



"My niece Jennifer is coming," Lucinda said, ignoring the gasps of her family.

ALL BRIDGEPORT knew that Lucinda Bales had a fluffy lavender hairdo. What they didn't know was that she had a mind to match. But after living three months in Bridgeport without seeing any signs of Lucinda's familiar fantasies, her husband and children began to hope that her free-wheeling imagination had been buried back in Chicago and the long-ago past.

What Matt and Barby and Tim didn't realize was that for the past three months Lucinda's imagination had been channeled into settling the house. Now, having rearranged the furniture to her final satisfaction, she turned inevitably to the rearranging of facts.

It was a May Saturday in the supermarket when the awful truth burst upon them that she was launched on one of her inventive sprees. Myrtle Hendricks, president of Lucinda's book club, precipitated matters by calling from halfway down the meat counter, "Lucinda, I have wonderful news for you! My cleaning woman will have Tuesdays free beginning in June.

You're still looking for someone to help you out, aren't you?"

"I was," Lucinda called back, "but now I couldn't use her till Fall."

"Oh, are you going away for the Summer?" Myrtle's voice carried beautifully over the heads of seven other customers.

"No, but my niece Jennifer is coming to visit for several months," Lucinda ignored the three-way gasp from the rest of her family.

"All the more reason you'll need help," Myrtle called.

"Well, Jennifer's the kind who likes to help. And I think it's best to keep her occupied—so she won't brood."

Myrtle, her son Will, and several customers looked interested. "Brood?" Myrtle prompted.

Lucinda hesitated only a fraction of a minute before she said, "While her husband's overseas. Naval reserve, you know. Three-month cruise."

When Myrtle had moved on, Lucinda's family converged on her. "Lucinda!" said Matt. "Mother!" said the children.

"You know we're going to stay in Aunt Martha's cottage at the lake while she goes to Hawaii."

"Look," said Lucinda. "I know we're going to the cottage, and you know it, but does every stranger in this store have to know our house will be empty all Summer? Why, it's practically inviting burglars to break in!"

Matt shook his head in despair. "And Jennifer isn't even married!"

The next week they heard from Aunt Martha that she had broken her ankle and wouldn't be lending them the cottage after all.

Lucinda promptly forgot all about having invented a nonexistent husband for Jennifer, and it was therefore quite a shock when, during a neighborhood party, Sally Martin asked, "When does your niece's husband leave on his Naval Reserve cruise?"

Lucinda blinked and found herself saying, "July first."

"Has she been married long?"

"She isn't. I mean—they're being married in June as soon as school's

out. She's a grade-school teacher."

"A bride!" Sally cried. "We'll have to entertain for her."

Lucinda was surrounded by interested faces. "But you mustn't," she protested. "It isn't necessary."

"You don't know Bridgeport," Sally said. "This is the most excitement we've had in weeks."

"But Matt," Lucinda wailed later, "how was I to know Myrtle would tell anyone? How was I to know everyone would get so interested?"

"I'm interested myself in how you're going to get out of this," Matt said.

It was the next week, while Lucinda was entertaining the book club, that the special-delivery letter arrived. "Good heavens," she gasped. "Jennifer's coming to visit us!"

"But of course," Sally said. "You told us all about it."

"But I mean now," Lucinda said. "Day after tomorrow!"

There was an excited buzz. "But the wedding! What about the wedding?"

Yes, the wedding, she thought, fran-

# Lucinda of the lively imagination

by Marnie Ellingson

tically skimming the rest of the letter. Jennifer had had pneumonia and was too weak to finish out the term. Mr. Clifford, the ogre who was principal of her school, lectured her on the weakness of the modern pampered generation and told her he could get along without her permanently. Jennifer had nowhere else to turn till she was well.

Lucinda looked up into 36 expectant eyes. She had to say something. "Jennifer's had a terrible shock," she told them. "She had a quarrel with—ah—Clifford, and he eloped—with a night-club singer. Poor Jennifer's practically prostrate from the shock."

The book club agreed unanimously that Bridgeport must rally 'round and help her forget.

JENNIFER ARRIVED, weak and pale, but when she was finally allowed out of bed Sally Martin and other neighbors came to call, carefully omitting all mention of weddings, night-club singers, and the U. S. Navy.

Matt's view of the situation was gloomy. "What do you think Jennifer's going to say when she finds out she's been jilted by a man who doesn't even exist? That will be a shock!"

"Now, Matt, who would be tactless enough to mention it to the poor child?"

"Poor child!" Matt stared at her. "Mark my word, Lucinda, someday you'll go too far."

When Jennifer had been with them three weeks, Will Hendricks approached Lucinda in front of the bank. Twisting his hat nervously, he said, "Mrs. Bales, I don't go out much, but—"

"Yes?" Lucinda prompted.

He swallowed. "I mean, when I was in law school I had a job nights. So I don't know much about giving a girl a gay evening, but under the circumstances I thought, well, if your niece would have dinner with me, it might take her mind off—well, you know."

Lucinda gave him a brilliant smile. "How thoughtful, Will."

"I saw her sitting on the porch one night," Will said. "How any man could treat her so—"

"I wouldn't mention it to her if I were you," Lucinda said hastily.

Will looked shocked. "Certainly not. It was after her second date with Will that Jennifer came to her aunt's

room with a puzzled expression. "Aunt Lucinda, tell me truthfully—is Will Hendricks quite—all right?"

Lucinda put down her comb. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Sometimes he says things that make no sense, and then he apologizes for 'reminding' me—whatever that means."

"Well, now," Lucinda began uncomfortably.

"Then today I saw him downtown and mentioned that I was taking Barby and Tim to see 'Away All Boats' tonight. Will actually looked shocked. 'You're not going to torture yourself that way,' he said. 'I'm taking you to the country-club dance tonight.' I reminded him he's supposed to be busy preparing a big case, but he insisted. I promised I'd go, but it's the last time. He's awfully attractive, but honestly, I think there's something very odd about him."

"I hadn't meant to tell you," Lucinda said, "but Will has a secret sorrow!" Jennifer, her eyes wide, sank down on the bed.

"He was engaged to a wealthy girl," Lucinda invented. "Only she didn't want Will to practice law. She just wanted to have fun on her father's money. She made terrible scenes. Naturally Will broke away, but he's been unstrung ever since."

"What a sensitive, fine person," Jennifer cried, "giving up all that money for a dingy little office—putting honor first! That takes character."

When Will saw Jennifer in her frothy white evening dress he looked worried. "You're so fragile," he told her. "I hope I don't step all over your feet."

"Don't you know," Jennifer said, "that some girls prefer a serious-minded man who spends more time thinking about his career than dancing!"

Lucinda never eavesdropped, but one August night when Will brought Jennifer home after a date their voices drifted in her open window, and she couldn't help overhearing.

"Jennifer," Will was saying. "I'll never mention this again, but I must know—about Clifford—do you still have regrets?"

"About him?" Jennifer sounded surprised. "Certainly not. He always made me miserable, but I didn't realize how miserable till it was all over."

"Darling!" Will's voice came fervently. There followed a long silence during which Lucinda shut the window.

JENNIFER AND WILL looked radiant driving away in the beribboned car. When the last crumb of wedding cake had been erased from the rug, Lucinda sank gratefully onto the davenport.

"It was a lovely wedding, wasn't it?" Her eyes were misty.

"They make a good-looking couple," Matt said. "And I hope you've learned a lesson. It was sheer luck that your wild tales about Jennifer didn't keep them apart. You should be so grateful that you'll promise never to invent another story."

"All right," she sighed. "If it means so much to you all, I promise I'll stick to the exact truth from now on—no matter what. Oh, by the way, a neighbor of Myrtle's brought her a big batch of frogs' legs from a camping trip. She's invited us for dinner tomorrow."

"Aww, Mom," Tim burst out. "You aren't going to make us go! You know I hate frogs' legs."

Barby turned pale. "The thought of them makes me deathly ill."

Lucinda shook her head. "We'll either have to eat them, or insult her by telling her we can't stand them. Honesty is my new policy."

Just then the phone rang. It was Myrtle. "Mother, please," Barby said desperately. "Couldn't you invent an excuse? Just this once?"

"Here," Matt thrust the receiver at her. "You can think of something."

She allowed herself one delicious moment while they all looked at her anxiously. "If you really want me to."

"Myrtle," she said, "I know this sounds sentimental, but the children used to have pet frogs—Charlemagne and Ingrid. They were really part of the family, and we'd feel like cannibals if we so much as touched a frog's leg."

As she warmed to her subject her eyes took on that dreamy look her family knew so well. Matt, Barby, and Tim listened in reluctant awe, then all kissed her on the cheek and tiptoed out respectfully.

"Yes, very intelligent," Lucinda was saying. "Take Ingrid for example. She loved classical music and every Saturday during the opera broadcast..."

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