We're ready to open the gifts."

I hung back. "Well, actually, I—"

"Don't worry. You didn't miss the instructions," Jennalyn said. "I was about to explain how the favorite-things gift exchange works. Here." She placed a basketful of gifts into my arms and pointed at the coffee table.

I found a spot for them next to a plate of cookies and hesitated before sheepishly lowering myself onto the sofa.

I'll stay for the exchange. Then I'll slip out. No drama.

I noticed that my teacup had been refilled, so I reached for it and held it like a prop, grateful to have something to look at other than the women in this close circle.

"It's simple," Jennalyn began. "Everyone takes a few minutes to talk about what she brought and why it's a favorite item for her."

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

“We have to stand up and say something?” Christy echoed my discomfort.

“You don’t have to stand. But you do have to explain why you chose what you brought. Then we all get one of the gifts to open, since everyone brought five of the same thing. Does that make sense?”

“Yep,” Sierra said. “Should I go first?”

“Yes, please do.”

“My favorite thing is shopping in funky thrift stores.”

She and Jennalyn started talking at the same time and laughing about a shared moment they had recently while shopping at a local thrift store. They had found a vintage dresser that Sierra had turned into a changing table for Ella Mae with the assistance of Jennalyn’s painting skills.

Their enthusiasm for “repurposing treasures” made me feel less self-conscious about where my sweater had come from. I also realized they called them thrift shops and not junktiques.

“I didn’t have time to wrap them, so here.” Sierra opened a zippered fabric pouch she had pulled from her diaper bag and displayed an assortment of at least a dozen bracelets on the coffee table. “I thought everybody could pick the one she wanted.”

I waited until the others had made their selections before settling on a lime-green, plastic bangle. Since I don’t wear a lot of jewelry and always felt like bracelets got in the way, I made my choice based on what I thought Audra might like.

“Thanks, Sierra.” Tess gave her wrist a shimmy. “I really like this one.”

“Good! I’m glad. Why don’t you go next, Tess?”

Tess handed out her gifts in small drawstring pouches. Sierra immediately knew what it was.

“Is this the same fragrance you brought over with the diffuser a couple of days before Ella Mae was born?”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

“Yes.” Tess’s buttery voice sounded confident. “No surprise, is it? One of my favorite things is fragrant oils. These are roll-on tubes of my latest favorite combination. The base is cedarwood and lavender, so it’s earthy and calming. You might also pick up the faint hint of frankincense.”

“What does frankincense smell like?” Christy untwisted the top of hers and rolled it on her wrist. I followed her lead, as she held her arm up to her nose and closed her eyes, drawing in the deep amber fragrance. “I love this.”

“Me too,” Sierra agreed. “What did you call this one? You had a name for it the other day.”

“Slippers.” Tess grinned, her gaze resting on me.

I smiled back. For the first time that evening, I felt relaxed. I rolled the scent on my other wrist.

“Slippers! Perfect name!” Sierra drew in another deep sniff. “Doesn’t it make you want to put on your slippers and cozy up with a good book? Hey, you know what? We should start a book club.”

“I’ve wanted to do that for a while,” Jennalyn said. “I also want to do a banner word for next year the way Christy does.”

“A banner word?” Sierra repeated.

“It’s something I’ve been doing for a while,” Christy explained. “I journal a lot, so I try to take some time before the start of a new year, and I simply ask God for a word. Then I write down whatever is impressed on my thoughts. I’ve found that the word becomes a sort of theme for the year.”

“That’s cool. Why don’t we all do that for this new year?” Sierra glanced around the group. “Next time we get together, we can share what our word is for the year and discuss the book we all read.”

“Great idea, but hold that thought until we finish the gift exchange,” Jennalyn said.

Christy went next. She had made aprons for each of us. Darling aprons with long ties in the back and cute, mismatched pockets and a ruffle across

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

the bib top. Sierra was elated and gave Christy a “you shouldn’t have” look, saying that she knew how much Christy sold her aprons for in the local boutiques, and they didn’t sell for five dollars.

“I used scraps on these. Don’t worry. They didn’t cost me more than five dollars.” Christy went on to explain why aprons had become one of her favorite things. “I found that I really like wearing an apron when I’m in the kitchen. It brings back good memories of my grandmother; she used to always wear homemade aprons. I feel like I’m bringing a little of my midwestern heritage into my home.” Her expression turned wistful. “I especially feel that way since my grandmother passed away last year.”

“This is so sweet, Christy. Thank you,” Jennalyn said. “I love mine.”

“So do I,” I echoed, feeling confident enough to speak up.

Tess held hers up, commenting on the colorful fabric and slipping her hand into the broad pocket. “This is officially now one of my favorite things.”

“I’m so glad you like them.” Christy looked slightly embarrassed by the praise.

All eyes were on me. I cleared my throat, as if I were about to make a speech. I had been so caught up in the other gifts, I hadn’t thought about what to say. What came out was awkward. “I guess my favorite thing is sugar.” I laughed, but no one else did.

“Because, well, here.” I handed out the tissue-wrapped gifts. They were adorned with a springy ball of ribbons, hand-curved with care by Audra. “What I just said will make sense when you open them.”

Sierra had hers torn open first. “Yum! Hot chocolate and a little packet of shortbread cookies. I love shortbread cookies. My mom used to send this kind to me when I lived in Brazil.”

“Nice,” Christy said. “A cozy moment waiting to happen. Thanks, Emily.”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

I nodded, still trying to take in that Sierra said she had lived in Brazil.

“Great choice on the cookies, by the way,” Christy said. “This kind is perfect for dipping in hot cocoa.”

“I agree,” Sierra said.

I appreciated the way the others were so affirming, even though my contribution wasn’t very personal. I decided to add a final thought in case it would help explain why I had come up with the idea.

“A few years ago I started a tradition with our daughter. After the tree is decorated, we turn off all the other lights and sit on the couch with our cocoa and cookies and listen to Christmas music.”

“I love that,” Sierra said. “I want to start traditions like that with Ella Mae. Although, I’ll have to eat her cookies for her this year.”

A twitter of laughter rolled comfortably over the group, and Jennalyn reached for her basket of gifts. I leaned back, glad to have the spotlight off me. Jennalyn rested the basket on her knees since most of her lap was otherwise occupied. She handed out five small, flat rectangular gifts. Our names were written with a flourish on the outside of the paper wrapping.

“As most of you know, one of my favorite things is creating handmade cards—”

“I love, love, love the beautiful invitations you made for this party,” Sierra interrupted. “They were so cute.”

“Thank you.” Jennalyn shifted. It seemed she was either uncomfortable with the compliment or was getting kicked in the ribs from the inside.

“So one of my other favorite things is finding verses in the Bible that apply to whatever is going on in my life. Go ahead. You can open them.”

Sierra held up her gift before opening it. “I get it! Brown paper packages tied up with string. Very clever.”

The gifts were indeed wrapped in brown paper and tied with red string. Jennalyn looked pleased that Sierra had noticed.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

We unwrapped the gifts in unison. The hand-lettered cards had a Scripture verse on them:

*We confidently and joyfully
look forward to actually
becoming
all that God has had in mind for us to be.
—Romans 5:2*

I glanced around and saw that we all had received the same verse, but the artwork was different on each of our cards. Mine had watercolored peonies painted in the top right corner. I love peonies. Jennalyn couldn't have known that; the coincidence touched me deeply. I felt as if I had received a little love note.

"The reason I chose that verse," Jennalyn said, "is because, as Christy knows, I've been coming back to it a lot over the last few months."

Christy nodded the way a best friend agrees with someone she knows by heart.

"We're all in process, right?" Jennalyn added. "We're becoming all that God created us to be. I've been trying to remember that instead of getting discouraged because things aren't going exactly the way I'd like them to. I need to relax and be confident and joyful, like this verse says."

Jennalyn's voice wobbled as she spoke, and for the first time that evening, I wondered if perhaps I wasn't the only woman in the room who was going through a private struggle.

"I love this verse," Sierra said. "It's perfect. None of us has arrived. We're all in the process of 'becoming.'"

I watched the women nod as if pondering what "becoming" meant to them.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

“Anyone else notice a theme with our gifts?” Tess asked. “We can roll on our Slippers fragrance, put on our aprons to make our cocoa, and then curl up to enjoy our sugar cookie . . .”

“While wearing our cute bracelets,” Christy added, giving her bangled wrist a twist in the air.

“And memorizing our new verse for the year.” Tess waved Jennalyn’s card.

The others laughed comfortably, and I smiled. It felt good, like a sense of accomplishment. I’d made it this far through the night. I’d been included and accepted.

Yet deep inside, I still felt spurts of nervousness. I wanted to leave. I needed to leave.

The conversations twirled around the circle. Tess had started up a discussion with Sierra about fragrant oil combinations, and Jennalyn and Christy were discussing book options for the proposed book club.

Quietly gathering my gifts, I tucked them into my shoulder bag. Before I could stand up and make a smooth exit, Christy leaned over and said, “I liked your gift.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

Jennalyn had pushed herself up and moved into the kitchen, carrying a cookie on a napkin. Tess joined her, and Sierra adjusted herself to nurse Ella Mae, who was making the tiniest kitten-like pleas.

“You inspired me to start a new tradition with Hana this year,” Christy said to me. “Now that she’s six, she’s very excited about Christmas. We’re planning to get our tree tomorrow.”

“You have a six-year-old daughter?” I asked.

“Yes. And a three-year-old son.” Christy grinned and in the cutest voice added, “I also have a pretty great husband.”

“I have one of those too.” I grinned back at her.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Then, as if something pinched me on the inside, I felt compelled to add, “A pretty great husband, I mean. Not a—”

“Do you guys mind if Tess selects the first book for our book club?” Jennalyn’s voice rose above the smaller conversations. “She has one she really likes and said she can text us the title.”

“Sounds good,” Christy said.

Sierra nodded.

I didn’t make any kind of gesture of agreement or disagreement. Instead, I reached for my phone in my shoulder bag, acting as if I needed to check an incoming message. No updates were on my phone. Only an internal message from my bossy insecurities telling me to pack it up and get out of there. Leave on a high note. Mission accomplished.

My instincts knew that with a group like this, it was only a matter of time before the conversation turned again to talk of children, babies, and pregnancies. With the discussion would come questions. Questions I wasn’t ready to answer, regardless of how kind and inviting all these women were.

“Wonderful!” Jennalyn said. “Tess will pick the book, and we’ll meet here the second week of January if that works for everyone.”

Christy laughed and raised her eyebrows at Jennalyn.

“What?” Jennalyn glanced at her chest as if making sure she hadn’t left a trail of powdered sugar from the half-eaten cookie in her hand. “What did I miss?”

“Don’t you think you might be a little busy around the second week of January?” Christy dipped her chin toward Jennalyn’s belly.

“Oh! Right.” Jennalyn smiled.

“Why don’t we decide when to meet after all of us get through Christmas?” Christy suggested. “We can start reading the book now, but we don’t have to set a date.”

“Okay. Sounds good to me,” Jennalyn said. A quiet pause followed. It

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

seemed we had all turned our focus to Jennalyn's pronounced side view as she stood by the kitchen counter.

She must have sensed the object of our collective gaze because she patted her middle and said, "I honestly think this little wiggle bunny will come sooner than January 4, though. I can't imagine going all the way to my due date. Mostly I can't picture my poor body getting any bigger than it already is."

"That's exactly what I thought during my last month," Sierra said. "And you guys know how huge I got!"

Jennalyn looked at the half-eaten cookie she was still holding. We all watched as she pressed the pedal on the trash bin and held out the cookie as if she were going to drop it in the trash.

"I'm not saying that you're huge," Sierra said quickly. "You're nowhere near as big as I was."

Jennalyn grinned, dangling her cookie.

"You probably won't get much bigger," Christy said.

"Maybe a tiny bit," Sierra said bluntly.

"But not much," Tess offered.

"Eat the cookie!" Sierra spouted.

Friendly laughter circled the room.

"Are those your new favorites?" Christy asked. "I can make them again for your baby shower. Because, if you're right about an earlier due date, our next gathering will be a baby shower and not a book club."

I stood up. Not like a rocket but more like a blow-up snowman lawn decoration, wobbling from side to side.

"I'm convinced you're having a boy," Sierra said. "I know that's what Mark wants."

Reaching for my shoulder bag, I felt my throat tightening as I said calmly, "I need to get going. Thanks for everything. It was nice meeting all of you."

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

The replies came in a tumble of voices. Couldn't I stay a little longer? Did I want to be part of the book club? We hadn't shared contact information yet. Did I really have to go?

My heart was pounding so rapidly I didn't think I would be able to hold it together. Especially if everyone was going to sit there and talk about planning a baby shower.

Jennalyn followed me as a chorus of friendly "byes" and "see you later" echoed in the background. She gave me a side hug at the door and smiled as if my exit wasn't awkward at all. "I'm so glad you came."

Instead of answering by saying, "Me too," which would have been normal, I blinked quickly and said, "Thank you."

Jennalyn rested her hand on my arm, delaying my exit. "I should probably explain why everyone was making such a big deal about the baby shower."

"You don't have to."

"I want to. Because, you see, my husband, Mark, and I opted not to know if we're having a boy or a girl. Eden is a daddy's girl, for sure. But my husband comes from a big Italian family. When we announced we were expecting again, they put so much pressure on us that this one needed to be a boy. I just couldn't take it."

I placed my hand on top of hers, wishing I could make the words that were shouting in my head come through my lips in a generous act of solidarity. *Oh, Jennalyn. I understand! Big families, pressure, expectations. Yes, yes! I know exactly what that's like.*

But I just stood there, mute.

"So Mark and I decided everyone would just have to wait and find out at the same time, when the baby is born. Boy or girl, it shouldn't matter. Whenever he or she arrives, I'm hoping for nothing but love and acceptance all the way around."

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

My heart, like a spring-loaded mechanism, pushed my arms to encircle her in a spontaneous squishing and bumping hug.

“You get it, don’t you?” Jennalyn asked softly when I pulled back.

I nodded, swallowing my surging emotions. The tears I had been holding back all night began to free-fall.

“We should go to coffee sometime.” Jennalyn placed her words precisely, like a verbal welcome mat. I knew she was inviting me to tell her my story. To share with her why I felt so connected to her experience.

My head nodded, telling her yes, I agreed. We should go to coffee sometime.

But I knew I couldn’t do that. I wouldn’t. We moved to California to start a new story—not to gather sympathy or retell all the events that led us to this place in an effort to reboot our marriage and family.

“Good night, Emily.” Jennalyn smiled calmly.

At that moment I was pretty sure I wouldn’t see Jennalyn, Sierra, Tess, or Christy ever again.

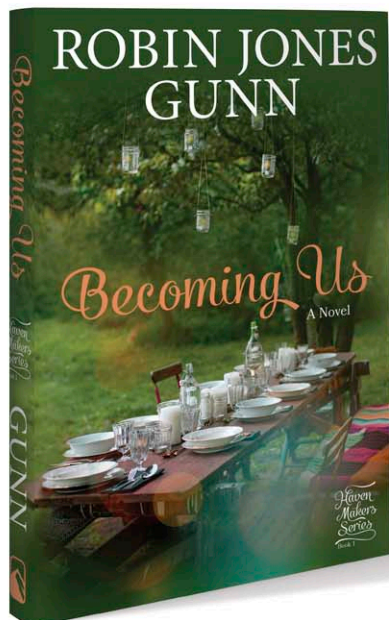
UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/BecomingUs

Continue
Reading...

Order
BECOMING US
now!



BUY NOW



MULTNOMAH