

Save the
Date



JENNY B. JONES



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Saving Grace, a home for young women who have graduated from the foster care system, is a real place. With real girls. With real hopes and dreams. This book is dedicated to them.

You are an inspiration. We are all so excited for your futures. I so admire the women you are, as well as the women God is shaping you to be. Never give up. Never lose hope. Never stop dreaming. And never stop reminding the world that our work has only begun. You are worthy, you are beautiful, you are . . . amazing.



. . . But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus."

—Philippians 3:13, 14

Prologue

It was a good night to get engaged.

The moon was full. The candles lit. And Lucy Wiltshire wore a new black sheath that would have made Audrey Hepburn jealous. Her friends might say it was just another old find from the secondhand shop, but Lucy had known from the moment she'd spied the dress that it had been something more. Found on a tightly crammed rack between an avocado peacoat and an acid-washed denim skirt that had seen one too many Bon Jovi concerts, the dress had just called out to her. *Buy me. I'm yours. We belong together.*

And buy it she did. Despite the fact that the bodice was a bit tight, and she'd had to let out the waist a few inches, the dress just felt right. It made Lucy want to twirl in her tiny kitchen, letting her kitten heels slide across the gray tile floor.

It was the perfect outfit to wear when getting proposed to. She had dreamed of this day since she was six and had thrown a wedding for Barbie. And now her own Ken doll was four feet away, acting nervous as a man with marriage on his mind and a solitaire in his pocket.

Matthew tugged his navy tie loose and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Good day?" Lucy asked, as she put some garlic bread in the oven, humming to herself.

"It was fine." His voice was distracted, his focus on the stack of mail she had yet to move. "What's this?" He held up a gold embellished card.

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She glanced his way then quickly turned back to the oven. “It’s nothing.”

“It looks like a class reunion invitation. I thought you didn’t graduate in Charleston.”

Her childhood in South Carolina was the last thing she wanted to discuss tonight. Or ever. “Obviously it’s a mistake on someone’s part.” Or a cruel joke. The daughter of a maid, Lucy had been on the very bottom of the social food chain at the elite Montrose Academy. Her mother had cleaned the homes of her classmates. And they had never let her forget Lucy wasn’t one of them. But now, back in Charleston, life couldn’t be sweeter.

“Or maybe they just want to see you.”

Lucy sat down and stared at the man who had asked her out one year ago today. Matt’s fingers drumming next to his plate seemed out of sync for someone who was normally as calm as a morning sunrise. She adored his predictability. His sandy-blond hair always parted to the left. His white shirts starched and perfectly creased in the sleeves.

The timer over the stove dinged, and Lucy jumped up to take out the bread. “I hope you’re hungry. I made your favorites.”

“I noticed.”

Lucy threw the bread in a basket and placed it on the table. Grabbing his plate, she loaded it with her homemade noodles, her own secret recipe marinara sauce, and a salad—easy on the dressing, just like he liked. Lucy could envision them sitting together thirty years from now, sharing a meal and talking about their day.

“Maybe you should go to the reunion.” Matt neatly placed his napkin in his lap. “If you’re wanting to start that girls’ home, you’re going to need to rub elbows with as many people in the community as you can.”

Lucy watched him as she sat down. “I’ll get the funding from somewhere else. That’s what federal grants are for. And besides it’s the same night as your award ceremony.”

Matt was going to be honored for his charity work with senior citizens. An accountant, he had donated countless hours helping the older folks in Charleston with their taxes and providing free financial

counseling. Every day she gave God a big “thank you” for sending Matt her way. He was . . . perfect.

He called his mother twice a week. He led a Bible study and played on a baseball league at church. He read autobiographies and watched CNBC. The guy drove a Volvo. What more could she ask for?

“Lucy?” Matt’s face was taut as he reached for her hand.

This was it. She was going to become Mrs. Matthew Campbell. She hoped her lip gloss was still on. And where had she put that camera? If any occasion called for a “extend arm and take your own photo,” this was it.

He swallowed and folded his fingers over hers. “I have something I need to talk to you about.”

Her vision blurred with unshed tears. They would have a boy and a girl. They’d name the girl Anna, after her mother. He could name the boy. It didn’t really matter to her. As long as it wasn’t Maynard. After that uncle he liked so much.

“Lucy, we’ve been together a while now.”

“A year,” she said. “Our first date was a year today.” Which was all part of his thoughtful plan.

His grip loosened on her hand. “And it’s been great. I’ve enjoyed our time together. And I think you are one incredible person.”

Matt reached into his pocket.

The ring. He was going for the ring. Marquis, pear, princess, round—she didn’t care.

“Matt”—Lucy sniffed—“I want you to know I’m so happy God put you in my life and—”

He opened his hand.

And placed a business card on the table.

Lucy’s pink lips clamped tight. Those were not wedding bells pealing in her head right now.

“What is this?” She picked up the card. “Matthew Campbell, senior accountant, Digby, Wallace, and Hinds?”

His smile was hesitant. “I got a job offer.”

“Offer?” She ran her finger over his embossed name. “Looks like

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you've already progressed beyond that. When were you going to tell me?"

"I've tried." He pushed his plate aside. "You've just been so busy with the shelter."

"Residential home," she corrected. "Saving Grace is a residential home."

"You've been so occupied with getting that started, I haven't been able to get your attention lately."

"You've got it now." Something was very wrong here. "What's going on? I've never heard of these people. Are they new?"

His green eyes focused on the candle in the center of the table. "No. They're quite old, in fact. Very prestigious."

"And *where* are they old and prestigious?" She couldn't relocate. He knew that. Not with mere months before Saving Grace opened. Was he going to move—without her?

"In Dallas."

Lucy's heart fell somewhere to the vicinity of her shoes. "When are you leaving?"

He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Lucy."

"You're going to have to do better than that."

"I think we've been moving too fast."

Lucy thought of the bridal magazines under her bed. "Then let's slow it down. I'm okay with that. I think if we just—"

"I'm leaving next week. This is an opportunity I can't pass up." He spoke low and patiently, as if talking to a child. "I think we need to take a break. My relocating is the perfect opportunity to give ourselves some space and see what happens."

The white-picket fence was collapsing before her. *Was it too much to ask, God? Was it too much to want a family of my own? To finally have that home?* For the first time in her life, she had let herself believe she could have it all.

Her laugh sounded pitiful and strained. "Can you believe"—tears clogged her throat—"that I thought you were going to propose tonight?"

Matt stood up, walked over to her, and kissed her forehead. “I think I should probably go.”

She grabbed his hand as he leaned away. “Is it me?” Because wasn’t it always her?

Reaching out, he pushed a stray curl behind her ear. “No. I know you’re ready for a permanent commitment, but I have to put my career first now—whether I want to or not.”

The smells in the room—the food, her life decaying—made her want to throw up. “I could wait, you know. We could do the long distance thing.”

“I’m sorry.” He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair. “For what it’s worth, I believe you’re the right girl—it’s just not the right time.”

Two minutes later Lucy stood in her living room and watched Matt drive away.

No ring. No engagement.

No happily ever after.

She walked upstairs to her bedroom.

Sucked it in as she unzipped the Audrey Hepburn dress.

Peeled it off her body.

And threw it out the window.

Chapter One

Two years later

Outside the birds sang happy little tunes as they sat on magnolia limbs old enough to have shaded Robert E. Lee. The May sunshine hovered over treetops and steeples, sending the good people of Charleston away from their porches and inside to the cool. Saving Grace occupied an old home downtown, wedged in tight next to an Italian restaurant that put out more than its share of trash and basil-scented air. But inside the house, Lucy sat in her swivel chair and wondered how many times a world could fall apart.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I heard you correctly.” She stared at the slender woman sitting in her office.

“Sinclair Hotels will be cutting our funding to Saving Grace by forty percent, effective immediately.”

Lucy had barely had time to put down her morning cup of coffee before the PR representative from Sinclair was knocking on her office door. Loosening the garage sale Hermes scarf at her throat, Lucy tried to recall if she had put on deodorant that morning. It was all a blur. Surely she had. But she needed all her wits about her. And her Dry Idea.

“Miss Pierson,” Lucy said. “I was promised this amount six months ago.”

“Unfortunately, tough economic times sometimes necessitate cut-backs. I’m sure you understand.” Miss Pierson speared her with a snotty gaze she had probably perfected in junior high. Lucy immediately had

a memory of walking through the halls of her high school. The stares. The ridicule. Her classmates doing everything they could to make the poor scholarship girl feel inferior at that ridiculous private school her mother had made her attend. “Marcus Sinclair and the board are grieved over these decisions as well, which is why I was sent to personally deliver the news.”

“And I am very grateful,” Lucy managed to say. “Sinclair has been very generous. But if I can’t guarantee the funds you initially quoted, I’ll lose my federal and state grants.”

“As you’ve probably read, Sinclair Hotels has suffered setbacks these last three years under the previous CEO. So Mr. Sinclair has come out of retirement and returned to the helm.”

She had to be a size double zero. What a shame Sinclair didn’t pay this woman enough to feed herself. Meanwhile Lucy’s own size ten skirt was about to cut her waist in two.

“Isn’t there anyone I could talk to?” *Lord, help me be calm. Claiming your peace here. I’m breathing in. Breathing out. Breathing—oh, seriously, her arms are no bigger than toothpicks.*

“It was a board decision.”

“Maybe I could speak with Mr. Sinclair?”

“That will not be possible. He’s very busy with his duties as CEO, as well as campaigning for his son.”

Lucy didn’t even let herself think about Alex Sinclair, heir to the family fortune. Not that he needed anyone else’s money. He had made his own as a quarterback for the New York Warriors. And she had gone to school with him, though she had been a year behind him. If he was still treating people the way he’d treated her, it’s a wonder someone hadn’t smothered him with a jersey in his sleep.

“You are still invited to the gala Friday night.” Miss Pierson’s eyes flitted over the walls of Lucy’s office. Decorated with black-and-white photos of past and present girls of Saving Grace, it wasn’t exactly art. But to Lucy, they were more precious than any Van Gogh.

Tomorrow was the annual event when she would normally receive her donation check, happily assured that Saving Grace would carry on

another year. Girls getting their educations. Gaining employment skills. Having a roof over their heads. Now she didn't know how they would continue through the winter.

Miss Pierson stood, her body gracefully rising from the scarred wooden chair. "On behalf of Sinclair Hotels, we appreciate you letting us participate in serving our community." Offering her hand in a limp handshake, Miss Pierson gathered her purse and exited the small office.

Lucy's head dropped to her desk. "Why me?" There had to be something she could do. She couldn't just sit there and let Saving Grace die simply because of one donation, substantial though it was. *Lord, what am I going to do? I need some colossal help here.*

She returned to pounding her head and muttering.

"Is this a private mental breakdown or can anyone join?"

Lucy's blonde curls flounced as she sat at attention. "Hey." The sight of her best friend Morgan should've been a welcome comfort. But spotting a young woman standing behind Morgan, Lucy knew there would be no time for her to pour out her heart.

"I was just telling Marinell here what a calm, sane person you are." Morgan sat in the chair Miss Pierson had just vacated and motioned for the girl to take the other vacant seat. "But that's after you have your coffee."

Lucy barely withheld a glare from her smiling friend. "I'm giving crazy a try today. And so far . . . I'm rather good at it." Lucy turned her attention to the girl who looked like a young Salma Hayek. "Hello, Marinell. I'm so glad you've decided to meet with me."

As the foster-care caseworker, Morgan had shared with Lucy the contents of Marinell's file. Age eighteen. Spent the last year and a half in four different foster homes, the last one being so difficult she had dissolved ties with the system and moved out on her own. Getting ready to repeat her senior year, Marinell was homeless and living who knew where on the streets.

"I told Ms. Morgan I would hear you out, but I don't plan on moving in," Marinell said. "I'm fine right where I'm at."

"And where is that again?" Lucy asked.

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“With a relative.”

Most of the girls they saw were so beaten down by their circumstances, they were almost afraid to hope there was something better. Lucy knew she had no family in Charleston but her mom, whose parental rights had been dissolved. Her younger brother had yet to be placed and stayed in a boys’ home. “A relative, huh?”

She shrugged. “A friend.”

“Then I guess it’s my job to convince you to stay.” Which would be fine except for the small detail of Saving Grace closing down if Lucy didn’t find some financial support. “Morgan went over the expectations, right?” Marinell just stared in response. “We’re a faith-based operation here. You simply have to go to school, work hard, and follow our rules.” There were curfews, Bible studies, life-skill classes, and responsibilities in the house that the girls had to adhere to. Between Lucy and the two resident assistants, a supervising adult was always at Saving Grace, making sure the rules were followed.

She and Morgan worked closely together. As a caseworker for the county, Morgan had contact with girls who had aged out of the foster-care system. Once they were eighteen and out of school, the state considered them adults. Saving Grace provided transitional housing for those with nowhere to go. While the state provided some assistance until they turned twenty-one, few young adults took advantage of it and simply struck out on their own. And with foster kids far outnumbering willing homes, the chances for a kid to be out on the streets was shockingly high. It was a national epidemic that the average citizen knew nothing about, and the injustice never failed to light the fuse of Lucy’s temper.

Morgan would expect Lucy to give the girl the selling points. “Why don’t we take a tour?”

“I guess.”

Leaving Morgan behind in the office, Lucy and Marinell started down the hall. Lucy brought her to the spacious living room first. “We had a large church group help out with the décor. This is where all the girls hang out and watch movies or do homework. We have a Bible

study here every Wednesday night.” From the hardwood floor to the teal lamps, the room was like something out of a Pottery Barn catalog. Lucy forced away the thoughts of losing it all. Too much work had gone into making this space a home.

“It’s nice.”

Lucy saw her eyeing the flat-screen TV over the fireplace. “The girls just got a Wii donated, so we’ve been having some serious bowling competitions this week.” Pleased she got at least a faint smile out of Marinell, Lucy moved on. “We have two halls of bedrooms. Each one has been adopted by a community member and professionally decorated. No two rooms are the same.”

Lucy flipped the light of one bedroom and walked inside.

Marinell couldn’t hide the surprise on her face. “I never seen anything like it.”

“It’s cool, huh? This is our last room left.”

Marinell ran her hand over the cream colored duvet, then the printed green pillows.

“So tell me about your family.” Every girl that came through her doors had a story.

Marinell studied an M. C. Escher print on the wall. “My mom moved here a few years ago. My brother got sick and she lost her job. When one of my teachers found out we didn’t have a place to live, the state took us.”

“And where’s your father?”

“Gone.” Marinell shrugged as if it were no big deal. “Do you feed us here?”

“Yes. And you get to learn how to cook.” Thanks to a handful of community volunteers, the girls got trained in various life skills, like preparing a healthy dinner and balancing a checkbook.

Walking back down the hall, Lucy could hardly make the necessary small talk for her racing mind. She needed time. There were people to call, companies to contact. She had to find new donors. And quickly.

Lucy guided her back into the office, but Marinell stopped just

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inside. “What’s that?” Marinell pointed to a series of worn indentions in the sun-bleached wooden floor.

“Saving Grace was a convent until about five years ago.” The thought always made her heart warm. “This is where the nuns prayed. Those dents there? That’s from many hours on their knees.”

“You serious?”

Lucy nodded. “I’d like to think the sisters would be proud of what we do here. Those marks in the floor remind me that I can’t solve anything without putting my own time in on my knees.”

“My mom and dad are Catholic. Um, I mean my mom is.”

“But you’re not?” Lucy asked.

Marinell looked away from the floor. “I’m not anything.”

Lucy exchanged a look with Morgan before handing Marinell her card. “This is how you can reach me. If you need anything, give me a call—night or day.” Pressing it in Marinell’s hand, Lucy felt the warmth of the girl’s skin, the life that pulsed beneath it. *God, help me save this one.* “We’d like Saving Grace to be your home, Marinell.” She smiled into the girl’s weary eyes. “And we’d like to be your family.”

“Do you know how many people have said that to me?” Marinell’s chin lifted in challenge. “I need someone who’s gonna come through for once. I don’t want this to be just another place that lets me down.”

Morgan smiled. “Then I’ve brought you to the right place.” Lucy listened to her best friend’s words and willed herself not to burst into tears. “I promise, Lucy won’t let you down.”

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