

Just Between You and Me

A NOVEL ABOUT LOSING FEAR
AND FINDING GOD

JENNY B. JONES



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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To my sweet, sassy niece, Katie Beth.
May you walk boldly and fearlessly for Christ
all your days. Your giggly, squealy joy for life
makes me smile. I love you, curly girl.
Always remember . . . I'm your favorite aunt.



*Though the mountains move and the hills shake,
my love will not be removed from you.*

—ISAIAH 54: 10

Prologue

To some women, fear is a man walking out the front door and never coming back. To others, it's looking at that black dress in the back of your closet and knowing—without a divine miracle or the return of the corset—you'll never be a size six again.

For me, in this moment right now, it's a Parisian river calm enough to lull a baby to sleep. And yet my palms are so slick with sweat, I can hardly maintain my grip on the boat rail. My heart beats violently in my chest and I haven't heard a word that's been said in the last hour.

"Here we go. Step off nice and easy." Pierre, our guide, assists the captain by leaping onto the dock and tying the small vessel in place.

The crew of *Passport to the World* climbs out one by one. I go last, waiting for the black spots to subside as I stand and fight with gravity's pull on my wobbly knees.

"You did great, Maggie." Carley, my friend and producer, pats me on the back as I focus on everything but the water. Unlike the rest of my coworkers, she's the only one who doesn't ignore the fact that I turn into a psychotic mess anytime I have to shoot a location involving water. Sometimes I can get an intern or another cinematographer to cover for me, but I have to pick those battles. And the lazy Seine is not worth calling in a sub.

"You need therapy," Carley says.

"I need a chocolate éclair."

She shields her eyes from the noonday sun and hands me a Dasani from her bag. "Let's get some more footage at that café by the Champs-Élysées. I'm considering of coming to Paris for my honeymoon. What do you think?"

My job as cinematographer for the travel show can be as glamorous as the Eiffel Tower at sunset or as unattractive as a night in a leaky hut in Cambodia. Last year we became the number one show on Travel TV, picked up a few awards, and got moved to a killer time slot. I should be on top of the world—thrilled with life. But somehow lately I'm not.

My pocket buzzes, and I reach in and pull out my phone. My dad. Calling again. And two messages from John, my boyfriend. Are men born with a guidebook on how to be a nuisance? I could travel to the ends of the earth and some man would find me and expect some big sacrifice from me. Like a text. Or a date. Or a returned call. But I'm a busy person! I have things to do. Cities of the world to film. A week-old *People* magazine to read. And a candy bar in my bag that has been calling my name for the past two hours.

Getting out of the rented sedan, I stretch my arms, then reach for my camera.

"I want to talk to the café owner," Carley says. "Will you translate again?"

"Sure." We walk across the busy street and into the quaint restaurant. "Where's the owner?" I ask a waiter in French, reminding him who we are and why we're here.

He jerks his head toward the back. "He's taking a cigarette break." The slim man stares at his full tables, his brows furrowing as someone shouts out a drink order.

"If it's okay, I'll get him." I shoo the waiter away. "Don't worry about us."

I weave through the diners and back into the bustling kitchen, throwing up a hand in greeting to the staff. "*Bonjour!*" My eyes land on a partially opened back door, and I slip through it, blinking at the sun.

Beside me a Dumpster rumbles, and I gasp as I see two little legs sticking out, wiggling with the effort of digging.

"Hey," I say automatically, then call out a greeting in French. "*Salut!*" I walk up to the Dumpster and tug on a dirty shoe.

A head pops up, and I'm face-to-face with a small boy, face smudged with grime, fear making his eyes as round as dessert plates. He flings from the trash like a little gymnast, his feet landing on the ground.

I hold out my hand. "*Attends!*" Wait!

Without a backward glance, he takes off in a sprint, running as fast as his little legs will carry him, dropping food behind like crumbs on a trail.

I sling my camera over my shoulder and race to the edge of the building, my lens trained on the slender blur. "Wait, please!" I shout to him in two different languages, but he just keeps moving.

"Beggars."

I whirl around and find the restaurant owner behind me. "Did you know him?"

He gestures toward the direction the boy ran. "What is there to know of one such as him? He is a thief and a public nuisance."

My heart twists in my chest. "But he's so young. So thin." I step back toward the restaurant. "Obviously he was hungry."

The owner laughs, his belly making his shirt dance. "I have a business to run. I cannot feed every stray dog that shows up here."

My breath catches with the insult, but I bite my tongue,

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knowing Carley would throw me out like a stale croissant if I made him mad and ruined her interview. "Does he live nearby?"

"Who cares?" He slams the lid down on his Dumpster and flings open the café door. He steps back inside, leaving an odor of cigarettes.

Who cares? Sometimes I ask myself that very same question. Could I have helped that little boy if he hadn't run away?

For a moment I stand there, the yellow sun beating down on my red head. Who am I to help anyone anyway? I'm a girl with a camera and a suitcase. Nothing much more to give.

Because I've seen the world.

But sometimes I wonder . . . has it ever seen me?

Chapter One

I sit at my dining room table and swirl linguini noodles around my fork. Unease has me on high alert as John relights a reluctant candle.

"When are you going to fix this place up?" He sets the lighter down and smiles with the confidence of a man who knows he makes a pretty picture. "We should've gone to my apartment."

"But I haven't been home in weeks." I glance about the dining and living room area. Okay, so I meant to buy some prints to hang here and there. But one day you're looking at art, and the next thing you know a few years have gone by, and your walls are just as bare as the wood floor. "It's not like I'm here much anyway," I say around a bite of bread. "But thanks for cooking me dinner." I blot my mouth with my napkin and wonder at the strange gleam in John's eye.

"Maggie, do you know what tonight is?" He grabs my hand, and I watch his large fingers cover mine, making them disappear.

I untie the scarf at my neck, a treasure I carried with me from my last trip to Ecuador, purchased from a street peddler who couldn't have been older than eight or nine. I reach for my goblet of ice water and tip it back.

"Tonight is our five-month anniversary." John keeps talking. Actually, I don't know that *boyfriend* would be the right label for him. More like frequent date when I'm in town.

John's hand strokes across mine, and my stomach does a little flip. Not the good kind that makes you want to break out in a show tune. More like the sort of quivering that happens when you've swallowed one too many bites of questionable sushi.

I tune back into the romantic scene unfolding before me and plaster on a smile. The candlelight illuminates the dark center of John's eyes. "I want you to know how special you've become to me," he says.

There's a feeling in the air, and I don't like it. A feeling that says, *Things are about to get messy and out of control*. Messy I can handle. The contents of my purse are a testimonial to that. But this relationship business? Let's just say I'm a better cinematographer than I am a girlfriend.

I clear my throat and interrupt him just as he appears to be on the verge of a sonnet. "John, I, um, was wondering how your day went."

He blinks. "Did you hear a word I said?"

I bat my heavy eyelids. "I'm really tired. We filmed way into the morning, and then I was on a plane for twelve hours."

Oh, there goes that compassionate look. The one that promises to care for me in my every moment of jet lag, sleep deprivation, and PMS. You'd think I'd be grateful to have found that. I know I should be.

"I think we should talk about our relationship, Maggie. What our next step is."

"I have an interview with the National Geographic channel."

His face freezes. "What?"

"Even Carley doesn't know. It's very hush-hush." I nod and study the ice cubes in my glass. "It's in a couple of weeks. They just called today."

"Would this job involve more travel?"

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Lately John has been hinting that I try to stick closer to home more. Every time he brings it up, I get these little itchy hives on my neck. "It's the chance of a lifetime. I'd be the producer of one of their TV shows." I see his eyes light up at that. So why don't I feel more excited? I should be oozing with enthusiasm. It's like when I got saved last year, a lot of things changed for me. Including my attitude about my career. And I have no idea what to do with this feeling of ennui I now wake up with every morning. "And it would get me that much closer to the people who could make my documentary a reality."

He leans back and rests his elbows on the chair arms. "You've had five rejections on your documentary proposals. Let it go."

"Maybe." And—just like the value of ESPN and foreign sports cars—here is yet another area in which we will never agree. I've approached a few companies about backing this idea I have for a series of documentaries. Everyone has said no. Even John thinks it's silly.

"People have done plenty of films about underprivileged children." John reaches for my hand again. "You know I think you're gifted at what you do, but budgets are tight out there for projects, and they're not going to fund something that's been done a hundred times."

I don't want him to be right. But he probably is.

His smile is warm, filled with care. "You need to learn the difference between work and a hobby."

I grip the stem of my water glass. "You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Talking to me like I'm a child."

"I just want the best for you."

John works as an attorney for our network. Sometimes I think he finds my career behind the camera a little beneath me. Or him.

"Maggie, tonight is a very special night."

Uh-oh. Here come the dreamy eyes again.

"I care so much about you. And recently I've realized those feelings have grown into something more. I'm crazy about your laugh, your smile, your sense of adventure. I want to tell you that I—"

"Boy, am I tired." I like how John and I are a casual couple—we go out when I'm off the road. We talk; we text; we e-mail. We do pad thai and a movie. We do *not* do the L-word. "Maybe we should skip dessert and call it a night."

He leans forward, his face too close to mine at this small table. He runs the back of his fingers across my cheek and down my jaw line. "Maggie, I love—"

Ring! Ring!

"Oh, sorry." *Yes!* "Gotta take this." John's face crumbles into a mask of frustration as I answer my phone without even checking the display. Whoever it is, I owe them a *big* one. "Hello?"

"Maggie?"

My heart plunges like a runaway elevator. "Dad?"

"I've been calling you for weeks. Didn't you get any of my messages?"

"I've been out of the country." I wince at my own tone, but it's Dad, after all. The man who only contacts me twice a year, and usually it's just to tell me some distant old relative has gone to the great beyond. Heaven forbid he get crazy and call because he wants to see how I am. Or acknowledge a birthday.

"What is it?" John whispers, and I hold up a finger to wait.

"Maggie, I don't know how to ask you this, so I'm just going to come right out and say it. I . . . I need you to come home."

I snort into the phone. "Right." Maybe when the planet starts rotating the other direction. "I was just there a few Christmases ago."

"That was five years ago."

"Oh." Seems like only yesterday to me.

"Your sister showed up last month . . . and we need help."

"I'm sorry. I can't come see you guys right now. The show is wrapping up for the season, and I have to catch a plane in four days."

"Look, you know I wouldn't ask you if I had anywhere else to turn. Last week I had to go back to the plant to work."

"Why would you go back?" Dad retired five years ago after giving his life to the local tire factory. It got more of him than his family ever did.

"I don't have time to get into that now."

"Where's Allison? Is she in trouble?" My quirks are more socially acceptable, but my younger sister's? Not so much. There's no telling what she's done this time.

"Gone. She's just gone, okay? The point is I . . . Can't you just visit for a few days?" His tone snaps like a rubber band.

It occurs to me that this is the longest conversation I've had with my father my entire life. I mean, he's using real sentences and everything. "Dad, if you or Allison need money, I'll gladly send some. I can have it wired tomorrow. But I can't just up and leave. I have to fly out to Taiwan next week to tape, so I can't simply abandon work."

"I don't need your money!" he growls. "I need . . . help." Silence crackles on the phone. "I need help, Maggie. Please."

I close my eyes at the plaintive tone. Never have I heard my dad like this. It scares me almost as much as the idea of going back home to Ivy, Texas. Though I don't owe this man anything, I feel the familiar twinges of guilt.

I think of my sister, three years younger than me, and at the age of twenty-seven, she has yet to grow up. When I left home after

graduation, I pretty much never looked back. And if I have any regrets, it's that I left Allison to be raised by a heartless grump who was only home long enough to criticize. At least I had Mom until I was sixteen. By the time Allison was thirteen, she only had me and Dad . . . and then I left. I took off with a suitcase in one hand and guilt for leaving my little sister in the other.

"It's just not doable, Dad. I have too much going on right now. I'm sorry."

"This is for Allison."

My sister—my Achilles' heel.

"Think what you want about me, Maggie, but she's never needed you more. In fact . . . I think you're the only one who can save her this time. Do it for your sister."

I close my eyes against the inevitable. "I'll be on the first flight out tomorrow."

An hour later, with the excuse of fatigue and a need to pack, I escort John to the door.

"How long are you going to be gone?" His face radiates such care, I find myself drawn into his hug.

"Three days. Then I'll fly out to the show location."

"I'll miss you."

I smile at his predictable statement. Of course he will.

He pulls back and cups my face in his hands. "I wanted tonight to be perfect. I needed to tell you that I—"

"John . . . I think we should use this time apart to really think about our relationship."

"I think about it all the time."

And here's another one of our problems: I don't. "I believe you and I are at two different places here. Two different speeds."

He takes my hand, kisses it. "You're tired. I'll let you pack."

"No, I'm serious."

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“Call me if you need me.” He presses his lips to my forehead.
“Talk to you soon.”

I shut myself in and take comfort in the click of the locks . . .
and slide to the floor.

Me, scared?

I’ve counted snakes in the rice fields of Cambodia. Eaten things
that crawled down my throat in Botswana. In the Amazon, I dodged
mosquitos as large as birds.

But I, Maggie Montgomery, world traveler, have never been
anywhere quite as frightening as home.