A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Your Wedding

Cindy K. Green
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His dark hair ruffled in the billowing wind with a single lock falling forward on his forehead. For the first time in a long time, Kari forgot about her heartache. A sudden shiver skittered down her back. She wasn’t sure if it was caused by her soaked condition or the man who somehow sent her senses spinning.

She pushed her wet tawny hair back from her face before accepting her waterlogged book from him. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said after releasing the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “It’s just this rain… and I’m late.” Her voice wavered. “I can’t seem to find the place I’m supposed to be. I’m in a wedding this afternoon.” She tried to hide how awkward and strange she felt standing a few inches away from a stranger.

He smiled teasingly as he looked over her outfit of Capri pants and tennis shoes. She’d never seen such an authentic smile. It was as if it started in his eyes and traveled down to his genial mouth. “And that’s what you’re wearing?” he asked as his eyes returned to her own.

“No, of course not. I…” She shivered again.

“Well, maybe I can help you out with directions.”

She replied with the name of the church and he provided her with yet another devastating smile. “Sure I know the place. You passed it at the beginning of this block. Just turn down the street and you’ll see it. If you don’t mind, I could come along with you. It’s on my way.”

“No need and I’m really in a hurry. Thanks.” She started to head off when he stopped her, causing her to jump at the gentle touch of his hand on her arm.

“Here take my umbrella,” he offered.

She faced him again, taking the handle of the umbrella. “Are you sure? You’ll get soaked. I don’t want to impose and I won’t even know where to return it.”

“Consider it a gift then. And who knows, we just might bump into each other again sometime.”

“Yes, but hopefully it will be less jarring in the future,” she said with the hint of a smile on her lips, trying to be just as witty.

He tipped his head close to hers. “I doubt that.”

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication
This book is dedicated to my sister Kari who was the inspiration for this story. Thank you for being there when I need to prattle on about my stories and being just as excited as I at the news that “Funny Thing” was going to be published. Remember that God always has a plan for our lives, and He will lead us to all that He has in store for us.

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Chapter One

Black, ominous clouds littered the afternoon sky as Kari Montgomery emerged from the train station with her suitcase in one hand and a book in the other. As she stood waiting beside a low, rounded curb, a few startling drops of rain fell onto her nose. Shaking her head, she realized here was yet another reason why she shouldn’t have agreed to be in this wedding. Though she loved her cousin and would never take away one bit of her happiness, she still felt her stomach clench inside at the mere thought of attending any wedding. It only reminded her of her own failed engagement.

Lightning flashed up in the sky and a minute later the low rumble of thunder echoed in the distance. Kari glanced up at the summer storm brewing overhead. Why would anyone want to get married in August? If only I hadn’t had that unscheduled staff meeting last night, I could have missed all this. Lord, help me make it through this day.

After jumping into the next available taxi, she gave the address of the church. Driving through mid-town traffic, anxiety seized her again. When her cousin Emily announced her engagement, Kari was as happy as could be for her. But as the wedding date neared, she began to shrink away from being involved in the wedding plans, citing work as her main excuse. It was just too painful. Closing her eyes, she moved a hand through her drooping bangs as another pain knotted deep down inside her stomach.

Horns honked around her as they neared her destination. Glancing out the window, she noticed they were stopped in a gridlock of traffic. With the ceremony scheduled to begin in one hour, she had to act quickly.

“How far away are we from the church?” she asked the driver.

“How blocks up. You can’t miss it,” he replied in a thick accent.

“Thanks,” she said as she paid the man and closed the door.

The rainstorm had begun as she jogged to the nearest storefront overhang to avoid the deluge. Colorful lightning crackled almost on top of her as the thunder crashed overhead again. Entering into the mess of rain, she pulled her light jacket tightly around herself, walking in quick determined strides. Several minutes later and only a few feet further down the street, she had become completely drenched. Even though it was a hot summer day, chills still coursed through her, making her miserable. There was nothing worse than being wet. This was the reason she avoided water rides at amusement parks.

Walking through the pouring rain with her head tilted toward the sidewalk, she wasn’t looking beyond her own two feet when she smacked hard into something and started to fall backwards. With her arms flailing out hoping to grasp onto something, her belongings flew into the storm. Her heart jolted inside her chest as she moved closer and closer to the ground.

Before hitting the pavement, a hand came out of nowhere, wrapping around her left wrist and pulling her into an upright position. Before she knew what was happening, her savior hoisted her closer to him, shielding her from the rain under his umbrella. She was so close to him, she could feel his heat. Her eyes clung to his humorous, kindly mouth as he gave her an irresistible grin she found impossible not to return. Her mind clouded over as her heart continued to beat rapidly. It was almost as if she was moving in slow motion and for the moment had forgotten where she was or what she was doing.

This was hardly the time to stop and stare with a torrent of rain storming around them and time ticking away until she was to walk down the aisle as maid of honor.

“In a hurry, aren’t you,” he said with a trace of laughter. The timbre of his voice was friendly and soothing. It reminded her of how she felt on rainy afternoons while curled up in her mother’s afghan, reading a book in front of a fire.

She withdrew her hand quickly as a new and unexpected warmth rushed through her. He bent down to pick up her suitcase and book from a puddle on the ground. After handing the suitcase back to her, he glanced down at the cover of the book, Pride and Prejudice, her favorite novel.

A moment later intelligent yet humorous blue eyes focused back on her. His dark hair ruffled in the billowing wind with a single lock falling forward on his forehead. For the first time in a long time, Kari forgot about her heartache. A sudden shiver skittered down her back. She wasn’t sure if it was caused by her soaked condition or the man who somehow sent her senses spinning.

She pushed her wet tawny hair back from her face before accepting her waterlogged book from him. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said after releasing the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “It’s just this rain… and I’m late.” Her voice wavered. “I can’t seem to find the place I’m supposed to be. I’m in a wedding this afternoon.” She tried to hide how awkward and strange she felt standing a few inches away from a stranger.
He smiled teasingly as he looked over her outfit of Capri pants and tennis shoes. She’d never seen such an authentic smile. It was as if it started in his eyes and traveled down to his genial mouth. “And that’s what you’re wearing?” he asked as his eyes returned to her own.

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“Consider it a gift then. And who knows, we just might bump into each other again sometime.”

“Yes, but hopefully it will be less jarring in the future,” she said with the hint of a smile on her lips, trying to be just as witty.

He tipped his head close to hers. “I doubt that.” This time he replied in a smooth, deep tone, the playfulness gone from his eyes.

Though feeling a tingly sensation at the back of her neck, Kari turned from him, wondering what he had meant exactly. Not having the time to truly think about it, she headed swiftly down the street and turned the corner just as instructed. There she saw the quaint almost picturesque white-steepled church nestled in the heart of the city. The sign read, “Grace Community Church.”

Facing the building, Kari realized when she stepped inside its dry halls, the bride, her cousin, would be all over her with worry and wondering where she had been. She seriously considered running back to the train station and just forgetting it all. But she knew she couldn’t. Emily was her dearest friend even if she was a relative. Mounting the stairs, she knew she wanted to see her get married and be a part of this day.

“Kari, where have you been,” called Emily from a seated position. She looked back at Kari through a mirror in the choir room, her golden hair falling in long curls around her head.

“I’m so sorry, Em. Something came up at work so I missed my train and then I got caught in the rain on the way here.”

“You’re soaked.”

“Don’t I know it.” She did her best to smile at her.

“But you have an umbrella.” Emily stared at the dripping umbrella still in Kari’s hand.

Kari stared at the umbrella, too. She wanted to laugh and tell Emily about the whole embarrassing encounter, but now wasn’t the time. “It’s nothing to be worrying about right now. I’m going to get dressed and then you are going to have the best wedding ever.” She walked behind her cousin, admiring how beautiful she looked in her pristine gown of white. She felt a quiver of pride in her heart, remembering all the times she and Emily had shared visions of their future weddings when they were girls.

“Oh, Kari, I’ve been on tenterhooks all day and wishing you were here.” Rising from her chair, Emily turned and faced her disheveled friend. “How do I look?” she asked as she tilted her left brow with uncertainty.

Kari’s heart filled with pride again as she stared at her cousin. She really was happy for her. “You are the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. John is just going to want to scoop you up and run away with you.”

“How do you think I’ll be a good wife?” Her petite, gloved hands lay clenched at her sides while her eyes grew large and bright.

“The very best and John will be the perfect husband.” Her words were calm and even as she hoped her sentiment was the comfort her nervous cousin needed.

Emily took a step closer and grabbed onto Kari’s hand. “Thanks.” She sighed deeply. “I think I might be able to make it through this now that you’re here.”

“I’m glad, and now I better get ready.”

Thirty minutes later, the momentous moment arrived. After dressing and trying to do something with her sopping wet hair, Kari stood lined up in the church vestibule with the other bridesmaids, dressed in their matching lilac gowns.

When the doors opened, Kari walked serenely down the aisle to her place on the platform. But just as she neared the end of the aisle, she turned her eyes forward to see the pastor who was to perform the ceremony standing behind the altar in front of her. His eyes veered over in her direction while an easy smile played at the corners of his mouth. Nervously, she moistened her dry lips before she could manage a small, uncertain smile,
feeling her cheeks beginning to burn with color because the pastor in question had been the one who had rescued her in the rain only moments before.

Accompanied by her groomsman, Kari stepped into the church’s overflowing reception hall, heading for her seat among a glittering arrangement of lights and flowers. The room echoed with laughter and she was inundated by the clinking of crystal and china. Standing at the door behind her, she observed the newly married and blissfully happy Mr. and Mrs. John Richards.

Kari took in a quick breath as she crossed the room and put on the pretense of being happy. All it did was remind her that another wedding, which should have taken place around this time, would never take place. Over the past months, she’d been able to keep those feelings in check, but this wedding seemed to drudge up all the past hurt. Trying to put that aside, she made an effort to enjoy her cousin’s wedding. It was Emily’s day today.

Throughout the introduction of the bride and groom and the toast, Kari grew restless. Observing everyone actively indulging in dinner and conversation, she deserted her escort who sat busily enjoying his meal. She needed some peace and quiet. She just might explode if she couldn’t find some silence. The chatter around the room was like nails on a chalkboard to her nerves. Upon departing her seat, she spotted her aunt, Patty Burke, mother of the perfect bride. As she reached the back of the room, it became clear there was no recourse. She had to speak with her aunt.

“Kari, where are you headed off to? Hasn’t this evening just been wonderful,” began Patty. “The flowers were perfect, the music, the food, everything.” Her aunt contained a joyfulness that was usually infectious, but Kari was unable to respond in turn. Patty didn’t even seem to detect her troubled demeanor.

“Yes, Aunt Patty, it has been a terrific wedding. I’m sure Emily and John are as pleased as can be by the results,” Kari answered evenly, ending with a closed mouth smile.

“Everyone here at the church has been so supportive of Emily, even though we’ve only been attending here for the past four months.”

“You’ve definitely been blessed with a wonderful church family since moving into the city.”

“And where is your escort, Kari?” asked Patty, finally taking in a real view of her.

“Brian?” She glanced in the direction of her table. “Oh, I’m sure he’s too busy eating to even notice I’ve left.”

As Patty started to speak again, her eyes picked up on something behind Kari. “Pastor,” Patty called. “I really wanted to say thank you for retrieving the rings before the ceremony. I can’t believe the best man left them at home.”

The pastor eyed Kari intently with a small smile on his lips and a twinkle in his blue eyes.

“And Kari this is Randolph Steele, the youth pastor here at the church. He also went to college with Emily and John.”

With that same smile still on his face, Randolph Steele put out his hand to Kari. “Well, now, Mrs. Burke, it is nice to finally meet your famous Kari Montgomery.”

Kari met the smile and the offered hand with a courtesy smile of her own. With his stunning eyes staring at her and that impeccable smile on his lips, she felt her embarrassment welling up again. If only she could close her eyes and find herself safe at home.

“Swallowing hard she tried to move past her humiliation. “I’m famous, am I?”

“You know me, Kari. I’m always building you up to everyone,” said Patty to her motherless niece. “My how much you look like my sister today.” She smiled at Kari wistfully. “Well, they are going to cut the cake soon and I need to get things going. I’ll see you later, Kari. You too, Pastor Randy. Talk with Kari. She needs
some encouragement after her most unfortunate...well, her loss.” Aunt Patty crisply cut her way through the dense crowd and toward the corner of the room where there waited an enormous three-tiered cake sprinkled with crimson rose petals.

Kari stood beside Randy Steele, vulnerability and embarrassment coursing through her after Patty’s final remark. She bit down on her lower lip and forced her eyes to dart around the room. But his eyes were so compelling, magnetic, forcing her to look back.

Steele. They must mean his eyes. The pastor had the most stunning steel blue eyes she’d ever seen. Viewing them under bright light instead of through gushing rain brought out their true sheen. Looking into those eyes unnerved her even more now because he was a man of God and not just someone she’d met on the street. Except, that was how she’d met him.

They stood together quietly for a moment only occasionally snatching glimpses of each other. Randy Steele appeared to be no more than thirty. He stood tall and massive beside her with his dark hair gleaming under the lights, giving it a bluish luster. Every once in a while, they would share a glance and he would smile at her.

While they stood there, several women walked by and said hi to him or waved. He smiled back affably. The sincerity she had sensed in his smile out in the rain continued with each encounter. As the women walked on, Kari could feel their curiosity about her as many of them cast glances her direction with furrowed brows.

She considered abandoning her position next to the unknown pastor, but she felt somehow glued to her spot as if he radiated some kind of magnetism she couldn’t fight. When the silence between them reached the point of being unbearable, Randy finally spoke.

“I don’t know why, but you look so familiar.” There was a faint glint of humor in his eyes as he crossed his arms and tilted his head away from her.

“Oh, you too. It’s so funny,” continued Kari with the joke, glad he had decided not to approach the subject of “her loss.”

“I’m having a sinking feeling there was rain involved,” he continued, crinkling his eyes.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I left you without your umbrella. I have it. I’ll go get it.”

He smiled, sending her pulse racing. “Don’t worry about it. You can give it to me later. I was hoping I’d have a chance to speak with you this evening. I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea about me.”

“The wrong idea?” Her embarrassment melted away as his words brought out her playful side. “You mean that you didn’t reveal you knew exactly whose wedding I was going to and you would indeed be seeing me soon.”

His mouth curved up into a delicious smile without even the hint of remorse.

“Well, I guess since you said ‘consider it a gift,’ I shouldn’t feel guilty about keeping your umbrella,” continued Kari.

“That’s just it.”

He smiled at her again. The energy contained in that smile produced goose bumps moving up and down her neck.

“Yes, well...um it was inappropriate and frankly somewhat unforgivable.” She feigned a harsh look.

“Great idea. Come outside with me.” He stepped even closer to her and tilted his head upwards as if daring her. “It turned into a wonderful night now that the rain stopped. The church has a nice open area between the main building and my residence.”

Her heart beat unnaturally in her chest as she contemplated complying. Instead, she replied to his offer with a question. “Do you live here on the grounds?”

“Yes, well...um it was inappropriate and frankly somewhat unforgivable.” She feigned a harsh look.

“Great idea. Come outside with me.” He stepped even closer to her and tilted his head upwards as if daring her. “It turned into a wonderful night now that the rain stopped. The church has a nice open area between the main building and my residence.”

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“Yes. They have a small house here for me as part of my salary. My parents hate that I live in it. They don’t understand why I do when I can afford a place of my own.”

“So, why do you live in the house then?”

“Well, it’s supposed to be for the head pastor, but when he and his wife had their first child, they bought a bigger house outside the city. When I came on staff, the house was offered to me. So, now I’m close to the church and available 24/7. It’s actually a cute house, and Alice likes it.”

Who was this Alice—a friend, a girlfriend, a sister...certainly not his wife. She peeked at his left-hand—no ring. Maybe he’s engaged.

“I’ll give you a personal tour of the grounds,” he said in a grandiose manner just like something out of a
Jane Austen novel.

Kari surveyed him for a long second, observing how well he filled his suit coat. After staring into his wonderful steel blue eyes again, she rolled her shoulders back and raised her eyebrows mischievously. Her caution with him had completely dissipated, and she was actually having a good time. “No. I don’t think so, Pastor. I don’t know if I can trust you to behave.” She felt a ripple of excitement shoot through her as she waited to see how he would react to her lighthearted manner.

“Oh, well, I promise to be on my best behavior. I actually have been …”

“Kari, here you are,” a voice from behind interrupted him. Startled, Kari and Randy turned toward the voice. “Everyone is looking for you. They want to take pictures by the cake.”

“Hi, Brian,” Kari acknowledged her escort. She turned back to the inexplicable pastor. “Well, it was a…a pleasure meeting you.”

“I assure you, the pleasure was all mine. I look forward to the next time we… run into each other.” He locked his eyes onto hers once more and they exchanged muted simultaneous smiles.

With her hand lying in the crook of Brian’s arm, Kari walked away but not before looking back at Randy Steele once more before heading to the cake. He winked at her as she moved away from him. She smiled back, a chuckle moving up inside her throat.

What was it about him that made her feel so at ease, enabling her to put aside all her previous anxiety attached to the wedding? He was nothing like Geoffrey, her previous fiancé. No, this man had the sense of humor Geoffrey completely lacked and a sincerity Geoffrey wasn’t even capable of. Still, Kari had loved him and now he was gone. All that remained were the wounds and the grief left in his wake. Meeting Randy Steele had momentarily taken away all those miserable feelings and replaced them with… amusement, she reflected.

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Chapter Two

“Randolph Patrick Steele, what have you done now?”

The harsh accusation surprised Randy as he sat in his office with his Bible and other reference materials strewn across his desk. The indictment had come from a young woman whose steel blue eyes gleamed under the bright fluorescent lights. Her slender form stepped inside, a fiery glare gracing her features.

He stood when he saw her and smiled easily. “Alice, what are you doing here? Don’t you have classes this week?”

“Of course I have classes. But something has come to my attention and I decided my college education would have to wait.” A rush of pink stained her creamy cheeks as she swept across the room and stood next to him, her similar blue eyes flashing at his.

“Okay, sis, what has got you up into such a panic?” Standing up straighter and clasping his hands behind his back, he wanted to laugh at the severe look on her face. Alice’s normal greeting was usually much less dramatic. She was angry about something that was for sure. He couldn’t help the small smile forming in the corner of his mouth.

“Well, you have been at this church for a year and you have dated, oh, let’s see…not once.” Her tone was cool and crisp. “Then I hear you’re engaged to Kari Montgomery.”

Randy widened his eyes as surprise and confusion enveloped him. Closing his gaping mouth, his brain finally started working, allowing him to reply. “Now hold on a minute…”

“Kari Montgomery?”

“Kari? You…you know her?” He cleared his throat and cocked his right eyebrow a fraction.

“Know her?” Alice moved away from him, stopping at one of the bookshelves in the back of the room. Fingering a book, she turned back to him. “She’s a legend at school.” Her hands dropped to her sides, as she looked him full in the face. “That’s right, she graduated from my current institution of higher learning and everyone is flooding me with news that includes your name with hers. I don’t understand how…”

“Hold on.” Randy put his hand up to stop his sister’s ranting. He couldn’t believe this. “I only met Kari at Emily Burke’s wedding. I don’t understand where all these rumors have come from.”

Alice sunk into the couch located between the two bookshelves containing Randy’s precious volumes. “Just face it. Mom and Dad are going to flip.” Her face was serious as she shook her head from side to side.

Randy returned to his desk chair, staring at his sister. “They won’t care. They haven’t given me one thought since I took this position.” He heard the deep-laid bitterness which welled over into his speech as he spoke. Though his relationship with his parents was strained, he usually tried to bridle his true feelings, especially with Alice.

“Mom and Dad will care because something this big concerns them, too.” She sat forward from her seated position on the couch and chewed on her nails, a sure sign of her concern. “Come on, Randy, what is really going on?”

“Just what I told you. I met Kari at the wedding. We talked, I kidded, she played back. It was fun but it was nothing more than that.”

Tossing her long, straight dark hair behind her shoulders, Alice reclined in her seat and crossed her legs. With her arms folded on top of her chest, she radiated all the compassion of an attacking tiger. “Well, my dorm mates, Mariah Summers and Kylie Thompson, both have sisters who are tight with Emily Burke and attended the wedding. They have been passing on information that you and Kari Montgomery are secretly engaged. You must have done something to start all these rumors.”

“Well…that’s ridiculous. I met Kari on one occasion and, to be honest, she didn’t seem all that thrilled with me.”

He eyed his sister knowing his muted smile revealed a whole lot more to her than did his words, tempting her fiery temper. Moving over to his desk, she looked down at him through narrowed eyes. “What did you do? Did you take that all too famous sense of humor a step too far again?” With a petulant expression plastered all over her face, she crossed her arms again. “You aren’t in college anymore, Randy. You’re a pastor and in a highly respected position.”

“I know I am, and I haven’t done anything to be upset about.” Randy leaned back in his chair, trying to look at ease but all he could think about was Kari’s alluring green eyes and how delicate and irresistible she looked when she blushed. There was just something about her. The day they met in the rain she’d had a wreath of damp, brown hair curling around her face and the most incredible eyes, even though they were filled with
anxiety. He wanted to see those eyes again. They were an unusual shade of green, appearing like a creamy sea
green you might see out in the ocean after a storm.

Staring out a nearby window, he was lost in his thoughts when he remembered Alice was standing beside
him. He swiveled his chair to the front and moved his eyes back to his sister. “So, what do you know about her
anyway?”

She gave her brother an examining stare before sighing with resignation. Her heightened color had
subsided back to her normal creamy glow. “Well, to begin with, Kari Montgomery had the highest SAT score
of any incoming freshman in the history of the university.” She sat down on the edge of his massive desk. “I
mean, she had like a perfect essay score. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Now she’s an associate professor of
history and the new House Fellow of my dorm.”

“What that all?” he asked sarcastically while stroking the stubble at his chin.

“I told you she was a legend.”

“No. But girls talk and she is my House Fellow after all. I also attend the same church as her up at school.
She sings in the choir. Actually, she has a great voice.”

“Do you know her pretty well?”

“I’m beginning to.” She smiled, her eyes returning back to her friendly, fun-loving self. “What did you
think about Miss Montgomery?”

“Think about her?” Randy cleared his throat as he looked away from his sister’s scrutiny. “Well, she
reacted different than any of the other young women here at the church. If I give any of these girls a second
look, they think wedding bells. But Kari…”

“Kari Montgomery didn’t give you the time of day, did she?”

He turned back to face her. “No, she didn’t fall for my renowned charm.” He smiled again, recalling how
Kari had played along with his teasing. “I guess I’ll just have to work harder next time.”

“So there is going to be a next time?”

“Yes?”

“Why were you so upset when you thought I was engaged? Don’t you like Kari?”

“It wasn’t that. It was because, well, because you didn’t tell me first,” she said with a pout before releasing
a smile at her older brother.

****

“Kari, how have you been? It seems like forever since we’ve gotten together,” said Emily Burke, now
Emily Richards. Her delicate blue eyes shined brilliantly under the lights as she peered back at her cousin. They
were filled with overwhelming optimism and expectation, Kari observed as they sat across from each other at a
local Chinese restaurant with all the delectable scents of Asian delicacies encircling them.

“It has seemed like forever. Someone hasn’t had much time for me lately,” said Kari, smiling playfully.

With a rosy tint to her cheeks, Emily smiled, looking like she was holding back a tremendous secret. There
was a warm glow of happiness radiating out from her; it was almost contagious. “John says to say hello.”

“How is John?”

She exhaled a long sigh of contentment. “He’s great. Everything is great. I can’t seem to stop smiling.”

“I noticed. Is it frozen on your face?” Kari joked. She was glad Emily was so happy and had found
someone like John. Her future for all intents and purposes was set.

“I really hate the idea of going back to work next week.”

“I can’t think of a reason why.” She gave Emily a smirking smile. “Well, I, for one, am really glad to have
you back again. I’ve missed you… I’ve missed this.”

“I know, Kari. I’ve missed our time together, too. I know we won’t be able to spend as much time together
as we used to, but please come and see us as often as you can.”

“I will. You have to promise you will come home from time to time, too.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Emily scooped another bite into her mouth. “So, how’s the book going?”

“Good. I never imagined turning my dissertation into a book would become this enormous. I’ve been
spending every free moment on it lately.”

“Well, that’s probably for the best.”

Kari knew she meant that in the kindest possible way, but all it did was remind her of why it was for “the
best.”

“Oh Kari, there’s my new mother-in-law. If you don’t mind, I’m going to go say hello.”

Kari nodded as Emily moved away from their table and off to see the other Mrs. Richards at the back of the restaurant. When she was gone, her seat was slyly taken over by someone Kari hadn’t anticipated in seeing and in fact hadn’t seen in a very long time.

“Kari, how are you?”

Kari greeted the invader with a piercing stare, loathing flowing over her. “Hello Geoffrey. How are you?” she managed to say while keeping her voice reserved. With caution, she eyed her ex-fiancé and his sandy blonde hair, broad athletic build and tanned skin.

“I’ve missed you.” He placed his beautiful long-fingered hands folded on the table in front of him and smiled. It was an insincere smile. Had he always smiled that way or was she just now finally able to see him for what he really was?

“And how is your new fiancée?” She looked undauntingly into his powerful set of brown eyes.

“Blair?”

“Where is she anyway?” Kari twisted her hands nervously under the table as she faced him squarely and directly.

“Oh, she’s out shopping.”

“How wifely of her.”

“Her parents are having a big party next week and she’s getting ready. Blair does love parties.”

“Isn’t that lucky for you, a party planner in your wife-to-be, just what you were looking for.” Her voice dripped with obvious sarcasm.

Picking up on her derision, Geoffrey’s jaw tensed. “Don’t, Kari. Don’t act like this. We can still be friends. How long has it been anyway? Four, five months.”

Kari didn’t reply right away. She was determined not to let him get the better of her. Raising her chin, she met his gaze with all the poise she could muster. “It’s been seven months since we broke off the engagement and you moved to the city.”

“Well, I hear congratulations are in order for you,” continued Geoffrey, sitting back with his arm casually draped across the back of the chair next to him. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“What are you talking about? Congratulations for what?”

“Your upcoming nuptials. Of course.”

Kari stared at him, stunned as if her tongue had been frozen for a couple seconds. Her eyes focused in on the teasing mouth she had always considered handsome. How could he be this cruel? She gave him a knowing look. “Okay, Geoffrey, what is all this?”

“I just heard from the folks back home you were engaged to some pastor from a small downtown church here in the city. Don’t look so worried, Kari.” He rose from his seat and dropped into the chair beside her. When he began his voice was soft and sickeningly sweet. “I’m not mad.” He took her slim hand into his and touched a stray lock of her light brown hair. She quickly slipped her hand out of his grasp and folded them together in her lap as she slid further away from him in her seat.

“It’s just made me wonder if this was the kind of guy you’ve been wanting? Is that why you broke it off from me? I know you feel God has been talking to you about your life choices but does that mean you have to marry a pastor? I think you have more to offer this world.” Geoffrey moved closer to Kari as he spoke, looking at her as he often had to evoke an emotional response.

With her lips pressed together, an angry fire burned deep within her as she scowled at Geoffrey. She was so angry she almost didn’t know what to say, but when she finally began, her voice was very cool and in complete control, not wishing to alert the rest of the lunch crowd to their conversation.

“Geoffrey Hudson, how dare you think you have even the remotest right to speak to me like this. The idea I had even contemplated marrying and giving myself to you just sickens me now. Who do you think you are giving me advice on whom to marry? If I chose to marry the silliest man on the planet, you have no say in the matter. If I choose to marry a man who has given himself to the highest calling a man can have in serving God on a full time basis, you better just keep your peace, you who I was so deceived into supposing had the same beliefs and values as my own.”

Geoffrey slid back from her, caught off guard and evidently surprised by her rebuke. The only other time she’d spoken this harshly to him was when they broke off their engagement. He brought his hands into his lap and his eyes took on an injured expression.

“And what’s wrong with marrying a pastor? I can do it if I want to. What better calling is there than to be the helper and wife to a man of God?” A flushed sensation moved up Kari’s neck and into her face as she
finished her speech. Her actions struck her with a surge of satisfaction.

“So, it’s true then?” There was an odd quiver of disappointment in his voice. “I thought maybe this was all just a rumor. I can’t imagine you with anyone but me.”

She shot him a cold look. “But you can imagine yourself with someone else,” she said, deflecting his question.

A shadow of annoyance crossed his face. “I did what I had to do. My parents were pressuring me. They always loved Blair. When you broke off our engagement, it seemed the best course.”

“So, did Blair’s father set you up in that brokerage firm after all?”

“Yes.” He inclined his head in a quick nod. His face filled with all the confidence she used to respect in him. There was no denying the powerful essence he exuded. He had always made her feel protected and safe. She knew better now. “I’ve been there for three months.”

“Isn’t that nice? Why isn’t that the exact amount of time you’ve been engaged? I’m so glad your upcoming marriage is for all the right reasons.”

“All the right reasons?” His body stiffened as he slid even further back from her in his seat. “Sure, I know you think I’m a creep but remember you’re the one who broke off the engagement.”

“Did you give me any other choice? You decided your god was money and success. You were going after it no matter what it took even though as a Christian you knew that was wrong. Geoffrey, I’m tired of your excuses and manipulations. I’m not the bad guy.” Kari stared down at the table, playing with her coffee cup.

“Kari, I know you. You can’t stay angry at me. Meet me tomorrow? I’ll take you out to dinner. Any place you want.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Kari answered with wide opened-eyes of astonishment as her heart raced inside her chest. She just couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How could he even think she would be all right with this? “You’re engaged to someone else now. You made your choice; now you have to live with it.”

“Just because I’m engaged doesn’t mean we can’t be...friends.”

“Friends,” she scoffed. “I think I have enough friends.” She glanced back to where Emily was beginning to rise from her seat at the back of the restaurant. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like you to leave. Emily is on her way back.”

Geoffrey rose without a word. He started to walk away when he turned back and leaned over to her ear. “If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask,” he whispered before exiting the building in long, determined strides.

“Was that Geoffrey?” asked Emily, sounding slightly stunned.

Kari cradled a mug in her hands as she spoke. “Yes, it was.”

“What did he want?”

After putting the mug down, she folded her hands in a pose of tranquility and sighed before she spoke. “He heard some awful rumor I was engaged to your Pastor Steele.”

“Did he? Well, as a matter of fact, Kari, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that myself.”

“Emily!” said Kari, shock inherent in her voice.

Kari caught sight of Geoffrey outside, walking down the street. She had imagined her first meeting with him many times. In all those imagined incarnations, it had never turned out like this, with her having the upper hand. Mostly she imagined him taking her back even though she knew that wasn’t what she really wanted. She quickly prayed and asked for strength and guidance during this troubling time.

She was surprised at how little she felt for Geoffrey at this exact moment. When they were dating, he had made her happy. She was pleased and contented to be with him, but she never felt that quivering heart pounding excitement she’d experienced with the young pastor the other day. That was a new and oddly exhilarating episode in her twenty-eight years of life. She’d been hurting for so long but this meeting had been cathartic. She’d never felt so strong and empowered in all her life.

Smiling to herself, she realized she never did clear it up with Geoffrey about her supposed engagement. Yeah, what is wrong with marrying a pastor, Kari thought, recalling Randy Steele and his captivating eyes and refreshing sense of humor.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Three

It was a clear, warm September afternoon when Randy Steele entered the laughter-filled parlor of the all-female Palmer House dormitory. He took a seat in the French Provincial chair in the corner of the room, trying to avoid bringing any attention to himself. He quickly spotted his sister’s friend, Tom Morgan, playing show tunes on the Steinway. Alice stood next to Tom singing a duet with him to “Put On A Happy Face” from the musical Bye Bye Birdie.

Randy knew Kari might very well be nearby since she lived in this dorm as well. His heart beat irregularly inside his chest at the thought. He was curious to see her again. He wasn’t sure why, but there was just something about her that made him want to know her better. Searching through the faces of the collegiates, he didn’t see her as he continued to listen to his sister sing.

“That was great you guys,” a young man on the couch called out as they finished.

“Yeah, sing another one,” suggested the girl next to him.

Alice turned around and, upon seeing her brother, gave him a smile. It was one of those smiles that told him she was up to something. Eyeing her friends, she said, “I think Kari should sing.”

“No, really, I don’t think this is the time,” Kari protested from her hidden position deep in one of the couches from across the room.

“I’ve heard you down here playing hymns and praise songs before,” said Alice.

“I think you did the entire score from Carousel one night,” added Alice’s friend, Chloe.

“Come on,” said Alice as she walked over and pulled Kari up from her seat and led her over to the piano. Tom, still sitting at the instrument, started playing “If I Loved You” from Carousel.

Kari gave in with a subdued smile and started singing the words to the sweet song with amazing passion in her soprano voice. On her second pass of the chorus, her eyes finally stopped on Randy who smiled at her from his corner seat. She gaped at him with surprise, probably wondering why he of all people was here listening to her sing. The color of her cheeks warmed up into a delightful blush. She touched her red face and then turned her eyes from him, gazing around at the rest of the room never returning her eyes to him as she continued the song.

As he sang, he observed her cute curving rosy lips and her narrow nose delicately curved at the tip. When he met her at the wedding a couple weeks ago, he inwardly acknowledged she was attractive, but he knew there was more to her than beauty. She seemed to have great spirit and genuine warmth that drew him to her.

“That was great Dr. Montgomery,” said Tom as she finished. “You should have gone into theater.”

“That’s what some of my friends told me in high school, but I never felt enthusiastic enough about my singing. I do sing in my church and you are all welcome to come this Sunday.” She glanced about the room. Most of the young adults turned away and moaned.

“Yeah, Kari,” the girl from the couch prodded, “you have a terrific voice.”

“No, really, I don’t think this is the time,” Kari protested from her hidden position deep in one of the couches from across the room.

“I’ve heard you down here playing hymns and praise songs before,” said Alice.

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Tom’s eyes still watched her. “I’ll go. I’d love to hear you sing again, plus Alice keeps trying to get me to go.”

“That’s right I do. It’s about time you came to church,” Alice scolded from her seated position on the floor near her brother’s feet.

“Well, that’s enough for me tonight,” broke in Kari. “I’ll see you all later. I have…something to do tonight.”

“Are you working on your book again?” the girl from the couch asked her. Kari shook her head in the negative, but she didn’t elucidate any further.

“Do you have a date then?” asked another one of the girls.

Kari brought her hand to her slender white throat and then shrugged her shoulders with a smile. “It’s just the Philharmonic.”

“Are you going alone?” another girl asked, speaking as if she already knew the answer.

Alice knocked her elbow into her brother’s shin as if to clue him in on the conversation. She didn’t have to worry. Randy’s eyes were glued to Kari’s perfectly oval face, taking in every word.

Dr. Hamilton is taking me.”

“Is he the alleged fiancé we keep hearing about?” the same girl asked.

Kari turned to look at the interrogator. “You know I told you there is no fiancé.” Her voice contained an agitated edge. She gave a furtive glance at Randy who was still looking at her but no longer smiling. Waving to
the group, she headed to her room.

“So, Randy, what brings you to my neck of the woods?” began Alice as she looked at her brother. “Hoping to see Miss Montgomery? I assume you got an eyeful and an earful.”

Randy pulled the corner of his mouth into a slight smile. “You know I only came to see you. What have you been up to these days?” He crossed his arms as he sat back in his chair.

“Oh get off it, Randy. I know you came to see her. She fascinates you; I can tell by the look in your eyes. And I think I can help you out.” Alice smiled with confidence. “I just happen to have an extra ticket to the Philharmonic tonight because my friend Esther can’t make it. Interested?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “You know me; I’m always ready for a great musical performance.”

“Yeah?” She cocked her head at him. “You mean you haven’t had one yet?”

Randy shook his head as he laughed quietly. “What time should I meet you?”

“In an hour.”

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Randy took his seat in the Wellington Opera House next to his sister and her friend Chloe, trying not to look about the theater for another familiar face. But trying and succeeding are two very different things. To fight the urge, he finally glanced down at the program to see that Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth) was to be played during the evening. He tried to remember what he’d learned about Mahler in Music Appreciation during his sophomore year of college ten years ago. He had a feeling he didn’t care for Mahler although he still loved listening to Beethoven and Chopin. He listened to them often when he was trying to come up with a sermon or was stuck on a certain passage. But Mahler?

“You look stumped, big brother,” said Alice.

“I’m just trying to remember if I liked Mahler.”

“You don’t remember you ever saying you did. I’ve only heard you raving about Beethoven’s Pathetique or the Moonlight Sonata .” She played with a lock of her hair as she spoke, rubbing it back and forth across her chin. “Mahler is from the Post-Romantic era. His music is supposed to evoke an emotional response. This piece in particular is meant to epitomize his pain or something.”

“You actually paid attention in class, huh,” he kidded her.

“Hey!” She knocked her fist playfully into his arm. “Even though you had a nine year head start, I do know things you don’t and just maybe I actually like this stuff.”

“Or you met a guy who did.”

“Oh be quiet; it’s starting.”

During intermission, Alice and Chloe wandered off with a couple of their other college friends. Randy strolled over to the refreshment cart and bought a coffee. He stopped next to a pillar and leaned against it as he slowly sipped his hot beverage. From behind him, he heard Kari’s voice. He peeked his head around the corner and then back again. His body felt buoyant with exhilaration. He took another sip of coffee, eavesdropping.

“So, how did you like the Mahler piece, Linus,” Kari asked a scholarly looking man who couldn’t have been more than an inch taller than her approximately five foot eight inch frame. He wore a perfectly pressed navy suit, matching tie, and frameless eyeglasses.

“I thought the Philharmonic made a notable attempt at the arrangement. It is a prodigious piece to take on, after all. They did adequately for a small town symphony.”

“Don’t tell anyone else you said that,” responded Kari with dismay. “They’ll skin you alive. I know you have the Boston Pops at home, but the Opera House is the cultural center of things around here. They say if it doesn’t make it here, it won’t make it in New York.”

“I don’t mean to dismiss your culture here. It’s just that Mahler is so enormous.”

“True, the Das Lied von der Erde is an ambitious piece and calls for a large orchestra.”

Randy then took it upon himself to enter into the conversation. He turned to the other side of the pillar, revealing himself to the two speakers. “Ah, but did you care for Mahler’s music, Miss Montgomery?”

Kari’s golden brown hair hung in long graceful curves over her shoulders. She wore a simple but flattering dress, matching the color of her eyes. With her mouth dropped open, her astonishment at Randy’s sudden arrival was written all over her face. A chuckle came from her before she could actually put words together.

“What are you doing here?”

He flashed her a grin. “I told you we would bump into each other again sometime.” He emphasized the word ‘bump’ on purpose. She smiled back, warming him inside and out as he continued. “I’ve just been checking out the local culture and I must say I wasn’t disappointed.”

“And what about at Palmer House?”

“The residence hall! I was just visiting my little sister.”
“Your little sister?” Her shapely brows drew together in puzzlement.
“Alice.”
“Alice Steele. I should have known. You both have the same sense of humor.”
“You noticed, huh?”
“That’s the Alice you were talking about at the wedding last month.”
“One and the same.”
Randy glanced over at Kari’s disturbed escort who kept fidgeting with his eye glasses.
“Sorry, Linus,” said Kari. “This is Randolph Steele. He’s the youth pastor at Grace Community Church where my cousin Emily attends.”
Linus looked up to Randy, who stood about five inches taller than him, giving him a condescending stare.
“Nice to meet you…Pastor.”
“Call me Randy,” he said while offering his hand.
Linus tentatively took Randy’s hand, but his face disclosed his wish for an antibacterial wipe to disinfect himself.
Kari continued with the introductions. “This is Linus Hamilton, professor of American Literature.”
“So, you two are colleagues of sorts,” said Randy.
“I suppose. Did you really enjoy the performance?” asked Kari, changing the subject, her exquisite eyes searching his.
“I did enjoy it. The orchestra is quite talented here; but didn’t you find it a bit long and tedious. The Mahler, I mean.”
Crinkling her eyes at him, annoyance passed over her face before she answered, her color rising. “I must disagree, Pastor Steele. Mahler is known for depicting an emotion and this piece in particular is extremely impassioned, linking his pain and his past.”
Her reaction amused him so he continued. “But didn’t you find it somewhat depressing.”
She squared her shoulder as if readying herself for a debate. “Maybe, but I think that was the intention.”
“I just think that if you want to be in that place emotionally why not play Beethoven.” As he spoke, he took a step closer to her, enjoying her fervor in the discussion.
“Do you enjoy Beethoven, Pastor Steele?” Linus broke in.
Both Kari and Randy peered over at him, seeming to have forgotten he was standing there.
“He’s one of my favorites and I am a particular fan of the Moonlight Sonata,” said Randy.
“Funnily enough, so is Miss Montgomery,” replied Linus.
Before Randy could respond, the house lights flashed, reminding them the performance would be starting again. Kari’s lashes swept gracefully across her cheekbones before she looked up at him again. They shared one more glance before Linus took her arm, said goodbye to Randy and led her back to their seats.
Randy returned to his own seat where Alice was already sitting with Chloe.
“What have you been up to?” his sister questioned him.
“Just some music critiquing with some of the other patrons.”
Turning her head forward, she said, “Okay, Randy, don’t tell me.”
On the way out of the theater after the performance, Randy caught Kari’s eye again. She turned to Linus and then looked back to see Randy once more before she left the building. Randy said goodbye to his sister and dashed out to see if he could find Kari one more time, but they were gone. Even though he knew she would more than likely return to the dormitory, he decided to head back to the train station.
On his thirty-minute train ride back to the city, he thought about Kari Montgomery and her wistful sea green eyes. He tried to figure out why she interested him when all the women who had traipsed past him over the past year had made no impact.
He prayed silently, Lord, I’m not sure why, but Kari Montgomery does fascinate me. Is she the one you’ve chosen to work alongside me?
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Chapter Four

Kari entered the office of Ellen Bradstreet, the Assistant Director of Archives at the Wellington Opera House. A large valanced window graced the back of the room, allowing warm afternoon sunshine to fill the office. As she took a seat on the plush couch covered in a floral tapestry material, a wave of nervousness soared inside her stomach. Her eyes glided around the room past the small, white shelf containing a set of antique books and then settled on her friend.

“Kari, thanks for coming in today. I know it’s short notice, but this will really help me out.” While Ellen spoke, her attention was focused down on the papers in front of her. When she was finished, she looked up and smiled at Kari from across an ornate nineteenth century cherry wood desk which was covered in files and papers, order seeming to be nowhere in sight.

“It’s no problem. I enjoy the days I get to come be tour guide.”

“It makes you wonder if you should have gone into public history, doesn’t it?” Ellen flashed her a large smile.

“Sometimes,” Kari answered with a shrug.

“That reminds me. How’s your book coming?” asked Ellen, playing with the pen in her hand.

“Okay. I’ve had more time to work on it these days.”

“Still based on your dissertation?”

“Yes and growing.”

“Sounds like fun. Well, I have to get going.” She dropped her pen and started straightening the disorganized papers on her desk. “Your tour group should be getting together in a half an hour or so. Until then just relax in here.” Taking the papers, she slipped them into a manila file folder.

Kari gave her a fleeting smile before Ellen left. While still sitting in her chair, Kari mentally walked through the script she had put together for her Opera House tour.

Ten minutes later, she stood and stared out the window to the street below, observing the crowd forming at the door of the Opera House. Peering at the people, she thought she saw Randy Steele among them. She shook her head, thinking she must be mistaken but found herself looking again, trying to focus in on the faces. A tall man with hair like coal glanced up at her and smiled. It was Randy. Kari stepped back from the window and sat in a nearby chair.

What is he doing here?

She had been surprised to see him at Palmer House two days ago, but after she recovered from the shock, she just wondered what had brought him there. Now he was here again. Sitting back in her chair, she wondered what it was about him that made him seem so different. She chuckled to herself when she realized it was his sense of humor. Even in high school, she always ended up choosing funny before good looks. Randy was blessed with both. She moved over to the window again, casting a guarded look down below. After seeing the young pastor with the rest of her tour group, she quickly moved away from the window, returning to the seat she had just vacated.

Her heart seemed to be keeping time with the lighthouse clock hanging on the wall as the second hand moved around with a loud tick, tick, tick. As the time for beginning the tour approached, Kari took a deep breath, rose from her seat, and then walked to the door closing it behind her. Stepping into the early afternoon sunshine, she faced the crowd with a smile as she clasped her hands tightly behind her back, attempting to avoid locking onto a certain pair of steel blue eyes.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I want to welcome you all to the Wellington. My name is Kari Montgomery and I will be your guide today.” After the introduction and opening remarks, she started in on her script. “Built in 1874, the Wellington is one of the oldest entertainment venues in the state. It was built by Abraham Beatty and so it was first called the Beatty Opera House.”

“And how did Mr. Beatty afford to build such a building?” asked a familiar voice out in the crowd.

Kari glanced around to spot the owner of the voice and stopped on Randy. A tiny smile teased at his mouth and she couldn’t help the slight curving of her own lips in return.

“A good question...sir,” she responded to Randy. As if she had no control over herself, she smiled again. “Mr. Beatty was a coal and lumber merchant who was quite wealthy by the time he built the Opera House. In fact, this was the site of his uptown coal and lumber yard.” After answering his question, she returned to her script, feeling a little bit more at ease.

“This building is one of the best examples of American Victorian architecture in the country.” She went
on to describe some of its outstanding features. Before leading the group inside, she pointed up at the black marquis with the golden lights spelling out “Wellington,” explaining it had been put in place in 1932.

After walking into the lobby, Kari led the group past the staircase and began the tour of the building, imparting the history and significance of the structure as they went. At the end of the tour, she took them to see the Wurlitzer Organ, which was installed in the twenties to accompany silent movies. The white instrument gleamed under the lights as she stood next to it and explained the history of the organ and the extent of its restoration.

At one-thirty, she ended the tour and said her farewells to the group as they went their separate ways. She started to walk back inside when someone called her name. She turned to see Randy walking toward her.

“Good afternoon, Pastor Steele. Enjoying the cultural amenities we have here, I see.”

“It was Alice. She asked me to come spend the day with her and at the last minute she got called away. A ‘journalism class fiasco,’ I believe she called it. She told me to check out the Opera House tour. I was surprised to see you as my tour guide.” He slipped his hands casually into his pockets.

“I don’t usually lead the tours. I went to school with the archivist and I like to help her out from time to time. I love local history. I’m a historian, if you didn’t know.”

“My sister told me you teach history.”

“Teach it, live it, breathe it.”

“Sometimes you are passionate about.”

“Sometimes it seems like it’s all I have.” Kari stopped and looked away from him. Why had she conveyed so much personal information to him? She shifted from foot to foot and glanced around at the opera house gardens nervously. She recognized she put more into her job and researching her articles and book than she should. Yet deep down inside she knew it was really all she had these days since Geoffrey had exited her life and Emily had gotten married and moved away.

“You worked hard this afternoon. Why don’t I take you to lunch?” offered Randy. His expectant expression was hard to resist with that particular pleasant smile gracing his face. A gentle wind lightly ruffled his soft, dark hair as he waited for her answer. “Please don’t refuse by saying you have too much work to do. We always have too much to do. Sometimes you just have to stop and do something fun.”

Kari gazed at Randy with her head cocked to the side as she considered whether to agree or not. She knew she needed to get back to campus and start on her Sunday school lesson. But there was just something about him that pulled her towards him. Despite her better judgment, she began to think he was right.

“I do have a lot to do. I would normally refuse, but I have to eat. Okay let’s go to lunch.” She released a smile at him. “And I even know the place.”

After going upstairs to fetch her purse, Kari led Randy to a nearby deli on Market Street. They ordered their lunches and sat down at one of the umbrella adorned outdoor tables. The sunlight shimmered down through the branches of the cherry trees that lined the street, casting shadows all around them.

They both just sat with their sandwiches before them until Randy suggested he’d pray. As he bowed his head, Kari followed his lead. “Dear Lord, Thank you for this wonderful day and the pleasant weather. Please bless this lunch, the food and the fellowship. In Your name, Amen.”

Randy lifted his sandwich but before taking a bite said, “I enjoyed your tour today, Kari. Very informative.”

“You mean boring, right.”

“No, I really enjoyed it. I didn’t realize there was so much history behind a building.” The wind blew a piece of his dark hair across his forehead. He pushed it back into place and again it slipped down onto his brow.

“I love old buildings especially Victorian ones. There is so much in the architecture alone that tells a story.”

“And the Philharmonic.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant as she stared back at him.

“You love the Philharmonic as well, or do you just enjoy spending time with…Dr. Hamilton, was it?”

“Linus? Oh, he’s just a friend.”

“Just a friend?” He lifted his left eyebrow at her, questioningly.

“Actually, he’s more of a colleague. I met Linus last summer when we were assigned to teach a joint class — Comparative Literature of the Early United States. It was half literature and half history. I haven’t been on a real date since…” Kari stopped amazed at herself for again conveying to him more than she had intended. What is it about him and his soothing voice?

“Since…?” he encouraged her to finish as he arched his brows.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to talk about that.”
“About what?”
“I’m sure my Aunt Patty has told you my entire life history.”
“She told me your father died when you were in high school and you helped your mother out considerably until she died last year.”
Kari looked down, feeling that particular pang of loss over her parents once again. Still staring at her half eaten turkey sandwich she replied, “Yes, I’ve lost both my parents; I still miss them.”
“I’m sure you do.” He took another bite of his sandwich before continuing. “So, you haven’t had a date since your mother died? Is that what you were going to say?”
Kari wanted to agree with him. It would make it simpler than admitting the truth, but she couldn’t lie to him. She eyed her glass of iced tea innocently, “Uh, no, it wasn’t. I haven’t had a date since I broke off my engagement.” Picking up her glass, she took a big gulp while looking straight at Randy.
His astonished expression revealed his surprise. Evidently, Aunt Patty had exercised some restraint because she had clearly neglected to fill in the young pastor as to the details of Kari’s broken engagement.
“I’m sorry. That must have been hard on you, especially with losing your mother, too. You seemed in good spirits last month at Emily’s wedding though.”
“Actually, I was feeling a bit down until I…” A slow smile emerged. “…well, until I talked to you. I guess your antics took my mind off it.”
Randy smiled at her with satisfaction. Kari felt the affect of it with goose bumps tingling at the back of her neck.
“You mean you’ve forgiven me?” he asked still smiling while tilting his head to the side.
“Forgive one another as I have forgiven you,” Kari paraphrased from Ephesians.
“You know your Bible, Miss Montgomery.”
“I hope so. My father and mother had me memorize a chapter a week from the time I was ten.”
“Good for them. I wish more parents took that much interest in their children’s moral upbringing.”
“You’re the youth pastor at Grace, aren’t you?”
“Yes. I love it. Of course, Alice says it’s because I’m as juvenile as they are.”
“Is that true?”
“Well, I’ll just say that I take pleasure in being able to serve God, stay young, and even enjoy my job.” He playfully raised his eyebrows at her as he took a sip of his soda.
“What brought you to work with the youth?” She knew her questions were becoming probing and personal, but he was the one who insisted on having this lunch so she figured she’d ask the questions.
“I love working with them so it was never a question.” A harsh expression crossed his face, but as soon as it had arrived it was gone. “Actually that’s not true. When I started college, I was going to be a lawyer like my father, but I knew God was calling me to be a pastor. I finished my degree in pre-law to please my parents and then went off to the theological seminary.”
“Your parents aren’t happy about your chosen profession,” said Kari more as a statement than a question. She was amazed at how free and open he was with his personal history. She very rarely revealed herself to anyone.
Randy laced his fingers together in front of himself. “No, Dad is still reeling I didn’t go to law school. He wouldn’t pay for the seminary. He kept hoping I’d give up this nonsense and go on to law school later. I didn’t.”
“Where do your parents live?” She leaned her cheek into her open palm, her elbow supported on the table as she asked her question.
“I grew up in upstate New York, Sackets Harbor. It borders on Lake Ontario.”
“Sounds lovely.”
“It is. You’d like it; there’s a lot of history. It was a great place to grow up. We were members of the country club and the yacht club, but I always felt like something was missing from my life.”
“Your parents weren’t Christians?”
“Nope. Not then, not now. My father is what you would call an agnostic. Although before I decided to go into church work, he was just ambivalent to God. Now it’s like he has declared war. He wants nothing to do with anything Christian. He’s still angry I chose to follow God instead of practicing law.”
“So how did you and Alice become Christians?”
“When I was 17, a revival came through and I decided to go. Alice was always tagging along with me, and in the end we both went forward and accepted Christ. My life has never been the same since.”
“I’m sure it hasn’t. God has a way of doing that to you.”
“Amen to that. When did you become a Christian?”
“Well, growing up in a Christian home, I felt like I always knew the gospel, but when I was seven I realized I hadn’t actually asked Christ into my heart. I asked my mother about it and prayed right in my bedroom one night. My life has been fairly normal—no drug stories, no awesome transformation.”

“That’s great. God doesn’t want us to suffer. He instructs in His Word how to live not as a stranger who wants to keep us from fun but as the protecting father who wants to guard us from harm.”

“Very true.” Kari was intrigued by the man sitting next to her. He was so honest and open. And every time he looked or smiled at her she felt her heart lurch inside. It was a worrisome feeling. She looked down at her watch. “I really have to get back to campus and prepare for tomorrow.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Usually it would just be another day at church, but I’m teaching a Sunday school class for a friend of mine who has been sick with the flu this week.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to interfere with that. I’ll walk you back to campus.”

“No. Please don’t bother.”

“I insist,” he said with a playful smile.

Kari was tempted to give into him as she glanced at his blue eyes glistening in the sun, but her intuition was twittering around inside her, telling her it wasn’t a wise decision. She was already feeling a bit too close and comfortable with him as it was. She needed to place some distance between them and the best way she knew how to do that was to think of him as a pastor rather than as a man. “I really appreciate you taking me to lunch today, Pastor Steele, but…”

“Please, you’ve got to drop the Pastor Steele. Call me Randy or at least call me what everyone at church calls me, Pastor Randy.”

“Okay, Pastor Randy, thanks for lunch, but I really need to get back. I’m sure you have to catch a train so don’t put yourself out for me.”

“It’s no trouble.”

His gorgeous smile was just too unnerving. He was like the proverbial knight in shining armor. But as much as she enjoyed his company, it scared her. Her stomach tightened, and she just wanted to get away. “I really wish you wouldn’t.”

Randy’s smile slid off his face instantaneously as if he had received a silent message. His face clouded over with irritation, and he sat up straight. “Sure. I understand, Miss Montgomery. Thanks for taking the time to humor the pastor kid.” He stood up with precision. The muscles in his jaw were tight, and the expression in his blue eyes was intense and troubling. “Goodbye.” Without another word, he took off down the street toward the train station.

Kari remained in her seat stunned by his departure, a knot forming in her stomach. She never even tried to stop him from leaving or explain what she really thought of him. She just sat there like an observer to the whole scene. When his shrinking silhouette was all she could see of him, Kari rose from the table and walked off in the direction of the college campus, her heart full of concern.

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Chapter Five

Dear Pastor Randy:

I’m sure you’re surprised to get this email from me of all people. Well, after your sudden exodus yesterday, I decided to clear things up. I got your email address from Alice. She said you would love to hear from me; I hope that’s still true. I just want you to know I wasn’t just humoring you. I did enjoy our time together. In fact, I haven’t opened up to someone like that in a long time. You must have a gift from God to allow people to be so free with their thoughts. Anyway, just know I do hope we see each other again sometime.

Sincerely,

Kari

Sending an email seemed much easier than picking up the phone and talking to Randy even though Alice had suggested it. As Kari pushed the send button, her chest cavity filled with apprehension. She truly meant everything she had put into the email. She wanted to clear the air and make sure the next time they met wouldn’t be uncomfortable. She knew she had been right to refuse to walk home with him. Even though there was something that compelled her toward him, she just wasn’t ready to start anything new.

She was still hurting from the memory of Geoffrey. It wasn’t that she still loved him. It was that she didn’t have the heart or the patience or the trust to begin a new relationship with anyone else. She had always been a happy, positive person but with all she’d been through over the past year, life just didn’t seem so bright and cheerful anymore. Being alone felt right.

Rising from the computer, she walked to her sitting room couch and sat down surrounded by the essays from her freshman US history class. She tried to forget about Randy by plunging in on the ‘Causes of the Civil War.’

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Randy returned to his little house after services Sunday afternoon feeling very low. Church had gone well today and he’d had fun with the high school group. They played their usual faire of ridiculous but fun games and enacted some Biblical skits. After the lesson, two new girls came forward to accept Christ as their Savior. It was a great day, he reminded himself. This is God’s day.

Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling of regret and loneliness encompassing him. What’s wrong with me? Usually, before he got to feeling this low, he would make a joke to himself, turn on the basketball game or call Alice. Even when John and Emily Richards invited him to lunch, he refused. Today he wanted to wallow in his unhappiness. He didn’t even try to pray; though, he felt the urge over and over. He stubbornly refused and slunk over to the kitchen to make himself a pitiful sandwich.

After lunch, he sat on his couch and turned on the TV. Flipping through the channels, he felt bored. He didn’t know what he wanted to do, but he was itching to do something. He finally realized what it was. He wanted to face down Kari and ask her what was wrong with him. He wanted to know why she had no interest in even being friends.

Turning off the TV, he moved over to his laptop on the side of his large desk in the study. He opened it and pushed the button that brought the compact computer to life. Last week, he had sent some e-mail messages to some college friends who were working overseas. Now was as good a time as any to check and see if anyone had responded yet.

Checking his e-mail, he looked down the list in the “From” column looking for a familiar name. There only seemed to be unsolicited spam mail. He pushed the “Select All” button and then “Delete”. On a whim, he checked his junk mail folder. There were twenty messages, but he perused through them too just in case a personal message had accidentally been sucked in there.

Then he saw it. FROM: KARI MONTGOMERY . He stopped, stunned for a moment. There was an odd quiver in the pit of his stomach as he gained control of his hand and moved the mouse over her name and clicked on the message.

Reading Kari’s words, he smiled with a snicker. So, Miss Montgomery, you want to make nice, do you? He clicked the reply button and began composing a message of his own.

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Kari lay down on the couch, rubbing her tired eyes but was glad she had finally finished all her grading. She folded her arms behind her head and just laid there for a moment thinking about what she had decided not to think about—Randy.

She rolled off the couch and sat down in front of her computer with the passing thought that he might have
written back already. I hope he’s not so angry he won’t reply. She opened her e-mail program and clicked the “Check Mail” button. As it processed her command, she idly strummed her fingers on the desk trying to pass the time until the computer informed her—“you have 1 message.” She selected the “1” and it opened her inbox. There in the FROM column was a message from RANDOLPH P. STEELE.

Dear Kari:

I must say I was incredibly surprised to hear from you but incredibly glad at the same time. Let me apologize for my behavior yesterday. I had a good time with you, too. I haven’t had such fun with someone in a long time. I’ll be back in town next week for the art festival. Alice invited me so maybe I’ll see you then. Take care.

Randy

Kari was relieved knowing that was settled with Randy, but she had had enough of her room and her computer. She slipped on a pair of flip-flops and started down the stairs for a walk.

“Kari, where are you headed off to in such a hurry?”

Kari looked down to see Alice Steele at the bottom of the stairs. “I was just going for a walk and maybe some coffee from the Kiosk.”

“I was just thinking about coffee myself. Care if I join you?”

“Sure. I’d like the company.”

“Your solo was great in church this morning,” said Alice as they walked though the bustling quad.

“Thanks. I’m glad I can use my talents at church.”

“I’ve been thinking about teaching a Sunday school class myself.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I often wonder if I couldn’t do more. I just get so busy between my work here at the college and writing my book.”

“I’m sure God will let you know if you should be doing more.”

Kari smiled at the younger woman who looked so much like the young pastor. Alice’s comment even sounded like something Randy would say.

“So, did you e-mail my big brother?” asked Alice with impatience inherent in her voice.

“I did,” said Kari calmly, purposefully keeping even the hint of humor out of her voice.

“And…did he write back?”

“Yes.”

“You aren’t going to tell me what you wrote him, are you?”

Kari glanced at her with a small smile and a shrug. “Tell you…tell you what? I just had something to clear up with him. He told me he was going to be here for the art festival next weekend.”

“That’s right and I would love it if you would keep him company because I have a…a date.”

“What?”

“Come on, Kari, please. He really is nice…and funny. You won’t be bored, trust me.”

“I don’t know.” The warning lights flashed inside Kari’s head reminding her that she should avoid this situation at all costs. “I really don’t think so, Alice. I’m so busy these days. I was planning on skipping the festival this year altogether.”

“Oh, Kari. You need to have some fun and that’s exactly what you’ll have with Randy.”

A small voice deep inside of Kari told her this was not a good idea.

“It doesn’t have to be the whole day. Just an hour or two,” continued Alice.

“So, you have a date?”

“It’s a double date with my friend Chloe and her boyfriend.”

“Aah, to be young and twenty-one again. All right. I guess I can baby-sit your big brother. But won’t he be disappointed since he’s coming to see you.”

“I have a feeling he won’t be disappointed.”

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
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Chapter Six

That Saturday, Kari waited impatiently for Randy at the entrance to the art festival in Sullivan Park. The last fifteen minutes of her life had been spent pacing back and forth as she nervously peered through the crowd for him and glanced at her watch. The atmosphere all around her was alive with energy. Swarms of people were filing into the park, buzzing with excitement. Loud music played in the background, and the diverse smells of appetizing cuisine assailed her from all directions.

Kari had to admit she was looking forward to the evening. Even though she felt somewhat set up by Alice Steele, it had been comfortable and fun with Randy the other day before he left in such a huff. Tonight should be fun.

She really hadn’t done a whole lot in the way of a social life recently. Between her work schedule, Emily’s wedding, and her depleted desire to do anything, Kari had been a relative recluse in town. Her outing to the Philharmonic had been the first time in a long time she’d ventured out on an evening.

She saw a tall, dark head out in the crowd ahead of her, tripping her heartbeat. But when he turned to face her, she saw it wasn’t Randy after all. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned around to see the subject of her search standing there behind her.

“I see my babysitter has arrived,” said Randy.

“I was waiting for you. When did you get here?”

“About half an hour ago. I wanted to check everything out. For the three years Alice has been going to school here, I’ve never made it for the art festival.”

“Well, it’s a lot of fun. There are art gallery and craft presentations, music venues of all sorts, and then there is the food.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed the food. I think I have some ideas for dinner.”

They walked down the promenade surveying the varying stands of ethnic foods and other consumer products available as differing forms of music jumbled all together in the distance. Randy’s eyes darted around the festival, attempting to take it all in. Suddenly his face turned serious. He cocked his head to the right as if he was trying to listen to one sound over all the other thunderous noises assaulting them. He turned to Kari with a smile. “I see they’re doing karaoke tonight.”

“Yes,” she narrowed her eyes as an uneasy sensation flip-flopped in her stomach. “What are you suggesting?”

“Just that it would be great to hear you sing again.”

Kari felt her cheeks warm, remembering the night he had come unexpectedly to Palmer House just as she was singing for the college kids. “Well, I don’t normally sing impromptu songs. It’s usually just at church when I’ve had plenty of time to practice.”

“I’ll even sing with you.” He placed his hands in his pockets, looking very self-assured.

“You’re a big singer, are you?”

“I’ve been told so.”

She stared at him, pressing her lips together as she evaluated him and his suggestion.

“No really. Come on. I’ll show you.” He grabbed her hand and led her over toward the mass of people surrounding the microphone. Kari stayed behind the crowd as Randy walked to the front to talk to the men running the karaoke station. By the time he started to return, Kari was ready to turn around and go back home. She had no intention of embarrassing herself in front of all these people.

As Randy approached her smiling, she felt even more worried. “I don’t think this is a good idea. How about we walk through the children’s art gazebo instead?”

“Sounds like fun—but after this. We’re up in a couple minutes.”

“No, I really can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can. Trust me. You’re going to be just fine.”

Even though his eyes were wide and persuasive, she knew she was not going to be “just fine.” Why should I trust him? The last man I attempted to trust broke my heart. Even if Randy was a pastor and seemed to have good intentions, she wasn’t ready to suffer this kind of humiliation.

A man waved to Randy and he returned the signal. Turning to Kari, he raised his eyebrows humorously.

“We’re up next.”

Her misgivings were increasing by the second. She felt like running away just like a little girl. She was very close to doing just that. “Randy, I think I’m going to sit this one out.” Her blood began to beat against her
temples as her entire face burned with heat.

“No way. If I’m going up, you are too. Come on.”

Before Kari could do anything about it, Randy grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the small make-shift stage. She tugged on his arm before he yanked her up the stairs. “Okay, I’ll go but on my own. By the way, what is it we’re going to sing?”

“Well, they aren’t doing any Christian music so I found something else I think you know.”

Without another word, Randy started up the three steps to the stage. Kari followed reluctantly behind, butterflies of anxiety flying around in her stomach. She couldn’t figure out how on earth she had gotten herself into this.

On stage, they stood in front of a mic stand. The title of the song “People Will Say We’re in Love” came up on the monitor. Randy looked at her contritely and raised his shoulders. “I figured if you knew Carousel you knew Oklahoma.”

“I know it.” She did her best to scowl at him. “You’re going to pay for this later.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He gave her a wonderful smile, sending even more butterflies rippling through her stomach. And yet she could have just killed him at that exact moment.

The words came up on the screen in front of them as the song began. It was Kari’s part first. She stumbled over her words for the first few bars before she let the song take her away and began to enjoy herself. At the line “people will say we’re in love,” she made the mistake of glancing at Randy and everything started spiraling out of control again. She refrained from looking at him while she finished her verse, peering out at the audience instead.

When it was Randy’s turn, he had no trouble with his words. His voice was amazing, and he seemed to know all the words by memory because as he sang his gaze focused squarely on her. His voice softened as he sang, “people will say we’re in love.” When he reached the line, “your hand feels so grand in mine,” he took Kari’s hand and held it. She couldn’t take it. She felt flushed and had to look out at the audience again.

As they started out on this ridiculous escapade, Kari hadn’t cared if they were good or not. She just didn’t want to make a complete fool of herself. But as they ended the song, she realized the crowd around the karaoke stand had grown and everyone was clapping for them.

When they were finished, they began to walk off the stage, and everyone started yelling “Encore, Encore!” Randy ran back over to the microphone. “We’ll be back for another set later on this evening.”

Kari didn’t wait for Randy. She took off down the stairs and ran over to the river near the edge of the festival. She wasn’t mad or upset. In fact, she was smiling and her heart was still pumping hard in her chest from the euphoria produced by the musical number.

“Hey, Kari, I wondered where you went.”

She turned to face him. “That was amazing.”

“You aren’t mad then?”

“Mad? No. That was exactly what I needed. It was amazing, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, absolutely amazing.” His voice was soft and soothing as he spoke.

“Well, come on. Let’s go have some more fun.”

“Sounds good to me.”

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“Well,” said Randy, as they sat together at an outside table eating their mix matched ethnic delicacies, “your book sounds interesting.”

“Don’t humor me.” She narrowed her eyes on him. “Whenever I start to talk about it to anyone I know, they tune me out—all except my friends from graduate school who are usually busy with their own books and articles.”

“No really, I enjoyed hearing you talk about it.”

Kari felt a warmth flow over her. Even Emily hadn’t shown all that much interest in her book. She just said to send her a copy when it was finished.

“You had fun tonight, didn’t you?” asked Randy.

Kari held her fork up as she toyed with her answer. “I must admit I did.”

“Did you think you would?”

“Honestly, I hoped so. I think Alice was hoping so too.”

“My sister…I tell ya.” He rolled his eyes.

Kari leaned in toward him over the table. “She’s great. I’ve enjoyed having her at the dorm and at church.”

“Well, I can tell she thinks a lot of you.”

“She told me she’s thinking about teaching a Sunday school class.”
“Great. I’ve been trying to get her to do something like that for a while. Did you encourage her?”
“I told her I thought it was a good idea.” She paused for a minute. They both took another sip of their
drinks. “I often wonder if I should be doing more at church myself.”
“What do you do now?”
“I sing in the choir and fill in for the sick Sunday school teachers.”
“So, what more do you want to do?”
“I don’t know.” She shook her head and shoulders. “I just feel like I should be doing more.”
“I’m sure God will let you know.” He used that soft, smooth voice again. It still had that warming affect
on her entire body.
Kari smiled at him and chuckled a bit. Randy shrugged and shook his head as if to say ‘what?’
“Alice said the exact same thing to me the other day.”
“What can I say,” he sat up straight, “great minds think alike.”

Kari bit down on her bottom lip to stop another smile but it was no use. As she bent to take another bite of
food a couple college girls from her freshman class walked up to their table.
“Dr. Montgomery,” said the girl with long blonde hair, “you sang so great tonight.”
Kari looked down for a second and then told the girl thanks.
Her dark haired companion displayed a flirty smile Randy’s way. “You were great too.”
“Is this your fiancé, Dr. Montgomery?” the blonde girl asked.
Kari’s mouth fell open in surprise. She tried to speak but nothing came out.
The girls smiled at Kari and Randy as they started to leave. When Kari finally found her voice, she yelled
after them, “No, girls, wait…”
“Too, late, Dr. Montgomery,” said Randy playfully. “So, the rumor of our engagement has yet to be
quashed, huh?”
“I guess so.”
“How do you think these rumors started?”
“I have no idea,” said Kari looking squarely into his blue eyes, liking how they sparkled in the dim light.
“Well, I have my suspicions.”
“Yes…?”
“It’s probably all my fault,” said Randy as he stared down at his empty plate.
“Why do you say that?”
He glanced up again. “Because I haven’t shown an interest in anyone since I’ve been at Grace
Community. I guess people started talking when I was so attentive to you at the wedding. Those rumors must
have carried back here with so many of your old friends, not to mention some of your students, attending the
wedding.”
“That’s ridiculous. Why would people assume… I mean it was so innocent…”
“Innocent, yes, but you know how people like to talk.”
“I suppose. I mean, I only heard about it from Emily and…”
“And…?”
Kari didn’t know if she wanted to tell him about Geoffrey and then she realized why not. She wasn’t
pining for Geoffrey. She may as well let Randy know the truth.
“My ex-fiancé, Geoffrey Hudson, also heard the rumor and asked me about it.”
“I’m sure you straightened him out.” Randy had a strange almost hurt look on his face as he waited for her
reply.
“Actually…” she gave him a culpable smile.
“Kari…”
“…I never did clear it up,” she finished.
“Kari Montgomery… I’m surprised with you,” he said in mock disapproval. “I never would have imagined
you to do something like this.”
“Like what,” she said as she sat up straight in her chair.
“I don’t know… something other than completely honest. Isn’t that what you expected of me the day we
met?”
“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I was just so angry at Geoffrey.”
Randy raised his chin as he spoke. “What did he do?”
“Well, he’s already gotten engaged to someone else, his girlfriend before me, Blair.”
“And you were… jealous?”
“Jealous? Of Geoffrey? No. I guess I just wanted him to think I was out of his grasp.”
“Well, aren’t you?”
She signed out loud. “I thought so, but the last time I saw him he acted like he thought he could still spend time with me and be engaged to Blair.”
His eyes flooded with concern. “He didn’t?”
“Yes he did. I can’t believe I was ever interested in him.”
“But you did say you would marry him. At some point, you must have thought you loved him.” His eyes took on a sharp, assessing quality as he gazed at her squarely in the face.
The intensity was too much for Kari. She peered down at the table, playing with the condensation left behind from her glass. “Yes. I thought I did. But I also thought he was a different person.” She glanced back up. “When he revealed his true nature, I knew I could never marry him.”
“I’m sure God has a plan for you, Kari, and whatever that plan is it will be better than you could have even imagined.” He seemed so sure in his estimation but Kari just wasn’t sure where her life was going. She tried to not even think about those kinds of things anymore.
She stared at Randy, wondering what it was about him. Why was she able to talk so freely with him? Usually, she kept her feelings bottled up, well, except with Emily. And even then, in recent months she hadn’t even felt comfortable sharing everything with her. With Randy, there was something different. She felt safe confiding in him. Maybe it was because he was so honest and open with her. She wasn’t used to that. After her break up with Geoffrey, she had realized he’d never really been honest with her.
“I know you’re right. Thanks for listening. I’ve needed someone to talk to and Emily has been busy with her wedding and now her fledgling marriage.”
“I’m glad I could fill in,” he said with certain sarcasm to his voice.
“No, really, thanks, Randy.” She placed her hand over his in a reassuring gesture.
He gave her a beaming smile. “Hey, you called me Randy, not Mr. Steele or Pastor Randy.”
“Well, I guess we’ve moved beyond formalities.”
“Yes, we have.”
As Randy walked Kari out from the park and down toward the college campus, the sound of her name rang out, “Kari, Kari, wait up.”
Kari turned around to see Geoffrey of all people coming towards her with Blair at his side. She glanced over at Randy while her heart did a tap dance in her chest. “Well, here’s my chance to clear up that misinformation with my former fiancé.”
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Seven

Randy watched as Kari’s previous fiancé neared them with who he assumed to be his new fiancée. It didn’t take long to size up Geoffrey—confident to the point of being vain and so self-assured nothing got in the way of what he wanted. Randy had met plenty of that type when he was in college, studying with all the other trust fund pre-law majors. It was one of the reasons he knew it wasn’t the career for him. He wasn’t a suave bulldog; he was what he was—sometimes transparently so. Following God’s will in his life had turned out so much better than the life his father had planned out for him. He much preferred playing games and doing his best to touch the hearts of young people for Christ than writing briefs and arguing cases before a judge among the rich and famous.

“Kari,” came Geoffrey’s silky voice again. “Am I surprised to see you.” He approached them with a smug look on his face, pulling his companion along with him. When they stopped in front of Kari and Randy, Geoffrey took his arm and wrapped it tightly around the petite shoulders of the young woman next to him as if flaunting their relationship in Kari’s face. “It’s great to see you. This must be your pastor.” Geoffrey turned his eyes on Randy with an expression of obvious dislike.

Kari opened her mouth to say something, but Randy decided to take the lead. He placed his left arm lightly around Kari’s shoulders and thrust his right hand in front of Geoffrey. “The name’s Randy Steele; you must be Geoffrey.”

Geoffrey didn’t look as confident as when he’d first approached them. He seemed stymied by Randy’s friendly attitude and intimidating stature. Taking Randy’s hand he said “Uh, hi…nice to meet you.” Then as if a second thought, he added, “And this is Blair.”

Blair broke loose of Geoffrey’s grasp and shook both Kari and Randy’s hands. “It’s nice to see you again, Kari.”

Blair seemed sweet natured. She had delicate, pale features and a kind smile. Kari, apparently moved by Blair’s sweetness, smiled back at her. It impressed him that even though Kari had been hurt and probably damaged by this Geoffrey character she still had the goodness of heart to treat him and Blair so pleasantly.

“We were just leaving,” said Randy, trying to save Kari from more embarrassment in continuing this charade.

“Come have some dessert with us,” offered Blair. “We were just on our way to…where were we going again Geoff?” she asked as she looked up at him.

“The Tea Shoppe,” he answered while he shared a look with Kari, who didn’t appear to be one bit happy with his reply.

“We really should get going,” said Randy.

“No, Randy,” said Kari, looking over at him and placing her hand familiarly on his chest. “Let’s go share a sweet treat together.” She shifted her gaze to Geoffrey’s face. “It will be fun to catch up with Geoff and Blair.”

“All right,” said Randy. “I’m always ready for dessert.”

They walked a few yards down the street until they came to the quaint Tea Shoppe. As they entered, the faint sound of Mozart filled the room along with the delightful smells of chocolate, cinnamon, and chamomile tea. Each of the round tables was covered in a floral patterned table cloth with a bud vase on top containing a single daisy. In the back were a couple comfy green couches decorated with lacy-frilled pillows.

After taking a seat at one of the tables, a teen-age waitress approached the party to take their orders.

“Good evening and welcome to The Tea Shoppe. Can I bring you a pot of tea?”

Geoffrey spoke first. “I’m sure Kari would like her usual pot of Green Tea with Jasmine and I’ll have…”

“No, Geoffrey,” interrupted Kari. “I’m capable of ordering my own tea. I’d like to have the Prince of Wales Tea and a piece of chocolate cheesecake.”

Geoffrey appeared baffled. “No strawberry short-cake?”

“You’ll see my tastes have changed, besides it was never my favorite,” Kari replied. “What would you like Randy?” she asked as she moved closer to him in her seat.

Randy was enjoying this scene far too much. That is exactly what it was, like a scene out of one of the plays he had participated in during his stint in his high school’s drama club. “I think I’ll have the same—Prince of Wales tea and chocolate cheesecake.”

“So, Kari, where did you and Randy meet?” Geoffrey asked after the waitress left with their orders.

“Meet, uh, we...” Kari struggled to answer.

“We met at a church function,” broke in Randy who reasoned that it was a church function, Emily’s
wedding, so technically he wasn’t lying. “She took my breath away at first glance or maybe it was I who took her breath away.” His eyes met Kari’s.

“At any rate, it was jarring to the both of us,” continued Kari, still looking at Randy. They both laughed together.

Geoffrey shifted in his seat uncomfortable with their interaction.

“Yes, I guess you could say my cousin Emily introduced us, at least, it was her idea that we both attend the…uh…the event,” said Kari turning her gaze over to Geoffrey and Blair.

“That’s right,” said Randy with a huge smile as he put his arm around Kari once more. “And it was just meant to be. We’ve enjoyed every moment together since.” He liked being close to Kari like this and smelling her sweet rose scented perfume. The role-playing was making him wish it were all true.

When the waitress arrived with their desserts and hot drinks, they busied themselves with eating and talking about the festival. Blair seemed to really enjoy it and told them about all the art she had considered buying for their new home.

Shortly after all the dishes had been cleared away, Randy stood. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Blair, and you too, Geoffrey; but we have to get going. We have church tomorrow.” He shook both their hands again and moved out of the way for Kari to exit the booth.

“Yes, it was nice to see you both,” said Kari. She looked at them sincerely. “I wish you all the best and really hope God blesses your marriage.”

They exited The Tea Shoppe together into inky blackness, the only illumination coming from the few street lamps overhead. Since the festival had closed for the night, revelers were still moseying around the streets. The weather outside was getting that brisk early fall feeling while a light breeze blew a few loose leaves around by their feet.

After walking past a couple shops, Kari laughed out loud. “I can’t believe that.” She laughed some more.

“What?”

“That whole performance. I especially can’t believe you took this whole fiancé thing so far. It’s one thing to let Geoffrey believe a misconception; it’s another to basically lie to him.”

“You’re right. We should have told him the truth. I’ll go back and clear it up.” He started to turn around and walk back to The Tea Shoppe, but Kari grabbed onto his arm.

“Don’t you dare.”

Randy eyed her hand on his arm and then placed it into his hand. “All right, but then I guess this means we’re engaged. I’ve never been engaged before. Is it supposed to feel like this?”

“Oh you’re real cute…” Randy raised his eyebrows at her. “…I mean funny,” Kari countered, completely disoriented. He loved how she crinkled her eyes when she got flustered. She drew her hand away from him and pulled her jacket closed. “Walk me home. I’ll just have to clear this up at some later date…or never…oh, I don’t know.” She crinkled her eyes and nose in frustration at him.

“Maybe you won’t have to. Maybe we’ll just get engaged for real and get married just to show off to Geoffrey.” He smiled at her playfully, but inside he wished it was true. He could easily imagine himself married to Kari. In his mind’s eye, he could see them in his little house making dinner together or her sitting on the small sofa reading a book or grading papers as he worked at his desk. He could really see her working by his side as he ministered to the youth. It was the first time he had been able to view any woman of his acquaintance able to take on that role.

“You are incorrigible,” she told him with a laugh.

“That I am ma’am. That I am. And just think we’ve only just met.”

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Chapter Eight

“Emily, I love what you’ve done to this apartment,” said Kari, sitting at Emily’s dining room table as she moved her eyes around the dwelling. “When you moved in here it was so…”

“Ugly…white…sterile,” inserted Emily.

“Well, yes, and now it’s…a home.”

“It does look nice, doesn’t it? Lucky for us, the owner of the building had no problem with us making improvements. So, I painted, added the border, and put up these curtains. It was fun. I feel like a real homemaker.”

A warm sensation flowed over Kari, as she glanced at her cousin’s homey improvements. The apartment was small containing a dining room, kitchen, tiny living room and only one bedroom. But it was evolving into a lovely home. This is what she had imagined her first apartment with Geoffrey would be like. It would have been fun to paint together and make their new place into their own home sweet home, but now that was never to be.

“I miss having you back home, you know. Do you like it here in the city?” asked Kari, trying to take her mind off of what might have been.

“It is definitely different; but now that I’m married, I don’t mind at all. I’m adjusting. John has been great getting me and mother settled. But I miss everyone and you most of all. I don’t think I’ll ever see you move here especially now that you’ve got tenure at work.”

Kari smiled, proud she’d been given tenure last year. “I feel pretty well settled for the time being.”

“Well, don’t shut the door on other possibilities.” She paused for a second. “I heard you spent some time with Randy Steele last weekend.” Emily smiled while the lights bounced off the dark flecks in her deep, blue eyes.

“Yes,” said Kari, sensing the blush moving up her neck and across her face. “His sister, Alice, asked me to spend the evening with him at the art festival since she ended up having other plans.”

“And that’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me? Kari, we’ve been each other’s confidants for as long as I can remember. You can tell me.”

Kari gave Emily a sideways glance from her place across the dinning room table. She stood and walked over to the kitchen window looking out at Emily’s plants on the back deck. “There really isn’t anything to tell. I’ve enjoyed my time with Randy.”

“Randy is it?”

Kari turned around and looked at her cousin. “He told me to call him that. He actually did me a great favor the other night.”

“Yes and what was that?” She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“We saw Geoffrey at the festival.”

“Really.”

“He was with Blair.”

“I’m so sorry, Kari.”

“Don’t be.” Kari sat down at the table again. She smiled at her cousin. “Geoffrey was still under the impression that I was engaged to your Pastor Steele and, well, Randy played along.”

“Did he really? I should have known. It sounds like something he’d do.” Emily paused and took another sip of her coffee. After placing the mug down on her lace placemat, she spoke in a low tone. “Kari, what do you think of Randy? I mean really.”

“He’s nice; he’s fun. I enjoy being around him.”

“But that’s it?” She raised her eyes from their lowered position as she spoke.

“I guess so.” Kari knew she wasn’t telling Emily the whole truth. But what was the truth? She just didn’t know anymore.

“Kari, I think he could care for you in a way Geoffrey never could.”

“I can’t believe you said that. But now that you mention it, I think you’re right.”

“You do? So, you’ll go out with him? You haven’t been out on a real date since Geoffrey.”

“Don’t get so excited. I realize Randy is special and he will make someone a great husband one day, but I don’t think it will be with me.”

“Why not? I think you have a chance with him. I’ve known Randy as long as I’ve known John and that’s like nine years. He’s had his pick of girls, yet he has always been very particular. For some reason he’s
interested in you.” She gave her a wry smile. “And I think you should give it a chance.”

“Emily, I don’t think I’m in the place where I can be with anyone else, not yet. I’m just not ready.”

“Well, come with us to church tomorrow. Randy’s preaching because our pastor is on vacation this week. Come hear him. I think you’ll be impressed.”

“Come hear Randy preach? This I have to see. Okay. I’ll stay over and go with you tomorrow.”

****

Randy arrived early for church on Sunday to make sure everything was ready for his sermon. He set up his slides in the projector and organized his notes. Walking through the sanctuary, a calm spirit encompassed him as he silently prayed for God to work through him today and guide his words as he preached. He continued through the courtyard to the youth building to prepare for Sunday school with his teenagers. As he placed the song booklets out on the chairs, John Richards walked in.

“Hey, John, you’re here early. Emily have prayer group this morning?”

“Yes, she’s there now. I thought I’d just come by and see how you were.”

“I’m great.”

“I can see that.” John leaned against one of the supportive posts with his hip and slipped a hand in the opposite pocket.

“So, are you and Emily going to work on that charity benefit?”

“Oh, yeah, sure, we decided we’d help out. I think Emily is even trying to recruit you some extra help.”

“Good ‘ole Em.”

“You might like to know we brought Kari Montgomery today.”

The last few song booklets in Randy’s hands fell to the ground. He kneeled down to pick them up.

“Really, she’s here today. And why is that?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“Emily told her you were preaching, and she said she couldn’t miss that.”

Randy stood up and placed the books on a shelf in the back of the room. “Great, it will be…um…good to see her again.”

“So, tell me, now that you’ve spent time with her, what do you think of her?”

“Does this mean you think this one is worthy of your old friend?” He tried his usual teasing smile but he wasn’t sure how convincing it was. He was sure John could see right through his game and figure out how much he really thought of Kari.

“Sure she is. Kari’s a special person. Actually, I’m trying to figure out why Em and I didn’t introduce you two years ago.”

“You were hiding her from me.”

“No, I guess between her being off at graduate school and you off at seminary, we never got around to it. You know you never answered my question.”

“What question was that?”

John raised his hands up to Randy as he stood straight again. “All right. I get it. You don’t want to talk about her.”

Randy eyed his friend thoughtfully for a moment as he mulled about in his head the best way to respond. “Kari Montgomery is special. I enjoy being with her and, yes, she’s interested me more than anyone I’ve ever met. There have I answered the question now?”

A small smile appeared on John’s face. He crossed his arms in front of himself “Wow. Finally, a straight answer.”

When the teenagers started filing into the youth room, John took that as his cue to make his exit. “I guess I’ll see you after services.”

“Sure, I’ll catch up with you later.”

Randy turned his attention to the kids coming in, asking what they did this week and following up with a funny story he’d heard on the Christian radio that morning. But even as he spoke the words to the story, he was thinking in the back of his mind about Kari being here and how he was ever going to get through his message with her sitting in the pews listening to his every word.

****

After Sunday school, Kari sat alone in a row half way from the front of the sanctuary since Emily and John were busy working as greeters that morning. Her eyes moved around the building starting with the cross, the pulpit and the stained glass windows which graced the front of the structure. She started imagining how she was supposed to look at Randy when he preached. She’d never thought about it before. When you came to church, it was to learn from your pastor, but she realized today she was here to watch Randy and see how well he did.
When Randy came in the room through a door near the front, her stomach fluttered and she couldn’t figure out what to do with her hands. Up front, Randy shook a couple hands and then made his way onto the platform. As well as she tried, she couldn’t help staring right at him. He took his seat and started making small talk with the music director who sat in a chair next to him. When Randy turned and looked forward, his eyes somehow found hers. He quickly walked down off the platform, making a beeline for Kari.

Since she was sitting in the last seat in her row, Randy was able to walk right up to her, standing in the aisle next to her. “Hey, Kari, glad to see you this morning. This is a pleasant surprise.”

She smiled at him. Several young women walked past them observing her with Randy. They weren’t very subtle as they eyed her suspiciously, making her feel like she was doing something wrong. “Well, I’m glad to be here. I’m looking forward to hearing you preach.”

“Then you’re in for a treat.” The pianist began playing Blessed Be Your Name. Randy turned toward the piano and then back to Kari. “Well, I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you all later. We’ll talk.” She smiled at him again before he went back to his seat on the stage.

The music director came forward and everyone stood and started singing. Emily and John joined her now in the row. After more singing and announcements, it was Randy’s turn. He walked to the pulpit, put his Bible down and looked out at the congregation with determination yet there still seemed to be a hint of humor in his eyes.

“Good morning.”

Many of the members in the seats replied “Good morning” in return.

“As most of you know, I like to liven things up and have fun which is probably why Pastor Wells has placed me with the teenagers.”

Laughing commenced around the auditorium.

“I thought about doing a visual lesson with you this morning, but I decided to try it out with the young people first. This is how it went. I attempted the old visual with the jars of smoke, alcohol, chocolate, and soil with a worm put into each. At the end of the lesson, I didn’t get the usual response. Instead, the girls screamed because the boys were dangling worms in front of them, two girls ran out of the youth room, and a third one with arms crossed said to me ‘I refused to touch a worm in Biology; I’m not doing it at church.’ As you can see the lesson was a complete success.”

Everyone rolled with laughter.

Randy smiled and continued. “So with those results, I decided it was best to skip the illustration and just dive right into the sermon today. If you would all please turn in your Bibles to the book of John chapter three and verses seventeen through twenty-one.

“Working with teenagers, I try to address issues that affect them so they can see how the Bible is as much for them as anyone else. I’ve found that one of the biggest concerns they contend with is self-acceptance. So, when I thought about what to preach on today, I came back to this topic because I don’t think this is something we just grow out of. It is something we struggle with for the rest of our lives.”

Kari’s body stiffened as she stared at him intently. It was as if he was preaching directly to her. His eyes seemed to be probing whenever they crossed hers as if his message really was intended just for her. She knew she had been struggling with this precise issue since ending her relationship with Geoffrey. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she had never given this conflict to the Lord. She continued to carry the burden alone.

“Read with me please in verse seventeen. ‘For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.’ I have a question for you. Is Jesus a judge or a Savior? I’m sure if we asked around some of you would say He is our Savior and some of you might say he is both our Savior and our judge. Well, Jesus was sent into this world not to judge us but to save us. He was sent to show the love of God to the whole world.

“Let’s move on to verse eighteen. ‘He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.’ This verse makes it clear that if we have accepted Christ into our hearts, we are not judged. It is the ones who have not accepted Him that will be judged. It isn’t the kind of judgment we are anxious about on a daily basis that is better called criticism. No this is the judgment of hell and damnation.”

Randy continued his sermon expelling his message of hope and recovery for those who had forgotten God loves them and accepts them. Kari knew she was one of the people he was talking to. Conviction swept over her. She knew she hadn’t given over to God all her negative feelings of insecurity. Ever since Geoffrey had revealed his true self to her, or more accurately since she had allowed her eyes to be open to what she refused to see, she had been shaken as to her self-worth and what she had to offer anyone. Staring at Randy, she saw in him what she had always wanted in Geoffrey—a man strong in his faith who would accompany her in a closer
relationship with their Lord. She was still so shaken from her last experience, though, that she just wasn’t sure if she had anything left to give.

She slipped out of the auditorium during prayer and walked out the front door toward the train station. She knew Emily would bring her things back to her since she was coming over on Monday to pick up the rest of her belongings from storage. All Kari knew was she needed to get away. She couldn’t face Randy right now, not now. She decided to just delve into the things she knew such as her schoolwork, her book, and her church. That would keep her busy until she was ready to deal with these other issues in her life.

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Chapter Nine

Dear Kari:

Sorry I missed you after services today. I’m sure you had a lot to do this afternoon to prepare for your week. I have an idea I wanted to throw out at you. You spoke about wanting to do more Christian service. Well, I’m heading up a charity benefit for the Angel Wing Shelter. It’s a shelter for abused women and children in the inner city. As I started to compile a list of volunteers, I thought of you. The initial meeting is this Thursday to assign committees. The dinner is in six weeks. I also have an idea of something extra special you could work on. Let me know if you’re interested.

Take care and God bless your week,
Randy

Kari sighed deeply as she finished reading Randy’s e-mail, remembering how over the weekend Emily had talked her into working on this very same charity team. I guess Emily has her reasons for trying to get me together with Randy. She only wished Emily would leave well enough alone. So much for steering clear of Randy Steele. Sitting closer to her computer, she replied to Randy’s message.

Dear Randy:

Sorry I couldn’t linger after services but I really did need to get home early today. Busy, busy, busy. As for working on that charity, I’ll let you know Emily already talked me into it over the weekend. So, I guess I will be seeing you very soon and very often for the next month and a half.

Kari

P.S. What’s this extra special something you want me to work on?

****

Randy stood in his living room next to the fireplace, waiting for the rest of the charity committee to arrive. His eyes restlessly glanced at the clock on the mantle, his “Randolph” Seth Thomas clock. It was the one tangible reminder of the inheritance he’d received along with his hefty trust fund after the death of his grandmother. The intricate vine patterned dial showed five more minutes until the other members should arrive. He had hoped Kari would’ve arrived early. She’d rushed off so quickly on Sunday he hadn’t had a real chance to speak with her.

“Randy, what are you so antsy about?” asked Alice as she came into the living room with a glass of lemonade in her hand.

“I’m fine. I guess I’ll go make some coffee,” he said, not knowing what to do with himself. “Everyone should be here soon.”

“What are you all doing tonight anyway?”

“I told you we’re working on the charity dinner for Angel Wing.”

“Oh, that’s right, Angel Wing. How is the shelter doing anyway?”

“Great. Mrs. Wilson is still running it, but now that our church has gotten involved they’ve been able to help a lot more women.”

The sound of the doorbell rang off in the distance. “Hey, Randy, you want me to get the door?”

“Kari, is that you?”

The lights flipped back on. “In the flesh.”

Her smile made him want to forget the whole evening and just take her away somewhere so they could be alone.

Randy laughed quietly at his sister and then pointed at the door as the bell rang out again.

In the kitchen, Randy made some coffee and then set out the sugar, powered French vanilla creamer, mugs, and spoons. As the coffee percolated, he filled a large bowl with potato chips. After opening the refrigerator, he pulled out the tray of finger sandwiches the senior pastor’s wife had made especially for tonight. As he situated all his snacks on the counter, the lights turned off.

“Hey,” he yelled as he turned in the direction of the door.

“Well, I heard a horror story from Alice, and I just couldn’t bear to see it with my own eyes.”

“Kari, it that you?”

Her smile made him want to forget the whole evening and just take her away somewhere so they could be alone.
“You are working in the kitchen,” she said with mock dismay. “Anything I can do to help?”
He couldn’t help but smile at her. “Sure. Help me carry these things into the dinning room.”
“At your command,” she saluted.
Kari picked up the bowl of chips and the pitcher of lemonade as Randy carried the tray of sandwiches.
“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” said Randy as he hurried back into the kitchen. When he returned with napkins and paper plates, Kari was busy arranging the food decoratively around the small table. Randy smiled at her touches to his humble spread. She was dressed in jeans and a pink sweater with her light brown hair tied up in a ponytail. He thought she looked cute, almost like the college girls she taught each day.

“Thanks for the help, Kari.”
She glanced up with a particular smile and a gleam in her beautiful green eyes. “Not a problem.”
“You seem to be in a good mood today.”
“I am.”
“Any particular reason?”
“Not exactly. I just have felt really good these past couple days. I don’t know...I guess maybe God is finally getting through to me to get over myself. Your message last week really helped.”

“Hey, you two,” said Emily, as she poked her head into the dining room. “Are we going to have this meeting or not?”

“Sure,” said Randy. “Have everyone grab a plate of food and meet back in the living room. There are also sodas in the fridge and coffee in the kitchen.”

****

Everyone huddled around the food, selecting what they wanted and then later settled back into Randy’s snug living room. Kari liked the room. It was cozy yet comfortable enough to hold the ten volunteers that night. She glanced around the room at the personal touches Randy had made to the house and wondered if she knew another guy with such great taste. She especially liked the beautiful clock on the mantle. It looked old and spectacular with its cherry wood veneer and antique hands.

When everyone was sitting either on furniture or the floor, Randy spoke up. “Well, I’m glad you all could make it. I’ve been looking forward to this night. This benefit we’re planning will help Angel Wing. For those of you unfamiliar with the shelter, let me fill you in on it. It was started by Marge Wilson about twenty years ago. The main purpose is to aid and minister to women and children running from abusive situations. They do really great work and have been able to see to the needs of a great number of those in trouble since several churches have come together to help them. I hope and pray this benefit will allow them to stay in operation for another strong year.”

“I’m hoping the benefit will get them media attention so more people will be aware of the work the shelter does,” said John Richards. “I’ve been working on that side of things already. Should I share what we’re doing, Randy?”

“Sure, go ahead. After that I’ll let everyone know what committees we have and then you all can decide where you think you can serve best.” He smiled at the group as he finished up, his eyes ending on Kari. She was caught in his gaze, held prisoner for a moment until John began to speak. After veering her attention toward the speaker, she couldn’t help but turn back and examine Randy some more. She could see in his face how much he enjoyed all this. Here was a man who gave his whole heart to helping others. Kari returned her eyes to John and listened to the plans they were making to publicize the benefit. Afterwards, Randy had them sign up for the different committees.

An hour later, everyone sat in their committee groups, making plans when Randy announced there was dessert.

“Come on, Kari,” called Emily. “I brought a chocolate cheesecake.”

“Chocolate cheesecake? What made you bring that?”
“I asked Randy if I could bring a dessert and he suggested it. It sounded great to me. I never knew a man who loved chocolate as much as a woman.”

After dessert, everyone started taking off for their respective homes while Kari stayed behind to help with the clean up. She was in the kitchen rinsing out coffee mugs when Randy came in.

“You really don’t have to do that, Kari.”
“I don’t mind. It’s the least I can do after you opened your home up to everyone. It was really nice this evening.”

“Thanks.”
“Oh and tell your parents for me that this house is great.” She smiled as she placed another mug in the drain board.
“I’ll do that.” He leaned back against the counter opposite from her. “So, you really like it?”
“Sure, it’s charming. I mean it is small but it serves its purpose and it seems to have the character all these new track homes lack.” She placed the last mug down and dried her hands with a dishtowel.
“I completely agree with you. One day when I buy my own home, I plan on getting one that is well broken in with lots of character.”
“Emily is the exact opposite. She wants a brand new home with nothing wrong with it. I kinda like the homes with broken fences and drooping curtains.”

“Kari, I really want to thank you for coming tonight.”
“No,” she put the dishtowel down and walked toward him. “I want to thank you. I’m really pleased to be a part of this. I go about my daily routine and rarely put myself out there to help others. I’ve felt the Holy Spirit working on my heart to do more. Besides, this could be very therapeutic for me.”

“I’m sure you’re right. There is no better cure for our own ailments than helping others.”
She nodded her head to him. “You are very wise,” she twisted her mouth into a teasing smile.

“I’ve been told so,” he stood up tall, playfully pulling on his shirt collar.
“Has everyone gone home?”
“Just about. Brittany and Ethan MacFayden are working on some details in the living room.”
“Well, I should be going myself.” She started toward the dining room where her coat and purse sat on the table.

“Are you taking the train tonight?” Randy asked, walking right behind her.
“Yes, I have classes in the morning.”
“Let me drive you to the station.”
She turned around and faced him. “Do you have a car?”
“As a matter a fact, I do.”
Her first inclination was to refuse the offer, but then she remembered Randy was a friend, trying to do the right thing by her. Plus she really did like him. “Okay. I appreciate it. Thanks.”

“Why don’t you collect your things, and I’ll meet you on the front porch. I’m just going to ask Ethan to lock everything up for me.”

“Sure. Okay.”

****
Randy talked to Ethan and then grabbed his wallet and keys before walking toward the front door. He was glad to spend a little more time with Kari. One-on-one time. Previous to today, it had been clear she hadn’t accepted him as anything more than a friend. The question was had she worked through the complications of her engagement break-up in order for her to see him as something more?

As Kari stood on the front porch, the moonlight seemed to be playing tricks with his mind because Kari’s amazing green eyes looked ethereal. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her, but he thought she just might not be ready for that. He only hoped he could ask her out on a real date and for her to say yes. If only I had a sign she was ready, Lord.

He led her over to where his ancient sedan was parked behind the house. Opening the door for her, she slid inside. He pushed the door closed and a loud grinding moan came from it as it shut.

“Let me guess,” she said after he took his seat inside. “You’ve had this thing since college.”
“You got it. I’ve thought about getting a new car, but it just hasn’t been a priority.”

“Don’t worry. I think you have your priorities straight. Most of the guys I know care more about their cars and appearance than anything else. You are a refreshing being, Randy Steele.”

She touched his arm affectionately, her fingers lingering on his hand for a moment. Randy didn’t know what to think. Is this the sign? Is she beginning to care for me as more than a friend?

As if she could read his mind, she answered his question. “I’ve decided it’s nice to have a friend like you, Randy.”

“A friend like me?”

“Someone who I can trust with my inner thoughts and feelings. Someone who won’t judge me and who isn’t working on his own agenda.”

Guilt clawed at his gut. He knew he had an agenda with Kari. He wanted her to like and trust him, but it wasn’t just for her sake. He wanted her to like him for his own sake—to be more than her confidant.

“Uh, thanks, I guess that’s a compliment, right?”

“The greatest compliment. By the way, I have to compliment you again.”

“Oh, yeah.” He looked over at her as they drove.

“Yeah, you really have decorated that little house of yours nicely. I especially liked your mantle clock.”
“Ah, my namesake.”
“What do you mean, your namesake?”
“That clock belonged to my dear grandmother. It’s called Randolph.”
“The clock has a name.” She started laughing and before long tears glistened in her glowing eyes. It was infectious. Randy started laughing too while trying to pay attention to the road.
Finally catching his breath, Randy added, “It’s not that the clock was named by my grandmother. It’s a Seth Thomas clock and that model is called the ‘Randolph’.”
“Oh, I see,” said Kari while tears of joy streamed down her face.
“Grandmother loved that clock because Grandfather bought it for her on their first wedding anniversary.”
“How sweet. But is that what you were named after?”
“It sounds ridiculous, but it’s true. Grandmother asked Mom so here I am. When my grandmother died, she left me the clock.”
“Well, it’s a great story to tell your grandchildren.”
Randy cleared his throat and glanced at Kari out of the corner of his eye. “Yeah, my grandchildren.”
They pulled up to the train station and Kari grabbed onto the door handle ready to open it. “Hold on. Let me get that,” said Randy, exiting the car from his side and running over to the other side of the vehicle. He pulled it open, and Kari stepped out. Randy shut the door, and they both leaned back on his car.
“Thanks for the ride. That was nice of you.”
“No, problem. I look forward to seeing you on Saturday.”
“Right. I think this fundraiser is going to be great. So, you never told me what this ‘extra special something’ was that you want me to do for the benefit.”
“Oh, right, that,” said Randy, feeling impulsive. He slid his hand over so that it touched hers on the hood of the car. “I was just thinking that the entertainment committee could use your help.”
She cocked her head, a look of confusion crossing her features. “But I’m already working on another committee.”
“I know, but this would be special.”
“Randy, what are you working on now?” In the dim light, he saw her eyes crinkled up in agitation.
Randy, still leaning back on the car, crossed his arms and glanced over at her with a villainous grin. “I thought maybe you could sing.”
Kari stood up straight, never looking more alarmed. “Sing? Me? I…I couldn’t.”
“Ah, why not? You can’t argue with the great success we had at the festival.” She didn’t look any more convinced. “Well, what if it was a duet?”
“A duet?”
“Yes, a duet with…” he cleared his throat “…with me.”
“With you? Oh, Randy…”
“Just think about it.”
“Think about it. Well, all right.” She bit down on her lip as if weighing his suggestion. “No.” The word just seemed to explode out of her mouth as she shook her head.
“No,” repeated Randy. His heart fell, a heaviness centered in his chest.
“The old me would wiggle her way out of this. So, yes, I’ll do it. I’ll sing.”
Randy couldn’t believe it. He was sure a huge, goofy grin covered his entire face. “Really?”
“Well, it’s for a good cause.”
“It sure is. Well, great. We can set up some practice time.”
“Practice time?”
“Sure, you know, to practice.”
“Right, practice. Okay.” Her look of resolve had now been replaced with uneasiness.
“Is there a problem?”
“No, I just have some rewrites due for my book this month, but …well, never mind. It will work out.” She glanced at her watch. “I really should get going. Thanks again for the ride.”
“Of course.”
She gave him one more look, her eyes bright and sparkly, before taking a step away from the car.
“Kari?” Randy called to her, touching her arm.
She turned back to him. “Yes?”
Randy’s hand slid down her arm until he held her hand in his own. “I…uh…I just wanted to say thanks again for helping out.”
She smiled at him and his heart flipped in his chest. “No problem. See you soon.”
“Right. Soon. Goodnight.”
“Goodnight, Randy.”

She headed into the station as he stood there and watched her. He let her leave without asking her out, but he knew if he moved too quickly it would turn her off from him forever. For now, they were friends. For the time being, he could live with that especially with her working so closely on the benefit with him.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Ten

“Kari, the menu looks wonderful,” said Mrs. Wilson, the manager of the Angel Wing Shelter. The gray eyes behind her steel framed glasses continued to move over the paperwork in front of them as she spoke, “I never imagined this dinner was going to be so elegant.”

“Well, it just goes to show what we can do with two weeks of hard work.”

“I’m just happy you found this caterer.”

“Mr. Parker was happy to do his part by offering us the food and his services for below cost. He’s been going to my church as long as I can remember. I only hope the decorating committee has as much good fortune finding a site for the benefit as we have had with the food.”

Kari stared down at the menu she had drafted after her conversation with Mr. Parker. Appetizers of Italian antipasto, shrimp cocktail, and bruschetta. Followed by entrées including roasted salmon, poached jumbo shrimps and scallops, and sirloin steak. To complete the meal, there would also be green tossed salads, dinner rolls, finger desserts, coffee and tea.

“Kari, Kari,” shouted Emily as she pranced into the room, smiling from ear to ear.

“What are you so excited about?”

“We have a venue for the benefit and you’ll never guess where.” Emily had never looked so excited, well, except for when she announced John had finally popped the question.

“So, just tell me.” Kari stood and stepped toward her cousin.

“We’re going to hold it at The Madison Hotel.”

“How can we afford that?” asked Mrs. Wilson with concern etched into her face.

“That’s the best part. The manger heard about our benefit and wanted to offer us a small room for half the rate, but then someone cancelled the Manhattan room. We are getting their largest, most elegant room for the half rate price on the small conference room. Can you believe it?”

“That’s fantastic.” Kari was in awe. She couldn’t believe how God had smiled on their venture.

“God provides, doesn’t he?” Mrs. Wilson spoke so low it was almost a whisper as she held up her clasped hands in front of her.

“He sure does,” Kari replied.

“Well, I have to go. John is driving me over to the hotel so I can meet with the event manager.”

“I’ll talk to you later. I have singing practice with Randy and then I’m catching the 4:30 train.”

“Right. Have a good trip.” Emily hugged her cousin goodbye before heading out to her husband waiting in the car.

“Kari, I can finish this up,” said Mrs. Wilson. “Why don’t you go see Randy?”

“Thanks. I think I will.”

“He’s on the phone in my office.”

Heading down the hallway, Kari felt lightness in her step and excitement flowing through her. She couldn’t wait to tell Randy the good news. She knew how hard he’d been working on this benefit. She’d been working alongside him, setting up the details and using real elbow grease to make this event perfect. The one snag had been the venue and now that was settled.

The past couple weeks had been great. She enjoyed her time with Randy even if it had been spent working hard. There had also been times in between when they had teased each other and played around and then times when they shared more about their desires and their weakness. This was especially true during their singing practice. He’d become a great confidant. She almost felt as close to him as she did to Emily. She thanked God that He had used her clumsy accident to form such an important friendship at a time when she really needed it.

Standing at the entrance to Mrs. Wilson’s office, she observed Randy on the telephone, trying to work out some other angle of the benefit. He hung up the phone with a frown and rubbed his temple before he noticed her standing there.

“Hey, Kari, what’s up?”

“I have good news for you.”

“Great. I could use some.” He sat forward in his chair.

“We have a place to hold the benefit.”

“Really.” The frown on his face transformed into a beaming smile. “I’ve just been trying to work that out.”

“Well, it seems the Madison Hotel heard about the benefit and offered us a small room at half the rate.”

“That’s unbelievable.” He smiled with the spectacular grin that made her heart flutter.
“If you think that’s unbelievable, you won’t believe this. They offered us their Manhattan room because the group who booked it for that night cancelled.”
“I…uh…how can they do that? I just can’t…”
“Stumbling over your words there, Pastor.”
“I’m just in awe. Kari, God works, doesn’t He?”
“He sure does.”
“I just heard from John that invitations to the event have been accepted by many of the well-known patrons in the city.”
“Looks like this benefit is going to be better than you ever envisioned.”
“If you pray and leave all the details to God, He always provides.”
“Yes, I’m seeing that. Well, should we go practice?” asked Kari.
“Come on, you’ve worked hard this afternoon. Let me take you to get something to eat instead of practice today. I’ll drive you to the station afterward.”
“But we still need the practice.” She stood beside the desk with her hands on her hips.
“You are a slave driver. I’ll come up Monday night for a session. How does that sound?”
“Sounds terrific.”

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Sunday after church, Kari felt content about how things were going in her life. She taught a Sunday school class and sang another solo in the church service that morning. The last few weeks had been very busy for her with her work on the benefit, her teaching schedule, and her church duties. Her book had lain untouched for weeks, but she wasn’t complaining. She hadn’t been this happy with her life in a long time. She could feel the love of God around her in all she did, and she knew she was beginning to heal from her experience with Geoffrey.

She made herself some lunch and decided to sit in the downstairs breakfast room of the dorm and look out at the fall color all around. The trees had their October leaves of brown, red, and yellow. The ground was covered with them as well and she enjoyed the view. The air outside was turning brisk; it was fun to have to put on socks, shoes, and a sweater just to walk over to the mailboxes each day. Kari liked cool weather. Fall and winter were her favorite. She enjoyed buying gloves and scarves then bundles up in her long, wool coat.

As fall was now in full swing, it also meant it was about time for her birthday. She wasn’t sure about turning twenty-nine. Emily said it was great and she looked forward to her thirties. Kari hoped she was right. In the past, thirty seemed so old and that time just seemed to be stalking her.

As she sat eating her lunch, her cell phone began ringing in her pocket. Pulling it out, she saw Emily was calling. “Hi, how are you?” answered Kari cheerily.
“I’m fine. How are you, Kari?” Emily didn’t sound like her usual positive self which worried Kari.
“What’s wrong?”
“You always seem to know. Nothing is really wrong? I’m fine. It’s just…have you seen the Times today?”
“No. Why do you ask?”
“I think you should get a copy and look at the announcement section. Then call me.”
“Okay,” said Kari, not liking Emily’s cryptic behavior. “I’ll call you later.”

After hastily finishing her lunch, she walked into the empty parlor, knowing the girls sometimes left the newspaper in there when they were finished with it. She saw a copy lying on the coffee table. She sat on the couch and opened it up. After shuffling through to the announcements, she stared at the picture looking back at her before crumpling it up and running back to her room with the paper still in her hand.

****

Kari was incensed as she stared down at her engagement ring resting on her opened palm. Well, not her engagement ring any longer, her ex-engagement ring. She just wanted to throw it into the deepest depths of the ocean and never look at it again. She closed her hand over it and sat down at her desk, forcing herself to peer at the newspaper photo of Geoffrey and Blair’s wedding. It was one thing to know an event is to take place; it is quite another thing to see that the deed is done.

As the ring rubbed against her palm, all she felt was anger. Not at him, but at herself. Geoffrey hadn’t wanted the ring back after their break-up, and so she’d kept this reminder of her failure and of a life she was never going to have. It hurt. She didn’t feel the loss of Geoffrey; she felt the loss of what she never had to begin with. She was mad at herself because she thought she was over all of this. The last couple weeks had been so great. She hadn’t felt this kind of regret and insecurity in awhile, and now here she was feeling it wash over her all over again.

With the ring still tightly clenched in her fist, she got up from her desk and lay down on her bed. She
closed her eyes, placed the closed hand over her heart and then covered it with her other hand. She lay there for a few moments, waiting for her heart to stop pounding and for her anger to dissipate. Opening her stinging eyes, she turned her head and saw the note Randy had sent to her just a couple days ago. Putting the ring down on her side table, she picked up the note.

She re-read the passage that had brought her solace the day before. Whatever may have happened in your past doesn’t have to dictate your future. You can make the choice to come out the victor. The decision is yours. Just remember this: ‘I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.’ Philippians 4:13. God is with you, supporting you. I’m here for you, too, Kari.

She put down the note and grabbed up the ring again. Making a decision, she left the dorm with the ring still in her hand, heading for Main Street. Walking down the street, she came to Miller’s Jewelry. Entering the establishment, the owner himself met her at the counter. “Good afternoon, Kari,” his warm voice greeted her.

“Hi, Mr. Miller. I have something I’d like you to look at.” She placed the ring into his open palm.

The jeweler pulled out his loupe, examining the ring. “It appears to be in superb condition. Do you want a cleaning because I don’t see that it needs any repairs?”

“No, not a cleaning. I want to sell it. Do you think you can appraise it for me?”

“Sure. Leave it with me and I’ll get you a good price.”

“Thanks.”

Kari left the store, pulling her jacket closely around her shoulders as a vigorous wind whipped her hair around in the breeze. She smiled. When she got the money, she knew exactly what she would do with it. She would donate it to Angel Wing. Finally, some of Geoffrey’s money would be put to good use.

Her decision—it had been to make sure her past didn’t dictate her future. It didn’t have a hold on her any longer. She did have a future. She didn’t know what it was exactly, but now she hoped her past couldn’t haunt her any longer.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
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Chapter Eleven

Kari entered the Manhattan Ballroom of the Madison Hotel with the benefit already in full swing. She looked up at the large windows which encircled the room, covered in a spring green floral drapery. The carpet was a similar shade. She eyed society’s who’s who as she glanced about the room. The turn out was terrific. The promised patrons were in attendance along with an actress from a play she’d seen last month and a movie star couple from the other coast. She hoped they wouldn’t be disappointed by this simple benefit. Finally, her eyes fell onto Emily. She quickly made her way across the room to newlywed Mr. and Mrs. Richards.

“Kari,” called Emily before embracing her.

“Can you believe this,” said Kari, motioning to the rest of the room with her hand.

Emily’s eyes were busy looking around. “The place looks wonderful.”

Kari peered around at the ballroom, taking in the draped green fabric hanging from the ceiling as well as the antique hanging lanterns and the small tables set with gorgeous pale pink floral arrangements and votive candles.

“Yes, everything looks like it came together pretty well,” added John.

“So, was all your hard work worth it, Kari?” asked Emily.

“Yes. I really enjoyed it. It was exactly what I needed. I had to focus on others and in the process forgot about my own woes…at least momentarily.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Randy as well,” said Emily apparently fishing for information.

Kari was hesitant in her answer. “Uh, yes, I have. He has really been great.”

Then as if on cue, Randy walked up to the group. “Good evening, Emily and John.” He turned his attention to their companion. “Hello, Kari.” He took in a view of her from top to bottom. “You look wonderful.”

Kari couldn’t help but blush. “Hello, Randy.” He was dressed in a black tuxedo with his dark hair combed back to perfection. And that’s what he looked like, perfection in a neat little package. Although, Randy was anything but little.

“You ready for your society début?” Randy asked her.

Kari sighed deeply. “No, but I guess I don’t have a choice. I’m committed or maybe I should be committed.”

Randy smiled at her joke, and Emily laughed out loud.

“You’ll be great, Kari. You two harmonize perfectly,” said Emily, looking as if she intended all that her statement suggested.

Kari gazed at Randy from the corner of her eye, observing his signature smile.

The evening progressed just as planned. The food was magnificent, served to perfection. Comments trickled around the room on how much everyone was enjoying themselves. The evening continued with Kari and Randy’s concert of three songs.

As they sang together, it felt right to be standing beside him, so natural. When she sang with him at the art festival, it had been so last minute that her heart was in her throat. On this occasion, though, they had practiced so much she experienced very little performance anxiety. She felt more nervous by the smiles Randy kept sending her way. As their small concert ended and the clapping commenced, her thoughts were turned to how happy she was to have contributed as much as she was able to this much needed cause.

Between the price of dinner and the auction held after dinner, they earned enough money to keep the shelter running for many years. Kari was glad she had taken the time to be a part of this event even though her book editor kept threatening her about deadlines. In her heart, she knew that most of her personal issues emanated from selfishness and focusing on herself. As much as she had contributed to this benefit, the work had also contributed to her healing.

Kari hadn’t seen much of Randy during the entire evening besides their initial meeting and their singing engagement. He was busy keeping things going and talking to the right people. At the end of the night, she walked through the crowds, nodding at a few guests as she made her way around the room. She was curious to find Randy and see what he was up to before she left for the night. After circling the room once, she never set eyes on him. She decided it was time to leave. As she started for the exit, she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She spun around until she was face to face with her conquest.

Randy still looked as calm and perfect as he did at the beginning of the night while her hair was already slipping out of all the hair pins she had so carefully placed earlier that afternoon. “Hey, do I know you?” He
gave her a silly smile.

“I don’t know, but you look vaguely familiar. It’s so weird.” She tipped her head to the side and gave him her best smile.

“Sorry I haven’t been around much tonight.” He honestly appeared sad that he hadn’t spent more time with her as he observed the disappointment reflected in his eyes.

“I know you had business to deal with. It looks like this event has….”

Randy reached up and moved aside a piece of her renegade hair which had slipped out of it’s confines. He looked into her eyes. “You had a…a…”

“A hair thing.” She tried to laugh but his eyes were so intense she couldn’t bring herself to finish it.

“Kari…” The sound of her name snapped her out of her trance.

They both turned to the left to see who had called her. It was Geoffrey and his arm decoration, Blair, walking towards them.

“Geoffrey,” said Kari stunned at his appearance. “I’m surprised to see you. How are you, Blair?” she asked, turning her attention to Geoffrey’s young bride. “I heard about the wedding. I’m sure it was beautiful.”

Blair smiled at her. “It was very beautiful.” Her genuine sweetness showed on her face. As insincere as Geoffrey seemed anymore, Blair appeared to be the exact opposite. Either that or she was a great actress.

“When is your wedding taking place?” asked Geoffrey, looking at Randy. “You don’t want anyone else to steal away this beautiful lady.” He actively eyed Kari as he stepped close enough so that his sleeve rubbed against her arm, forcing her to take a step backwards.

Kari couldn’t believe Geoffrey. Here he was forcing his unwanted advances on her right in front of his wife. She wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

Randy took a step closer to Geoffrey. “I think you should keep your eyes and your mind on your own wife.” His voice filled with protectiveness while his expression clouded with anger.

Kari stared at Randy in disbelief.

“Hey, I didn’t do anything,” responded Geoffrey. His jaw tensed up the way he always did before he exploded.

“You didn’t?” questioned Randy. “How about the time you thought you could convince Kari to see you while you were engaged to Blair?”

A soft gasp escaped Blair as she let go of Geoffrey’s hand, pure distain apparent on her face.

“You know about that, huh?” replied Geoffrey. He didn’t seem to be one bit embarrassed about his improper behavior.

“Sure. You made Kari feel the only way she could get out from under your grasp was to pretend to be engaged. Since you already supposed she was engaged to me, we just continued the façade for your benefit.”

“You’re not engaged?” Geoffrey said with a snicker as he looked at Kari.

He was so smug; she just wanted to slap his face. Instead, she straightened to her full height. “No, we’re not engaged. I should have told you the truth.”

“She wanted to tell you, but you made that pretty difficult,” said Randy. “All that is really beside the point. I don’t care who you think you are. Kari Montgomery is not available to you anymore. She has people to protect her from the likes of you. Go home and patch things up with your own wife. She’s supposed to be the most important person in your life, why not act like it.”

“Why I ought to…” Geoffrey began but never finished as he noticed Blair had left his side. He walked away searching her out after sending a heated glare at Randy.

Kari was astounded with Randy. He stood there seeming so tall and protective. She gazed at him with admiration welling within her and feeling safe for the first time in a long while. “Randolph Steele…”

“You aren’t mad are you? I had to control myself or I just might have hit him.”

“I almost wish you had, although, this probably isn’t the best place and it probably wouldn’t have been the best way to handle the situation. ‘Discretion is more than eloquence.’”

“Sir Francis Bacon.”

“That’s right.” Kari laughed. “Although I believe he was referring to your speech, but still, thank you, Randy.

“I never want you to feel trapped and scared by someone like him again.”

She stared into his wonderful eyes. “I don’t think I will.”

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As the evening ended, Randy walked with Kari back to Emily and John’s where she had already agreed to spend the night. Soon they found themselves strolling alone through the downtown area right outside the hotel.

“I’m still amazed this event went off without a hitch,” said Kari.
“You mean despite all the setbacks we’ve had since the beginning.” He gave her another one of his silly grins.

“Exactly.”

Randy walked beside her with his hands in his pockets. “I guess we won’t be seeing each other as much anymore.”

“You’re right.” She looked up with a troubled face, her wistful green eyes peering back at him. “I think I’ll miss seeing you.”

Randy felt his pulse increase at her words. He knew he would miss seeing her. Working with her on this project had been nearly perfect. He’d seen her in action as a Christian woman, engaged in God’s work. He’d loved being with her, laughing with her, and talking with her over the past six weeks. During that time, he’d grown to care for her in a way unlike anything he’d every experienced, yet he still wasn’t sure how she felt about him. He knew tonight he had to chance it. He had to know if their friendship had a chance to blossom into anything more.

“Kari, I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, but I have really enjoyed our time together.”

“I don’t think I would take that the wrong way. I like it when people like spending time with me.” An easy smile played at the corners of her mouth.

Randy smiled back at her humor. “That wasn’t what I meant.” He took a deep breath. “I was just hoping… I mean…I just wondered if you might like to go out sometime…” He felt tense as he gazed at her expectantly. “…like on a real date.”

Kari looked awestruck. She was unable to answer him initially and then when her jaw unfroze she stared back at him with indignant eyes. “Pastor, I don’t think that would be wise.”

“We’re back to Pastor, are we?”

Her look softened and she gave him a reassuring smile. “No, Randy, I don’t want you to think I haven’t enjoyed our time together. I have. But I just…”

“That’s the trouble with being a young, single pastor—either women don’t think I should date them or they look for everything I say and do as a sign of my affection.”

“I’m sorry.” Her green eyes glistened with moisture.

“For what? I just put my foot in it. I thought we were enjoying each other and that we might like to continue the friendship.”

“I’ve enjoyed the friendship.”

“So, what’s the problem, Kari?”

“I just don’t think we should go beyond the realm of friendship.”

“You remember the first time we met?”

“Sure, I ran right into a brick wall,” she said with no sign of a smile.

He smiled slightly, remembering the day three months ago when she literally ran into him. “Well, I don’t believe things happen by accident. God always has a plan. We are not usually privy to what His plan is at the time, but He knows. I think God knew we needed to meet. He meant for us to help each other and maybe…” He paused for a moment, feeling overwhelmed by emotion and frustration. “I just think maybe you should give it a chance. I want you to know that I’m not entering into this lightly. I’ve prayed and given this a lot of thought because…well…because you are in my thoughts quite often…”

Kari cleared her throat nervously and looked away from him for a moment.

 “…and because I know this is an important step in our friendship. I pray for you every day. I pray God would heal your wounds. I pray He would send someone into your life who will be the solace you need. And not merely that, but the true love of your life. I’m not saying that’s me, but if you can’t even meet me or anyone else for coffee or go out to dinner then you are shutting yourself off from the wonderful life God has planned for you.”

Kari looked at him in silence, the truth of his words seeming to soak into her soul. “I’m sorry, Randy. I just can’t.” A tear slid down her cheek. He wanted to wipe it away with all her other pain. Whether she could ever love him, he wanted her to find freedom from all the anguish that enslaved her.

She headed off down the street looking for a cab, when he raced up to her. He grabbed her right hand and swung her gently around to face him. Pulling her close he said, “Just tell me this then, is it me or you? I know the line is cliché, but tell me anyway.”

She gazed at him with her green eyes flashing in the moonlight, the scent of her rose perfume engulfing him. “It isn’t you, Randy. I can’t imagine anyone with more to give than you, but I wouldn’t be right for you.”

He squeezed her hand tighter. “Will you be right for anyone, Kari? You have to decide if you are valuable enough to be with anyone again. God will help you, but you have to let Him in. Even if you won’t let me in,
you must let God.” He reluctantly let go of her, desiring her more than ever.

“I know, Randy. Pray for me.” Another tear tumbled down her face, leaving a path of moisture behind it.

“Always,” he said softly, feeling his heart tear ever so slightly as he let her go.

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When a cab stopped in front of them, Randy helped Kari inside. The tears caught up with her as the taxi took off. She shook with emotion not knowing which side was up, not knowing which way to turn and feeling so mixed up. She closed her eyes, causing the burning hot tears to brim over as she silently prayed, Dear God, please help me. Help me! I don’t know if I can love anyone ever again or that I even deserve to be loved. I’ve tried to get over this, but I don’t feel I have anything to give. Please be with Randy. I know he wants the best for me. Help him to understand this has nothing to with him.

When Randy asked her out, she had felt exposed. Her support in time of trouble was trying to change their relationship. She loved the way he had protected her against Geoffrey. With him she felt safe and secure and now he was moving over to the side of the enemy. She was fond of Randy, but their relationship was one of friendship. She wasn’t ready to change that.

She had to admit she was attracted to him, but she just couldn’t imagine herself being more than a friend to anyone right now. Now he wanted to change all that. She was just getting to the point of feeling normal and vital again, but she still didn’t feel ready to accept someone else into her life just yet. All this made her fall backwards from the headway she’d made over the past couple months. She was back to feeling worthless especially as she remembered the hurt in Randy’s beautiful eyes.

When he’d told her she was shutting herself off from the life God had planned for her, she knew he was right. She knew she needed to accept that her past was behind her, and she needed to let it all go so she could heal and become the woman God intended for her to be. She needed to, but she couldn’t. Not yet. Not completely.

It was all so difficult. It would be easier to just shut everyone out again and live her own simple life. But that isn’t right. I can’t live my life this way. I can’t let what Geoffrey did to me ruin my life. God wants so much more for me. Maybe he did send Randy into that rainstorm to save me, but why can’t I let him in?

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Twelve

The next week, Kari was back into her old routine. Without the extra work of the benefit or the constant reminder of Randy, she reverted back into her shell. Except this time it was worse. She wanted no contact with anyone—no emails, no phone calls, and no visits. She was decidedly depressed, but she was also trying to gain some perspective on her life.

By the next Sunday, she was convicted by her behavior. She needed to get out of her rut. One thought kept going through her mind. Randy can help you—call him. Then she thought, No, Randy is the root of my problem. Needing to make sense of her jumbled thoughts, she stayed after morning services to speak to the pastor’s wife, Judith Elton.

“How can I help you with something, Kari?” asked Judith.

“Maybe,” replied Kari with a deep sigh.

“Is something troubling you?”

“I’ve just been thinking that I really enjoyed working on the charity benefit, and I thought maybe there was something more I could do here around the church.”

“Well, it is interesting that you ask because there is something. We’re starting another Thursday night teen girl’s Bible study, and we need someone to lead it. The current class is just getting too large. So, we want to start a second one. Do you think you could handle that?”

“A teen Bible study? Would lead it…all by myself?”

Mrs. Elton smiled and nodded. “It could be something you’ll really enjoy. It’s a small group of eight. The girls are all really sweet, and I think they’ll like you too. They aren’t a troublesome group. They just need some guidance.”

It was no mistake that this had come along. God wanted her to serve Him and here was her chance. “All right, Mrs. Elton, I’ll take it on.”

“Great. I’ll get the phone numbers for the girls in the group, and you can set up a time and place for the Bible study. I’m really glad you asked, Kari, because I have had a real burden on my heart to find a leader for these girls. I would have taken it on myself if I didn’t already have a group of my own on Thursdays.”

“I certainly hope I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Mrs. Elton had been right. The study was going very well. After only two weeks Kari was really beginning to love these girls. They were young thirteen and fourteen year olds, but they were genuinely sweet and accepting of Kari, which was exactly what she needed.

Even with the added responsibility of the Bible study, she still had time to think about what she didn’t want to think about. Most of the time, it happened at night just when she was trying to get to sleep. She would lie in her bed, close her eyes and Randy’s face would pop into her mind. She’d toss and turn, and then there he would be again. She could hear his words too, ‘Will you be right for anyone, Kari…Even if you won’t let me in, you must let in God.’

One night after going through this regiment, she sat up in bed and yelled out at him, “Just leave me alone, leave me alone.” Then she threw herself back down on the bed, covered her head with her pillow and concentrated on the Bible verses she was having her study group memorize until she finally fell into a fitful sleep.

When her birthday came around, Kari was finally thankful she didn’t have any family to force her into a party. She remained resolute in not wanting any contact with her friends. Emily threatened to come over there and induce her to celebrate her birthday, but Kari warned her she better not even try. Emily gave in and left her alone.

Even though she didn’t come to celebrate, Emily did send her a gift. It was a ceramic bell with her birth flower etched into the background and her birthstone in the handle. Kari disliked the November birthstone, that yellowish-orange topaz. The bell, though, was actually quite beautiful with the chrysanthemum imprinted on the front. She turned it around to the back to see written in yellow print: “This flower stands for cheerfulness, optimism and truth.” Now Kari understood why Emily had sent the bell. It had a message, and the message had been received. She didn’t dismiss the gift. Placing it on her nightstand, she admired it from the doorway. It was a beautiful piece. After picking up her satchel, she took off for her morning class.
When she returned to the dorm later that afternoon, the senior on duty at the front desk caught her attention. “You had a delivery this afternoon, Kari.”

Kari walked over to the desk, wondering what it could possible be. She wasn’t expecting any other packages. The girl pulled out a large box onto the counter.

“Thanks,” said Kari as she picked up the box. It wasn’t heavy just bulky. She heaved it over to the stairway, then lumbered up the stairs and into her room with it.

After placing it on her sitting room coffee table, she examined the address label. There was no return address, only her own. She opened the box with trepidation, still questioning who had sent it. She removed a wrapped object. Pulling the paper away, it revealed a clock—the same clock she had seen on Randy’s living room mantle. It must be from him. She just couldn’t figure out why he would send her such a valued gift. It defied logical explanation. She wasn’t even talking to him and here he sent her one of his most precious family heirlooms. His namesake as he called it. She studied the face of the clock to see imprinted on the elaborate vine pattern the words ‘Seth Thomas’ and under it in smaller print ‘Randolph’. She wanted to cuddle the clock in her arms like a newborn baby. It was precious. It was just a clock, yet it meant so much. She knew she shouldn’t keep it. It was so valuable to him and not in a monetary sense. She couldn’t send it back. She wanted to keep it; she needed to keep it.

At nine o’clock, a knock sounded on her door. “Yes?” Kari called out.

“It’s just me, Alice Steele.”

Kari cringed inside. She hadn’t been too friendly to Alice lately. Whenever they were in the same room and Alice looked like she was going to come over and talk to her, Kari made some excuse to leave. She didn’t want Alice to ask the questions she wasn’t ready to answer. Even more she didn’t want to tempt herself into asking the questions she wanted to know about Randy.

In a pleasant voice, she called back to Alice, “Come on in.”

Alice stepped into the room holding a cupcake with a lit candle sticking out of the gooey chocolate frosting. She looked at Kari and smiled as she closed the door quietly. “It’s your favorite, chocolate. I knew you probably didn’t want everyone to know it was your birthday since you seemed to be keeping it a secret, but I had to come and tell you ‘Happy Birthday’ myself.”

Kari motioned for her to come join her on the couch. Alice took a seat and handed the cupcake to Kari who took the treat and blew out the candle. “Thanks, Alice. I do appreciate the thought. I just haven’t wanted to celebrate just now, but thanks. I could ask you how you knew, but I think I already know.”

With a tiny smile in the corner of her mouth, Alice nodded at her. “Yes, Randy mentioned it to me. He said he was sending you a present. I never did find out what.” Looking past the box and paper on the table in front of them, she spotted the clock. She reached out and picked it up. Then she turned to focus her eyes on Kari. “He sent you his Randolph clock?”

“It seems so.”

“I can’t believe…I mean he would never…Kari, do you know how much he treasures this clock?”

“I’ve only been to his house the one time, but he told me later about the history of the clock.”

“Yes, it has family history and belonged to Grandmother Ferris. But more than that, it represented his independence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Randy knew when Grandmother died he would get the clock. She had always told him so. But what he didn’t know was that he would also inherit the trust fund my grandparents set up for him. When he got that money, he was able to do as he pleased.”

“And what did he do?”

“You know what he did. He went on and got his Doctorate of Divinity degree and took a job as a youth pastor at a small church because that is what he believed God had called him to do.”

“With all that money, that’s what he did?”

“Yes, actually I don’t know if he has spent any of it except in charitable ways. He still drives an old clunker car and everything. I don’t know that I’ll have the control he’s had.”

“I can’t believe…and this clock, it means a lot to him?”

“A lot. If he gave it to you it means…well…I don’t know what he meant by it but I have my suspicions.”

“Don’t say anymore, Alice. Thanks for the cupcake, but I really need to get back to my work.”

“Well, Happy Birthday, Kari.” She leaned over and gave her a hug before leaving.

Kari moved over to the clock and caressed the cherry wood finish. She pulled the rest of the wrapping paper from the box and an envelope fell onto her lap. She picked it up and silently read her name on the front. Taking it back to her desk, she sat there for a couple minutes just staring at it. She tapped it on the desktop and
then nervously stroked the flap before finally ripping it open.

She had cut herself off from Randy on purpose. She couldn’t handle being near him. It was just too hard. Throughout the three weeks that had gone by she had wanted to see him, talk to him, or just read his words. So, in tearing open the birthday card, she was feeling like most kids did on their birthday when they waited with bated breath for the unexpected surprise.

Dear Kari,

Let me start by saying, Happy Birthday. I hope it is a happy day for you. Now try to enjoy this last year of your twenties. Yes, Emily let it slip. How have you been? It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you. I’ve missed you and our talks. I worry about how you’re doing. Please take care of yourself and when you have the chance come by and see all of us here at Grace.

I have a favorite poet, and I thought I’d end with one of his poems. Consider it your birthday poem. After Lord Byron met a woman at a party, he came home and wrote the poem, “She Walks in Beauty.”

Kari stopped for a moment and with her hand wiped away the solitary tear that had slipped down past her nose. She was touched by his words. They were so normal and piqued with worry and care. He didn’t tell her “hey you’re being selfish and stupid.” No, instead, he expressed that he thought and worried about her. She looked back down at his note and started to read the poem.

She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies;

But it was when she came to the end that she realized why he had sent her the poem.

And on that cheek, and o’er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent. The smiles that win, the tints that glow, but tell of days in goodness spent. A mind at peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent!

A mind at peace, she read again. She had been trying to distance herself from Randy. But she just had to ask herself why. In the few moments she had allowed herself to listen to his words, she was encouraged again. She wanted so much to call him and thank him but she just couldn’t.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
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“Hey, little sis, what are you up to?” asked Randy while holding the phone receiver to his ear. He tried to sound calm and carefree as if this was just any other phone call.

“Am I glad to hear from you. I feel neglected. You haven’t called in ages.”

“I think it’s been a week.” His voice confirmed his sarcasm.

“Well, that’s like an age for you.”

“I actually had a reason for calling.”

“You want to know if Kari got your gift.”

Randy remained silent for a moment, his heart thumping rapidly in his chest. “She got it, huh?” His voice was low, trying to sound more composed than he felt inside.

“She sure did. Nice job sending her your clock. I think it made an impact on her.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I stopped by her room the night of her birthday and saw it. I told her a little bit more about Grandma and your money.”

“You told her about the money?” His voice rose an octave, irritation inherent in his tone.

“Why not? Was it a secret?”

“No.” He paused for a moment. I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

“So, what happened between you guys anyway? You never did tell me and Kari hasn’t been all that forthcoming lately.”

“Nothing happened,” he snapped at his sister. He stopped and closed his eyes for a second as he gained his composure. “Look,” his voice was soft this time, “the real reason I called was to tell you I’m going to stay with Mom and Dad for a little while.”

“What?” answered Alice. “You can’t be serious. The only time you ever see them is on Christmas and Easter and then you just try to get them to go to church.”

“I know. I just feel like going home.”

“All right, Randy. Well, I have to get going. I have a major paper due and the library is calling me.”

“Oh, I just wanted you to know where I was.”

“So, do you want me to pass this info on to someone I know?”

“No,” Randy said a bit harshly. “I mean no.” He lowered his voice again. “I’ve got to go.”

“All right big brother. Tell Mom and Dad hi for me.”

Randy hung up the phone attached to his kitchen wall and walked toward the dining room, brushing his fingers through his dark, thick hair. Finding a chair, he took a seat and folded his hands on the table. His eyes looked about the room restlessly. He leaned back in the chair and placed his hand on the back of his neck as he twisted his head back and forth, trying to work out the kink. Pushing up from the table, he got up again and walked out to the living room.

Looking outside, he glimpsed the sky darkening and wrapping the world up into the warm colors of an autumn sunset. Grabbing a jacket, he stepped outdoors, letting the screen door slam behind him. He zipped up his jacket and walked around the fallen leaves with his hands in his pockets. Kicking a pile of leaves, he looked at the church in front of him.

Why do I feel this way, God? I don’t want to feel like this. I thought being in love was supposed to be the most wonderful feeling in the world, not this. I love her, Lord. I think she could love me too if she’d let herself. What am I supposed to do? Do I just try to forget her and move on with my life? I can’t imagine my life without her now. Lord, show me the way.

He fell to his knees and continued praying to his Lord and God hoping to find an answer and solace to his hurting soul.

Randy had made a decision the day before. He was going to take a week off and go home to Sackets Harbor to try to forget Kari Montgomery. He also wanted to resolve things with his parents. It had been gnawing at him more than usual over the last few months. His talks with Kari about her relationships had reminded him about his own. It was time and he should be the one to make amends with them. It was the only way he was going to make a difference and win his parents to the Lord.

After talking to Alice, he was shaken all over again. His decision to forget Kari was far, far away. He was confused and just didn’t know what he should do. A couple weeks ago, he had considered going to see her at the college but he decided it would be best to wait. Then as time went on and he still hadn’t heard from her, he
started to lose all hope of ever hearing from her again. Kari had made it plain she didn’t care for him in the same way he felt about her. I just need time to forget her and to let go of these pointless feelings. I’m just not sure if I even know how.

****

Kari sat in one of her church’s second floor classrooms with a roomful of junior high girls as they laughed loudly. Their laughter was refreshing as she gazed out at their bright, earnest faces.

“Okay, girls, that’s enough. Let’s get serious now.”

“It’s your fault, Kari,” said a tall, slim girl named Danielle. “If you’re going to tell us these stories, you can’t get mad when we laugh.”

“All right, all right. I’m glad you find my life so amusing,” said Kari with a smirk on her face. “Now to get back to the topic at hand. We were discussing the difference between dating and courtship. My previous teenage experiences aside,” she smiled at the group again, “what do you think?”

“Well, I don’t really think kids today know what courtship is.”

“That’s a fair assumption, Sarah,” said Kari. “Does everyone else agree?”

“So,” said a girl in the corner who wore dark colors and multiple earrings. “I mean, courtship is such an ancient term. I feel like I’ve only heard it in old movies.”

“Okay, Desiree, what is courtship compared to dating?” asked Kari.

The girl shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe courtship is what comes right before marriage.”

Kari raised her eyebrows playfully nodding her head, “That’s exactly right. Dating is a way for members of the opposite sex to get to know one another. Courtship is what we do right before marriage. In the old days, the gentleman would ask for permission to court a certain lady. That didn’t mean I date your daughter. It meant I intend to marry your daughter.”

“So, does that mean dating doesn’t necessarily mean I want to marry you?”

“Exactly, Jennifer,” replied Kari. “Sometimes dating is just a time for two people to get to know one another and be friends. It doesn’t necessarily have romantic overtones.”

“So when we date, one day, we should be careful to know when this is just a date, friends going out, and courtship, something more serious,” said Desiree from her corner.

“Yes and that is why we have certain rules in place with teenage dating especially. You don’t want to blow it with some guy you may not even know in six months to a year. What are some of the rules your parents have in place now when it comes to boys?”

“I’m not allowed to have boys in my bedroom,” Jennifer spoke up again.

“Well do you think that is?” asked Kari.

Jennifer looked at her with serious eyes, concentrating on her answer. “I think it is really just so that we don’t even have the appearance of doing the wrong thing.”

That’s true,” said Kari. “Initially, you will have guy friends and you might question why your parents won’t let them come in your room when you are just friends. But there is the chance that feelings might build, making you or him interested in becoming more than friends, then you need to be accountable to each other. One of those ways is not allowing those opportunities to arise.” Kari looked at the clock across the room and smiled at all her girls. “Well, it looks like our time is up again. Next week we will talk about ‘Who to Date.’ I have a handout here with verses from Proverbs. Look those up and write down some ideas on what it is saying about who to date.”

Kari passed out the papers. The girls started idly talking together as they waited for their parents when Desiree called out to her.

“Who do you date, Kari?”

Kari felt at a loss to answer this question. She knew the topic would come up when she decided to talk about dating with the girls. She tried to erase the look of embarrassment from her face as she remembered the answer she had prepared.

“I don’t have time to date right now. I was engaged before, but that is a story for another time.”

“Aah, Kari, come on. We want to know,” said Sarah.

“I know. I promise. I’ll tell you soon.”

Several parents, who had been dismissed from their own Bible study groups, came into the room to pick up their daughters. After ten minutes, Kari saw the only girl left was Desiree.

“You ready to go home?”

“Sure,” Desiree answered.

They hurried down the stairs and out the church doors to the cool darkness outside. Wrapping their coats around them, they stepped out into the star-filled November night with the moon bright and yellow above them.
“I really want to thank you for walking me home every week, Kari. Or I should say my mother is grateful. She hates letting me go anywhere alone.”

“I don’t mind. It’s on my way anyway.”

“So, you were really engaged before?” asked Desiree, abrupt as only a thirteen year old can be.

Kari gave her what she thought was a regretful smile. “I was…for three months.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “He seemed so great in the beginning. He went to church and was active in it. He was an usher and a greeter. He went to all the services. If there was anyone at church or elsewhere that needed help, he was there. But it was all a ruse.”

“How? Was he a real creep underneath or something?”

“He was definitely a creep. Let me just say that after we got engaged, his true colors came out and he had no intention of serving God. He wasn’t anything that I thought he was.”

“So, you broke off the engagement.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you regret it, Kari? I mean sometimes you seem really lonely, not that I’ve known you all that long.”

Kari released a sigh before she answered, debating on the best way to answer her. “It’s okay. Sometimes I am lonely, but I don’t regret it. I would be miserable if I had married him and then I would be stuck.”

“How do you have hope there is someone out there for you?”

Kari stopped and looked at the inky, black sky filled with bright, pulsing stars. She couldn’t help but think about Randy. With hands in her pockets and the crisp night air invigorating her, she answered, “Yes, I think there is. I may have even already met him.”

“I hope you’re right because if someone as great as you can’t find a guy, I have no hope.”

“Oh, Desi, there is always hope.” Kari gave Desiree a quick hug and a smile. “Yes, there is always hope.”

Kari dropped Desiree off at her house and took the long way home, loving the brisk weather. Wrapping her favorite scarf around her throat, she walked on into the night thinking about the hope God had planted in her heart. She knew there was hope. God would lead her to the life she was supposed to have.

She knew she missed Randy, but she still wasn’t convinced he was the one for her or if the timing was right; although, she did know she needed to talk to him again. As she told the girls, spending time to get to know someone of the opposite sex didn’t mean courtship. It didn’t have to be romantic. She could just be friends with Randy for the time being. She wanted to be his friend. She missed his friendship. She needed his friendship.

****

Kari walked back into her room at nine-thirty that night and figured now was as good a time as any to call Randy. Her hands shook nervously as she dialed the number. Taking a deep breath as the phone rang, her heart thumped hard in her chest as she tried to work out what she was going to say. The phone rang a couple more times before the answering machine came on. She felt an odd sense of relief. She wanted to talk to him and yet she didn’t. Without leaving a message, she hung up the phone and lay back on her bed.

Deciding she didn’t want to spend another minute in her room, she got up, with her coat and scarf still on, and walked back down the stairs. Opening the door to go outside, she almost ran right into Alice Steele and a couple of her friends.

“Hey, Kari, where are you off to?” asked Alice as they stepped inside.

“I’m not sure actually. I just need to get some air.”

“I know what you mean. I will be so glad when Thanksgiving comes so I can have a break,” said Chloe before passing Alice with the other girls behind her.

“Well, I guess I’ll…” Kari decided she may as well bring up the topic going through her mind, “…uh, Alice?”

“Yes?”

Kari pressed her lips together for a second. “I tried calling Randy tonight.”

“Did you really,” said Alice, not even attempting to hide her happiness. “Did you catch him before he left?”

“No. Was he going somewhere?”

“Yes, he…” she hesitated for a moment “…he went home to visit with our parents.”

“Oh, did he? I didn’t think he…well… I was under the impression that…”

“Yes, Randy hasn’t been on good terms with them in years. I guess he thought now would be a good a time to patch things up.” Alice smiled hugely. She really was horrible at concealing what she was feeling. Or maybe she just didn’t care to. “I’m sure he had a good reason.”
Kari felt uncomfortable talking about Randy like this. She grabbed a hold of the door again. “I guess I’ll see you later.” She turned and stepped out into the cold night air, encircling her arms around herself as she walked toward the all-night coffee shop. Before she took five steps down the sidewalk, she heard her name again.

“Kari, I have to say something,” said Alice.

Kari stopped and faced her with a small, impartial smile.

“I don’t know for sure because my brother has been a bit distant lately, which I have to say is usual, but I think I know why he went home.” She paused and looked at Kari as if she expected a response. Watching Kari just stand there with her arms crossed, she started again with a more solemn look on her face. “I think he went home because of you.”

“What do you mean? Did he tell you…”

“He tells me nothing anymore, but I have my suspicions and I know my brother. I think he cares for you a lot maybe even more than that.”

“But he can’t…”

“All I know is Randy has never shown much interest in anyone before. I mean, he’s dated and had girlfriends, but he was never all that attached. He’s attached to you and I think it’s killing him. I don’t know why I’m telling you. He’d probably kill me if he knew, but I thought you should know.”

“Thanks, Alice.” Her thoughts were swirling around her, as she took in a deep breath, standing there in the cold.

“Hey, you want me to join you for a walk?”

“No, I think I just want to be alone for awhile.”

“All right, Kari. It’s okay that I told you?”

“Yes, I’m glad you told me.”

“All right, well, I actually better get back. I have deadlines at the paper and a project due in my Investigative Reporting class.”

Alice ran back into the dorm, and Kari walked off by herself, contemplating all the information she’d taken in. She thought about Geoffrey and what had happened in that relationship which had made her so uneasy to enter into another one. Her discussions with her teen Bible study had begun to make her think about the mistakes she’d made but also what a future she still had. Then her talk with Alice had brought up the idea of Randy again.

What’s wrong with me? I like Randy. He likes me. I really want to give this friendship a chance? Dear Lord, I know you have a future for me. Please lead me. I don’t want to try to carry all this on my own anymore. I’m ready to give it all to you.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Fourteen

The next night, Kari went for another nighttime walk. She’d been working furiously on her book for hours and needed some air. She ended up at the river near the spot where the art festival had been held. She thought about that night and what fun she’d had with Randy. She even thought back to the horrifying karaoke incident and realized it was a moment of her life she would never forget. Strolling next to the water, she stopped to squat beside it. Sticking her hand into the cold liquid, she let it splash around her as she wiggled her fingers through it.

“You still enjoy walking by the river at night, don’t you?”

Kari spun around completely caught off guard. With her heart pumping irregularly, she moved herself into protective mode.

“Geoffrey, you startled me.” She raised herself back to a standing position as she realized who had approached her. “What are you doing back here?”

“A man can only take so much of the city.”

“And where is Blair?” Her protective mode went back into place. She could never forget the arrogant attitude he’d had with her and Randy at the charity benefit.

“Forget Blair.”

“How can I forget her? She’s your wife.”

“Kari, I just need a friend to talk with. Can’t you give me a little of your time. I just want to talk.”

Geoffrey was never one who just wanted to “talk.” He talked when he had something important to announce, but he was never one for chit-chat or for pouring out his heart. He wanted something that was for sure.

“How did you know I’d be here?” She eyed him with suspicion as she pulled her coat close around her.

“I actually saw you leave the dorm and I followed you.”

“So, you’re a stalker now.” A shiver of anxiety shot up her spine.

“Don’t think about it that way. I just wanted to wait until we were alone.”

“What, so you could attack me? Maybe we should go somewhere better lit.” She didn’t think Geoffrey would actually hurt her, but she didn’t trust him and wasn’t sure what he was after.

“We can, but tell me, are you still seeing Randy Steele?”

“What if I am?” She lifted her chin in defiance. “What business is that of yours?” Anger poured over her. How dare he even mention Randy after all he’s done.

“So, you don’t think he was rude to me? He owes me an apology.”

Kari felt the anger surging into her face now. “Randolph Steele doesn’t owe you anything. He’s the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. I felt alone and abandoned in this world especially after I lost you and he…”

“Kari,” he took a step toward her, “you never lost me. I’ve always been here.”

Kari stepped backwards. “No Geoffrey. You haven’t been there for me. You never were. I was the only one who ever gave to our relationship and you took advantage of me. You thought you could keep it up even after Blair but that stops now. I’m not available to you as a friend or anything else.” She stood staunchly facing him, daring him to contradict her words.

When she took a step to walk away from him, Geoffrey grabbed onto her arm and pulled her towards him.

“Kari, you can’t do this to me.”

Kari struggled with him for a moment and finally shook him off. He lost his balance, falling into the river with a loud splash.

“Oh Geoffrey, I’m sorry,” she laughed, helping him out of the freezing water.

“No, Kari. I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ve always taken advantage of you. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” He got out of the water and tried to brush some of the wetness off. “I’ve lost you and now I’m going to lose Blair as well.”

“What’s happened?”

“She’s been upset with me ever since that benefit dinner. She threw me out of the house last night and I didn’t know where to turn except to you.”

“Geoffrey, you claimed to be a Christian when I first met you, but in time I’ve come to seriously doubt that. Are you a Christian?”

“I thought I was. I mean, I know it all in my head.”
“My advice to you is to go to church. Begin to hide God’s word in your heart and make it real. When you’re ready, ask Him into your life. That is the only way you will find happiness. You won’t find it in great jobs and lots of money. Only God can bring you that kind of happiness. That’s what I’ve had to learn myself.”

“You’re right, Kari. But what about Blair?”

“Take her with you. If you want to have a successful marriage, you need to have God at the center of it. If I’m not mistaken, I think she’ll take you back if she sees the sincerity of your heart. Pray for her, pray for your marriage.”

“Kari, I don’t know what to say.” He looked so pitiful standing there, shivering in his drenched state.

“I think maybe you should say you need to go inside before you freeze to death. Are you staying with your parents tonight?” He dipped his head down to signify he was. “You go home then and I’ll pray for you.”

“Thanks, Kari. Thanks for everything.”

Geoffrey turned and left, dripping as he went. Kari watched him leave and then faced the river with a smile. When she was sure he was out of earshot, she laughed. She laughed loud and let herself continue to laugh until she was crying and out of breath. It was energizing. When she finished, she sat down on the hard, cold ground and stared at the water rippling in the wind.

The entire incident had been horrible and funny at the same time. It had been a long time since she was able to laugh at herself. For ten months, she’d been mourning Geoffrey or at least the idea of him. She couldn’t believe how ridiculous she’d been. For the first time, she could see. It was like a blind had been removed from her eyes. She’d never loved Geoffrey. She could see that now. She wanted to be married and belong to a family. She had no one and wanted to belong to someone. Deep down she knew Geoffrey was wrong. The whole time she was mourning the loss of him, it wasn’t him. It was what he represented—a chance to have a family, the love of a family, and the acceptance of a family.

She laughed out loud again. How did I deceive myself so completely? She was elated like an invisible weight had been taken off her back as she walked up a very steep mountain. Then she thought of Randy. Her breath caught in the throat. Randy! I have to tell him. No, I can’t. He’s gone. This really doesn’t concern him anyway. This was about me.

****

“Emily, what are you doing here?” asked Kari surprised to see her cousin sitting in the lobby of Palmer House. The energizing happiness she’d had back at the river was still with her and she just wanted to laugh at how angry Emily appeared.

“I’m here to see you and don’t tell me you don’t want to see me. I’m staying and I’m going to talk to you.”

She stood up, holding her purse with both her hands resolutely. Her stance was like that of a stalwart statue of a famous navy captain, ready to take on whatever came at her.

Kari smiled although, she thought that might incite Emily’s anger even more. “I’m glad you’re here.” She leaned over and hugged her. “Come on up to my room where we can talk.” Kari led the way down the hall and up the stairs to her room as Emily followed.

Walking in the door, Kari shed her coat and scarf leaving them lying across a chair as she continued across the room to her sofa in the adjoining living area. She dramatically took a seat and asked, “So, what brings you all the way out here? Checking in on me?”

Emily looked all business. With coat still on, she took a seat on the couch next to Kari.

“You look angry, Em. Are you mad…are you mad at me?”

“Mad? No, why should I be? I mean, my best friend has ignored and avoided me for weeks, but I’m not mad.”

“Emily…”

“Kari, what’s with this audacious behavior? I don’t think I’ve seen you like this in a long time.”

“You’re right, you haven’t. I thought you’d be glad to see the improvement in me.” She couldn’t help smiling at her again.

Emily gave her a discerning glare. “Look, I came up here to make you promise to come out and stay with John and me for Thanksgiving. I’m not taking no for an answer. I know you don’t think you can be around people, but I am determined to get you to agree.”

“Okay, Emily, I’ll come.”

Emily was silent, evidently tongued-tied for a moment. “You’ll come, no arguments.”

With another audacious smile, Kari added, “No arguments. I’ve been silly avoiding everyone. I’d love to spend Thanksgiving with you guys. Can I come down on Wednesday and stay for the weekend?”

“Of course, we’d love to have you,” replied Emily still seeming to be recovering from her astonishment.

“Great. So, you want to hear a funny story.”
“Sure.” Emily sat back on the couch, relaxed and unbuttoned her coat.
“I saw Geoffrey today.”
“This is a funny story?”
“Just wait for the punch line.”

****

On Monday, Kari wanted to tell Randy she’d had a breakthrough. She knew he would appreciate it and that he cared enough about her to want something good to happen to her. But she decided to wait. Maybe I’ll see him over Thanksgiving when I’m visiting Emily. I’ll tell him then.

She walked over to her window and peered down at the students scampering across campus toward their respective classrooms. She smiled. The sun warmed her spirits, and she turned back to her room as she prepared herself for the day. Bending down beside the bed, she prayed out loud.

“Lord, I know I’ve been lacking courage and strength to go on over the past ten months. It was wrong of me. I didn’t trust in You to take care of me and lead me. I thought I was, but I wasn’t. I allowed myself to wallow in self-pity and believe the lies that I would never be the same again—that I would never be happy again—that I should shut out everything good. I want to thank You for staying with me every step of the way. I know you brought Randy into my life for one reason or another. I don’t want to hurt him. I want to help him and to be his friend. Guide us in this time, Lord. In Your Name, Amen.”

She opened her eyes and found they were full of tears—tears of happiness. Wiping them away, she got up and walked to her closet to dress for the day.

When the phone in her room began to ring, she picked it up to hear Geoffrey on the other line.
“What do you want, Geoff?”
“I went to see Blair last night, but she wouldn’t even let me in the house. She closed the door on me and told me to never come back. I don’t know what to do; I love her. I know I do. I think I always have. What am I going to do?”
“You keep praying and God will work it out. I’m sure good things are planned for you both. Maybe when I’m in the city next, I’ll make a visit to see Blair on your behalf.”
“Really, Kari, you’d do that? I mean, after all I’ve done to you, you don’t owe me anything.”
“I know. I want to do this. If I can help you both come together, then I want to do it. Now settle down and pray. God will handle the rest. I promise.”
“Thanks, Kari.”

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Kari found herself on her way to the Hudson’s home on her next day off. This wasn’t exactly how she wanted to spend her free time, but she felt heaviness in her heart to help Geoffrey and Blair. She didn’t know why. One side of her felt like letting Geoffrey stew in his own pudding. He’s the one who made the mess, let him clean it up. But on the other hand, she wanted to help and knew it was the best thing to do.

Exiting the train, she caught a cab and headed to the house belonging to Blair and Geoffrey. She got out of the taxi, paid the driver, and walked up the path to the front door, snow covering the entryway.
Blair opened the door with obvious surprise, her mouth falling open for a moment. After gaining control of herself, she closed her mouth and gave Kari a sweet smile. “Hello, Kari. I’m surprised to see you. Geoffrey’s not here.”
“I know he’s not. Do you mind if I come in?”
“Uh…sure…please….please, come in.” Blair seemed taken off guard and though she maintained her regal demeanor, her face revealed she was a little perplexed with Kari’s presence.
Kari entered the living room and sat on the Victorian style couch with plush pillows piled all over it. “I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here.”
Blair nodded without saying a word.
“Well, Blair, Geoffrey came to see me.”
Blair took in a quick breath and sat up straighter in her chair. “I assumed he would. How often has he been seeing you since we’ve been together?”
“Just one time when you were engaged and then last week he came to ask for my help.”
“Your help?”
Kari decided bluntness would be her best bet. “I know Geoffrey can be a real jerk and sometimes he is incredibly insensitive and selfish.”
Blair crossed her arms and sniffed in agreement.
“But inside I think he just wants to be loved and accepted. I believe he really loves you.”
“What makes you think that?”
“Because he told me. Geoffrey hardly ever told me he loved me when we were together. But when he called me a couple days ago, he seemed really broken up by all this.”

“Really broken up? Yes, I’m sure he’s broken-hearted to lose all Daddy’s money.”

“Blair, I think he is sincerely sorry.” Kari sat forward in her seat and looked directly into Blair’s eyes. “He doesn’t love me. He loves you. He told me he thinks he always has. I encouraged him to go to church and to take you with him if he intends his marriage to last.”

“You did…he did. Church?”

“If you really want to be happy Blair, you’ll find that in God and in the relationship you can build with your husband under His loving eye.”

“I don’t know. In my whole life, I’ve hardly ever gone to church.”

“How happy have you ever been?”

“I suppose not all that happy.”

“So, maybe, give God a chance and you just might find an opportunity for real happiness.”

She wrinkled up her nose and puckered her lips as if she was deep in thought. “I suppose.”

“So, when Geoffrey calls again, you will go to church with him and give all this a try?”

Blair looked down and nodded her head. When she glanced back up, her eyes were teary. “Yes, I’ll give it a try.”

“Geoffrey will be so happy.”

“Kari, why are you doing this? You should be angry with him, too.”

“I’ve spent many months being angry at him and me, but I realized there was no reason for that. I have joy in God and in the hope He gives to me.”

“And in your young pastor?”

“He’s not my pastor, but I hope we can still be friends.”

“You are an interesting person, Kari. I hope maybe one day we can be friends.”

Kari reached over and took one of Blair’s hands, “I hope we already are.”

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Fifteen

Randy was glad he’d taken some time off to be with his parents and to get away. The time hadn’t been wasted. He reconnected with friends back in his old neighborhood. He always loved going to Lake Ontario to walk, fish, and play. But every time he was alone, he would start to think about Kari again. It was agonizing. He had convinced himself she wanted nothing to do with him again. The idea of never seeing her green eyes and sweet smile hurt him more deeply than he thought possible.

When he first started studying for the pastorate, he’d decided he could spend his life as a bachelor. It was a definite possibility considering the work he was dedicating his life to. It would take a special woman to convince him to marry. All that changed when he met Kari. After meeting her, he could envision himself married and see her working alongside him, but now that had all gone awry. He should have known better. Kari wasn’t ready to be in a relationship and he had blown it.

Part of the reason he left for home was to forget her, but by the end of the visit, he knew that was never to take place. The trip hadn’t been completely fruitless, though. His parents were so happy to see him. His mother especially had rejoiced at the sight of him. She hugged him in the very way he needed to be comforted. His father hadn’t been so forthcoming but after a couple days, he too could see the need in his son’s eyes. They learned about his hurts and travails and decided to come into the city to spend Thanksgiving with Alice and him. They even said they would go to church with them. Randy was overjoyed. For the first time, his parents were open to God.

When he returned home, it was time for the youth to prepare for their Fall Festival, which took place the Saturday after Thanksgiving. He spent his time constructing booths and making sure everything was ready for the event. It was good to be back home and working with his kids. He really enjoyed his job and loved the teens in his youth group.

Before he knew it, Thanksgiving was upon him. He was to lead prayer during the Thanksgiving Eve service and he was excited to see his parents again. Things were so different between them. He wished he could share his happiness about it with Kari. The idea of her didn’t hurt as much as it had a couple weeks ago. Still, he wished he could see her if only one more time. He didn’t realize that the last time he saw her was going to be the last time he’d ever see her again.

Randy had decided to host a get together at his house before the Thanksgiving Eve service. His friends and church family members were all expected within the next ten minutes. While tidying up his living room, the doorbell rang.

“Randy, can you get that?” called out Alice’s voice. “Mom and I are trying to get this pie out of the oven.” His mother and sister giggled in the background as the oven door clanged down with a loud vibrating thud.

“Sure, it is my house after all,” he called back to her with sarcasm. “And don’t wreck my oven you two because I use it so often.” He opened the door to Brittany and Ethan MacFadyen who entered with cheery smiles.

“How are you doing, Randy?” asked Ethan, putting his large hand out for Randy to shake.

“Great. Happy Thanksgiving Eve to you both,” he said shaking Ethan’s hand.

“And you, too,” said Brittany. “I just talked to Emily on the phone. They’ll all be over in a little while.”

“All?” asked Randy feeling surprised. His pulse picked up with the small hope Kari might be with them.

“They’re bringing Emily’s mom,” spoke up Ethan.

Randy shook his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets, trying not to look as disappointed as he felt.

“Sure, sure, Mrs. Burke.”

“Oh, and Kari Montgomery,” added Brittany. “I guess she’s staying with them for the holiday.”

Randy opened his eyes wide as he looked at them while his pulse continued to race out of control. Trying to steady his words he said, “Kari is…” he coughed and touched his chest, “…she’s with them.” He lowered his voice so low it was almost inaudible.

“Sure,” said Ethan. “Hey Alice,” he called to Randy’s sister who stepped into the dining room. “Looks like you have a nice pie there.”

“Yes, but you can’t have any yet,” said Alice.

Ethan and Brittany walked inside toward Alice. Randy remained by the door, trying to take in the idea of Kari coming back to his house. Absently, he closed the door and excused himself to his room.

Standing in front of his dresser mirror, he spoke to himself. “Okay, Randy, just because she’s coming doesn’t mean anything. She probably just doesn’t care one way or the other. You’ve just played this up in your
mind. She doesn’t care for you, but that doesn’t mean she won’t be around especially with her cousin. Get a grip.”

Finishing his talk with himself, he tightened his hold on the dresser as he looked at himself deep in the mirror. Then he brushed his hands back through his hair again, smoothing it down before he walked back out to see that many more guests had arrived.

****

The house was bursting with activity when Kari entered with Emily, John, and her Aunt Patty. She walked in to see the familiar faces of those who had worked on the benefit committees with her. Many of them walked up and said hello soon after she arrived.

“Kari,” called out Alice as she made her way in that direction. Upon reaching Kari, Alice gave her a big hug. “I’m so glad you’re here. You have to meet my parents before you leave today.”

“You’re parents are here?” questioned Kari, feeling squeamish.

“Remember how I told you Randy went home a couple weeks ago.”

Kari nodded.

“Well, he totally made up with them. They came down to spend Thanksgiving with us, and they are going to church tonight and everything. Can you imagine how pleased Randy is?”

Kari needed a moment to catch her breath with Alice’s marathon fashion of communication.

“Randy will be glad to see you.”

“Are you sure?” asked Kari. “I haven’t spoken to him in so long. He probably thinks I’m a huge flake.”

Alice looked at her with care. She placed her hand on Kari’s arm with a light touch. “He could never think that.”

Kari glanced across the room after Alice left and her eyes picked Randy’s profile out of the crowd. She knew it was him because he stood a head taller than everyone else in the room, and she had memorized every curl on his head. He turned in her direction and she saw his face. It was him. She immediately turned her back to him, not feeling ready to face him or his wonderful eyes. But still she smiled.

Ethan and Brittany started talking to her next, asking about school and how she was doing at her own church. Kari answered their questions, but her gaze kept creeping away in search of Randy again. When she found him, he was surrounded by a group of women. They seemed fascinated by him. Suddenly, they all broke into a huge roar of laughter as he entertained the crowd.

When Randy lifted his eyes, he looked right at her. She turned away again and then started talking more animatedly with the MacFadyens. Unable to help it, she raised her eyes in his direction again only to see he was still staring directly at her with an inscrutable look on his face. One of the girls standing near him asked him something and he turned to talk with her. Kari smiled again. He sure seems to make quite an impression on the women at this church.

“Kari, here you are,” said Alice walking with an older man and woman who had to be her parents. Mr. Steele had the family eyes and Mrs. Steele was a tall woman with dark hair very similar to Randy’s shade.

Mr. and Mrs. Steele approached Kari with controlled smiles. When they reached her, Mr. Steele said with outstretched hand, “So, this must be the Kari Montgomery we keep hearing about.”

With a smile Kari, shook his hand and Mrs. Steele’s.

“I understand you teach at Alice’s college,” said Mr. Steele.

“Yes,” Kari replied.

“Oh, what do you teach?” asked Mrs. Steele.

“American history, early US and women’s history mostly.”

“It must be interesting work,” said Mr. Steele.

“I wanted to teach when I was studying at Wellesley College, but that was before I got married.” The two elder Steele’s shared affectionate smiles that warmed Kari’s heart as Mr. Steele put his arm around his wife.

“Yes?” said Kari. “What did you want to teach?”

“English literature. I grew up loving Austen, Shakespeare, and the Brontës.”

“Me too,” admitted Kari. “But I loved the story behind things even more so I finally settled on American history.”

“She’s terrific,” broke in Alice. “I didn’t have her when I took my history courses because she wasn’t here yet, but Hannah, Chloe’s sister, took her this year and says she actually makes history fun.”

“I’m sure she does,” said Mr. Steele.

“Randy says you’re writing a book,” said Mrs. Steele.

“Oh. Randy talked about me...about my book? Yes, I’m in the last stages of turning my dissertation into a book.”
“Must be a lot of fun,” said Mr. Steele.

“At this point, I will just be glad when it’s done,” said Kari with a wry smile. “I thought it was the most important thing in my life but in the past few months I’ve come to realize that there are more important things.”

As the conversation continued and Kari began to feel more comfortable, she reflected that she liked the Steeles. Their noticeable affection for each other made her think about her own dear parents. She missed them every bit as much today as the first day she lost them. Randy’s parents were kind and interesting and they made her feel important. She wondered if they made everyone feel this way. Even though these people didn’t share Randy’s faith and they hadn’t been the ones to teach him about God’s loving grace, they had taught him other things such as gracious manners and kind observances of others. It was refreshing. She was happy for Randy. He had his parents back and maybe one day soon they would accept Christ into their lives as well. She could just imagine how happy that would make him.

As the Steeles moved on with Alice making further introductions around the room, Emily moved toward Kari with two young men trailing behind her. “Kari, hey, how are you doing? Having a good time?”

Kari knew exactly what Emily was up to and she tried to communicate as much with her piercing stare. “How are you Em? What’s on your mind?”

“I’m great. I thought you’d like to meet a couple of the guys from the church here. This is Tom Newell,” she pointed at a man who was at least ten years older than her. “And this is Bill Cadry,” she said of the other man with the pleasant smile who was more Kari’s age. “I’ve got to find John. Why don’t you all get to know one other? Where is that man? I never seem to be able to find him when I want him.”

Kari smiled at both men self-consciously and then tried to break into conversation. “So, you both go to church here.”

Bill spoke first in a surprising bass voice. “We sure do. I’ve been going here for about five years and you’ve been here since right after college, right, Tom?”

“That’s right,” said Tom. Turning to Kari he said, “Emily told me we went to the same college.”

“Is that right,” replied Kari. “Did she tell you I teach there now?”

“She mentioned it. How do you like it?”

“I like it well enough. It was nice not having to move away from home.” She turned her attention to Bill again. “And what do you do?”

“I work at the Metropolitan Art Museum.”

“Did you study art?” Kari asked.

“I sure did. I even spent a summer in France.”

“That must have been an experience.”

“One I’ll never forget.”

Kari surmised that these men were kind and attentive; but as the discussion persisted, she kept losing interest in their conversation as she continued to watch Randy surrounded by his fan club of young women. When do I get my chance to talk to him? She smiled again before turning back to Tom and Bill.

With his coffee mug in hand, Randy stood encircled by several of the young women from the singles class. He didn’t go to that Sunday school class as he taught the youth group Sunday mornings, but he tried going to many of the single activities so he could get to know more people his age. These girls were sweet, but none of them had tempted him into asking them out. He kept an eye on Kari talking with Bill and Tom. He knew them both to be devout Christians and very helpful and kind, but inwardly he really resented them talking to Kari when he hadn’t even had a chance to talk to her yet.

He was listening to one of the youngest ones, Keira, tell a humorous anecdote of something that had happened at work earlier that week when Emily and John accompanied by Kari joined them. His eyes instinctively locked onto Kari, but he knew he couldn’t stare at her. He looked back at John. “Hey, what have you all been up to?” Then his eyes turned back to Kari’s.

“We’ve been talking to your parents,” said Emily.

Randy returned his attention to Emily and John. “My parents? Ah, so you see where I get my handsome looks and sense of humor.”

“Oh, Randy,” said Emily.

“Well, we should probably all get on over to the church. I think the service starts in fifteen minutes,” said John.

“Is it really that late?” asked Randy as he glanced down at his watch.

“We’ll see you over there,” said Emily as she and John headed for the door.

Kari started to follow when Randy called to her.
“Kari,” he touched her arm gently. She turned to him with a soft smile on her face. As she looked at him, he completely forgot what he wanted to say. He hesitated and finally let some words stumble out of his mouth. “I… I’m glad you were able to make it. It’s been awhile.”

She smiled again. “It sure has. I’m sorry I haven’t been the best correspondent lately. I would have come over to speak with you earlier tonight but you seemed busy.” She tipped her head toward a group of young ladies to their right.

“What can I say; a host’s job is never done.”

“Well, let’s talk sometime soon. I have so much to tell you. I’ve actually wanted to talk to you.”

“You have?” he asked, trying his best to tone done his delight.

She nodded her head with another closed mouth smile. “I suppose we all should get over to the church now.”

Her words woke him to the realization that he had to be at his duties. He glanced over at his parents and then to the watch at his wrist.

Kari touched his arm. “I’ll take your parents over with Alice. I’m sure you need to be at the church by now.

The very idea of removing Kari Montgomery from his life vanished from his heart. He had to win her. She was everything to him. He took her hand and, instead of cradling it inside his own as he wanted to, he shook it.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it.” He looked at her one more time before leaving to walk over to the church.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Sixteen

The first Thursday in December, Kari stood in front of her class, finishing her lecture on the role of women during the American Revolution. “So, here we have a first hand account of a woman who did her part at patriotism during the fight for independence. I think it becomes strikingly clear she knew exactly what she was doing. She was being a patriot not just fulfilling her domestic duties. Are there any questions or comments before we end today?”

“Dr. Montgomery, I find this topic fascinating. Do you have any book suggestions for further reading?”

“Definitely including my own dissertation since this was my topic for my PhD. Email me tonight for a couple book titles. All right, everyone, be finishing up your final papers which I will remind you are due in two weeks, and I guess I’ll see you all next time.”

The students loudly filed out of Kari’s classroom as she shuffled her notes and other papers back into her satchel. Before leaving the room, she looked up to some unexpected visitors.

“Geoffrey…Blair. How are you both doing?” Kari asked, feeling a sense of relief to see them together again.

“We’re doing well, thanks to you,” said Blair.

“I’m glad to hear it. Have you started going to church somewhere?”

“Yes,” said Geoffrey. “It’s near our house. We joined the young married class and we’ve already made some friends.”

“That’s terrific.”

“We were just down here visiting my mom, and I wanted to stop by and say thanks for everything,” said Geoffrey, looking more sincere and contented than she’d ever seen him.

“Well, I’m really glad you two are together and happy. Come on, let me take you both out for some campus coffee which, though not the best in town, is the closest.”

****

At five o’clock, Kari entered the residence hall. She was perusing through her mail as she walked up to her second floor room when she almost tripped over someone sitting in the stairway.

“Alice, what are you doing here?” Kari asked with an innocent smile. She noticed that Alice didn’t return her smile. In fact, she could see wet and dry tears all over her face. Kari dropped her satchel and mail on the stairs. “What’s wrong? What’s the matter? Has something happened? Is it Randy?” A sudden panic welled up within her heart. She knew something must be terribly wrong because she’d never seen Alice cry before.

“It...It’s Daddy.” She sobbed some more before she could continue. Sitting beside her, Kari wrapped an arm around her.

“Tell me what happened,” said Kari in a calm, motherly voice.

Alice looked up through teary eyes. “My Dad...Mom called and said he’s had a heart attack.”

Kari felt her heart flip flop inside her chest again. Oh, but thank God it isn’t Randy. Randy! This is going to devastate him.

“Alice, your father is going to be okay, isn’t he? He’s not ...”

“Mom said he’s in the hospital right now, resting. They aren’t sure how severe the damage is yet, but he might need surgery.” Alice started to cry again. Kari very naturally pulled her arm even tighter around the weeping girl, letting her get it all out.

“Alice, why don’t you come into my room and rest for awhile,” Kari suggested.

Alice didn’t reply. She just stood and followed Kari into her room. They both sat on the couch for a few minutes in complete quiet despite the loud girls racing down the hallway.

Alice looked about the room listlessly. Then out of the silence she said in a toneless voice, “I should call Randy.” As she spoke her eyes never moved from the flower arrangement on the coffee table.

“Alice, maybe I could call him for you. Did your mother say she was going to try to reach him?”

“I don’t remember,” she said in an eerily calm voice.

“You just sit here. I’ll call him.” Kari walked over to her desk and pulled out her address book. After looking up Randy’s home number, she picked up her phone and dialed without even remembering to be nervous about talking to him.

After three rings, the answering machine came on. Kari hung up. She looked over at Alice who sat slumped back on her couch, the listless look still on her face. “Alice, does your brother have a cell phone?”

Alice looked toward Kari again and nodded her head to signify that he did.
“Do you know that number?”

Before Alice had a chance to answer, a loud bang sounded at the door. It made Kari jump with her own heart pounding as it was. She rose from her desk, giving a quick glance at Alice before she opened the door.

“Hey, Dr. Montgomery, do you know where Alice is? We can’t find her and her brother is downstairs looking for her.”

Kari glanced over at Alice for a moment and then back to the girl in the hallway. “She’s here. She’s just had some bad news. I’ll go down and talk to him.”

“All right, Dr. Montgomery. I never met Alice’s brother; I didn’t know he was so cute.”

Kari smiled for a quick second before following the girl downstairs.

As she reached the last step, Randy saw her and flew over to her.

“Kari, do you know where Alice is? I’ve got to find her. I…I need to find her.” His voice cracked on the last word. His brilliant eyes couldn’t hide his anxiety. But he kept his expression stoic and guarded.

****

As Randy reached Kari, the apprehension within him felt like it was likely to burst out at any moment. She stepped down, looking calm and consoling. “I know where she is. She’s in my room. She told me what happened and then she fell apart. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you actually.”

“Thank you, Kari.” He took her hand into his own. The touch of her soft hand made him tingle from his fingertips to his toes. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

He didn’t want to let go of her hand. In fact, he wanted to plant his head on her shoulder and cry a few tears to release all that he was feeling.

“Is she ready? Mother told her to get ready, and I was going to come get her and drive her home.”

Kari shook her head. “I think this has all been a great shock to her. She’s in my room barely even able to respond to simple questions. She isn’t ready.”

“I should go see her.”

“Follow me.”

Kari led the way back to her room. When they walked in, Alice glanced in their direction. Kari slipped in close to Randy, touching his shoulder and whispering in his ear. He felt a tingly sensation at the back of his neck. “She looks better. The color seems to be returning to her cheeks and her eyes don’t seem so clouded over.”

When she saw Randy, Alice jumped up and ran to him. Pressing her face into his chest, she started to cry loudly. Randy quickly wrapped his arms around his sister and patted her back as he said calming words to her.

“Kari, don’t leave. This is your room and you have been so good to us.”

Alice stopped crying and lifted her head wiping her tears away with her hand. “Kari, please stay with me. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Alice’s words hit Randy to the heart. He knew he loved Kari, but seeing how kind she had been to his sister, especially at this troubling time, made him love her even more. She truly was a loving, caring woman—a woman he would be proud to call his wife and proud to love all the days of his life.

“Oh, why don’t you two just sit down for a moment?” suggested Kari.

“We really have to get going.” He was reluctant to leave, but he knew he had no choice. “Mother is expecting me. She really could use my support.”

“Of course she needs you,” said Kari.

“Randy, I’m not ready,” said Alice, seeming to have broken from her trance. “I haven’t packed or anything.”

“Well, how about I take the train and you can drive my car up later.”

“Me, drive your car all the way home? That’s over 250 miles. I’ve never driven it before.”

Randy tried to think of what to do. He knew he needed to get going quickly and the last train of the night left in twenty minutes.

“Randy,” spoke up Alice, “I’ll do it. I’ll drive your car and meet you at home.”

“Are you sure?” Randy asked with concern. He knew Alice hardly ever drove especially since leaving home, and a four to five hour trip wasn’t the way to break her in again.

“Yes, I mean, what choice do I have. I’ll see you at home. You better get going. Mom needs you now.”

“All right,” he said as he handed the keys to Alice. He turned his attention to Kari. “I really want to thank you again for helping out Alice. She rarely breaks down like this.”

“I just hope your father is okay. Tell him I’m praying for him.”
Randy nodded. “I will,” he said softly as he turned to leave. He glanced back at Kari again wanting to tell her how much it meant to him that she had done this but when he opened his mouth he had no words. He just nodded at her again, left the room and walked on to the train station.

****

“Kari, I can’t drive all the way alone. You have to come with me,” announced Alice.

“What?” said Kari. The very idea caused a knot to form in the pit of her stomach.

“I need you to come with me. Besides, whether my brother said it or not, he needs you too.”

“I can’t.”

“Please, I really need you. I know you don’t have any more classes until Monday. You could come back Sunday night.”

Kari thought about surprising Randy and just showing up at his parents’ home. It wasn’t as if she was a stranger. She knew his parents now and they seemed nice and liked her. She really did want to be there for both Alice and Randy.

Looking over at Alice with a stern stare, she said slowly, “All right. I’ll go. I’ll even drive, but don’t tell Randy. I just want to show up.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now I better go pack. I’ll meet you later.”

As Kari packed her own suitcase, she was nervous. She knew she wanted to go and she wouldn’t change her mind, but she wondered deep down inside if Randy might resent her coming. Their friendship was so strained right now and this was a family matter. She would just be intruding. Well, I will just keep out of the way and go home tomorrow if he doesn’t want me there.

When Kari finished with her packing, she called in to her office answering machine to inform her student callers she would be out until Monday. She left a message for the head of her department that there had been a family emergency and she would be out of town over the weekend. Then she made one more call.

“Hello?”

“Emily.”

“Kari, what are you up to tonight?”

“I’m on my way out of town for the weekend.”

“Oh, where to?”

“Sackets Harbor.”

“Sackets Harbor? Isn’t that where Randy…Kari, are you two…what’s going on here?”

“Actually it’s not as nice as it sounds. Randy and Alice’s father had a heart attack this morning and they’re headed home.”

“Oh, Kari, that’s awful.”

“Randy already left on the train, and now I’m driving Alice up in his car.”

“You’re going too, huh?”

“Alice was supposed to drive up on her own, but she says she can’t do it so she roped me into coming along.”

“Does Randy know?”

“No. I just thought I’d surprise him.”

“Have your feelings about him changed?”

“Maybe…I don’t know. Emily, now is not the time. I’m just trying to be a friend to both of them.”

“You’re right. Now isn’t the time. But I’ll be praying that the right time comes along this weekend. Take care, Kari.”

“Bye, Em. I’ll call you soon.

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Chapter Seventeen

“We’re almost there, Kari. This next street leads to our house. I really can’t thank you enough for driving me.”

“I’m just glad there was no snow all the way here.”

“Thank God, He led us here safely. Oh, here take this street then go down past that stop sign. It’s the third house on the right.”

Kari glanced about at the immense mansions all around her. She’d never been so near to such grandeur in all her life. The house she grew up in had three bedrooms and 1600 square feet. It had been enough for her threesome of a family, but these houses were unbelievable. A great nervous feeling crept up her spine and traveled to the back of her neck as she thought about going inside and seeing Randy and his mother again. The idea that she was imposing on them took over. She almost suggested to Alice that she drop her off and then catch a ride to the train station tonight. She knew they’d never hear of it, but she almost wished they would.

At the front door of the Steele home, they were met by a housekeeper who graciously welcomed “Miss Alice” home and took their bags. Kari walked into the vestibule to see a ceiling that seemed to go a mile into the sky. She found herself lifting her head up all the way looking to the left and to the right at all the beautiful crown molding. When Alice called to her, she dropped her head back down and followed her into the drawing room where Mrs. Steele was waiting for them.

“Alice,” her mother called to her. Alice ran the rest of the way across the room to be enveloped in her mother’s arms.

“Mom,” Alice said with a wavering voice into her mother’s cashmere sweater.

“I’m so glad you’re here. When Randy said he let you drive that old car of his all the way here, I was so worried.”

“Mom, there just was no other way,” interjected Randy who came to stand by his mother and sister.

Alice moved away from her mother and looked behind her and then back to her mother and brother’s concerned faces. “I didn’t come alone.”

As Kari moved into view, she was faced with Randy’s astounded expression. “I hope you don’t mind my intrusion. I …”

“It’s no intrusion,” interrupted Mrs. Steele who took a step toward Kari and gave her a tight, loving hug.

Kari thought she would just melt into her arms. She was so affectionate. Kari hadn’t had a mother’s hug in so long except for Aunt Patty and her aunt was just not all that mothering.

“I’m so glad Alice didn’t take on this trip all alone.”

Randy finally stepped forward and led Kari to the leather couch in the middle of the huge room. He sat beside her and just looked at her for a long moment with a serious look on his face, almost a frown.

“I hope you don’t mind that I’m here?” Kari asked.

“Mind? No. I’m glad Alice didn’t have to drive up alone.”

Alice came and sat on the floor by Randy’s feet. “So, how’s Dad?” Her voice was touched with anxiety.

“He’s resting well,” answered her mother as she approached the couch.

“They’ve done a few tests, and it appears to have been a mild heart attack. It looks like he won’t need surgery after all,” said Randy to his sister.

“Well, you girls must be exhausted,” said Mrs. Steele. “I’ll have Hayley turn down the bed in your room, Alice, and the adjoining room for Kari.”

“I hope it’s no trouble,” said Kari.

“No dear, no trouble. Now I’ll see to that and then turn in for the night. I am spent. I will see all you children tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Mom,” called Alice.

Randy stood and walked over to his departing mother and talked to her in a low tone. She turned back toward the girls. “Have you eaten? Are you hungry after that long trip?”

“No, we ate already, Mom,” said Alice.

“Well, I’ll have some tea made.”

“Tea sounds wonderful, Mrs. Steele,” said Kari.

Mrs. Steele smiled, “Call me Amanda, dear.”

“Thank you, Amanda.”

“Goodnight children.”
After their mother left the room, Randy returned to his spot on the couch. Alice leaned her head on his knee and yawned. “I’m so tired. I think I’ll head up to bed too. No tea for me tonight. I can’t wait to see Dad tomorrow.”

Randy ruffled his sister’s hair, “I’m sure he can’t wait to see you either, Small Fry.”

“Hey, don’t start the Small Fry stuff.” She got to her feet and smiled at them both. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She yawned again and walked to the circular stairway that led to the second floor. It was Kari’s turn to yawn now. She tried to hide it, but Randy saw her. “You’re tired.”

“I am. I should probably go to bed too.”

She stood to follow Alice, but Randy grabbed her hand. She turned to face him, goose bumps forming on her arms.

“Don’t forget about your tea.” His voice was low and his eyes were dark and brooding. He’d never acted so strangely before.

“I almost forgot about the tea. I guess I could wait and have a cup.” She sat back down on the couch.

“I can have it sent up to your room if you like.”

Kari smiled and sat back into the couch. “I have to say this is quite some set up you have here, Randolph P. Steele. Now I see that your name suits you.”

“It is a stuffy rich kid name, isn’t it?” He smiled and seemed to relax.

She laughed.

“Now you know why I go by Randy.”

“No, really, this is a beautiful house.”

“There is no denying it but it’s just too much. When you imagine your future home, do you see something like this?” He moved his hand in front of him making her look around the room. After perusing the grandeur of the place, she smiled and shook her head. “No, never even in my wildest imaginations.”

“Like I said, it’s just too much. Once I became a Christian, it all just seemed excessive. I have money; I come from money. I can’t get away from it, but I can decide what to do with it.”

“And what do you do with it?”

“Whatever I can. I support several charities and not just with my money. I try to be actively involved as well. I support my church, of course, and several missionaries including some of my friends who I went to seminary with.”

“And Angel Wing.”

“Yes.”

The maid who had opened the door, walked in with a silver tray containing a full tea service on it. She placed it on the Georgian-style cherry wood coffee table in front of them.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“No, Hayley. You can leave us now.”

She exited the room with nearly silent steps, and Kari now sat alone with Randy.

“We have two choices for the lady tonight and they are Prince of Wales Tea and Chamomile.”

Kari smiled at him. “You have Prince of Wales Tea?”

“Yes,” he answered with a modest grin. “When I came up here before Thanksgiving, I had Mom get some. It’s very, uh, soothing.”

“Well, with it being so late, I think I’ll have the Chamomile tonight.”

He poured the tea into an exquisite teacup with pink roses all around it and trimmed with gold paint. He handed her the cup.

“I put one spoonful of sugar in there. That’s how you like it, right?”

“Exactly. You remembered.”

He smiled “Of course.”

Kari took a sip and let the warm liquid glide down her throat, soothing her tired body.

“You really were great coming with Alice today.”

“Well, to be honest, she roped me into it so I didn’t exactly have a choice.”

“My sister can be persistent.”

Kari took another comforting sip of tea. “How’s your tea?”

“The Prince is great.”

“I really love that tea. I drank English Breakfast when I was in high school probably because that’s what Mom drank. Then in college I started in on the Chinese green teas especially with jasmine and oolong before I stumbled upon this one.”
“A black tea.”

“Yes.” Kari took another sip and finished her cup. “Well, I’m finished. That was just what I needed. I think I’ll go on up to bed now. I really am tired.”

“All right, Kari. It’s the third door on the right.”

“Thanks for making me feel at home. Tell your mother, too.”

“I will. Goodnight, Kari.”

“Goodnight.”

Kari took the stairs to the top and turned down the hallway to the third door on the right. As she did, thoughts of Randy’s behavior assailed her. His attitude had been disturbing. Even with his father in the hospital, he just didn’t seem like himself. There was something else bothering him.

Opening the door of her room, the smell of gardenia flooded her senses. Flipping the switch by the entryway, a lamp on the dresser across from her illuminated the room. It was decorated in a Victorian motif with pale blue lace wallpaper and antique furniture including a great big sleigh bed.

Kari felt like she was a princess in her tower boudoir. She walked to the draped window at the far side of the room and pulled them open to reveal a balcony. Opening the sliding glass door, she stepped out into the frigid night air. She pulled her arms around herself rubbing them in an attempt to warm up. The balcony looked out at the backyard and what would probably be a beautiful flower garden in the spring. She stepped back inside and closed the door. Opening her suitcase, she found her nightgown, dressed, and crawled into the inviting bed. Sleep came quickly.

*****

Randy turned over on his stomach as he tried to get to sleep. After pounding on his pillow, he laid his head down again and closed his eyes, but immediately they flew open. In spite of not having slept a wink the night before, he was wide-awake. He climbed out of bed and padded over to his window looking out at the street lamp shining on the house across the street. He wondered if Kari had gotten to sleep easily. He usually slept well in this house, but not tonight. It was unbelievable to think she was here sleeping in his parents’ house. It was driving him crazy. This was the place he had come to forget her, and now it would always hold memories of her. As much as he was glad she was here, he wished she had never come.

Hours later, he couldn’t take it anymore. Dressed in a pair of sweats with a sweatshirt from his undergrad alma mater, he tiptoed down the stairs, threw on his coat, and exited out the back door. Stepping out into the night, a cold wind rejuvenated him, cooling his overheated cheeks. He walked to the gate and stepped inside the dormant garden. Glancing around at his mother’s plants, he remembered all the springs when they had planted each one. He was deeply ensconced down memory lane when he heard rustling behind him. He turned to see Kari enter the garden.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked her. “Can’t you sleep?”

“Before I fell asleep, I noticed this garden from my balcony. I woke up a few minutes ago and thought I might like a walk. You do realize it’s almost five am.”

“No…really?”

“Couldn’t you sleep?”

“Not a wink.”

“Thinking about your father, right?”

“Uh, yeah I was, among other things.” He stared at Kari’s serious expression. “Does this bring back memories for you?”

She sat down on the garden bench and stared off into the distance. “Sure, how could it not.”

“What happened with your father?”

“I was sixteen when he died—heart attack.” Randy sat down beside her, and she looked over at him. “He worked for the mayor’s office. That’s when it happened to him. He was downtown and taken right to the hospital.”

“But they couldn’t save him?”

“It was too massive.” She looked away again. “I try not to think about it. It was a horrible day.”

Randy couldn’t help but take her hand and feel for her loss even though it was over ten years ago. “I’m sorry to make you relive those memories.”

“No. I suppose it’s healthy. We can’t just hide them away in our hearts and hope they go away. That’s been part of my problem for years.”

“How so?”

“I tried to pretend it didn’t happen and just moved on. I guess it’s because that’s what Mother did. It was probably the only way she knew.”
“If you don’t mind my asking, how did your mother die?”
“Cancer.”
“Was it long?”
“Not overly. She was diagnosed and then died four months later. I knew I was going to lose her, but it still came as a shock when she was gone. They gave her six months to a year.” Kari looked over at Randy again and pulled her hand back into her lap. “I’m just the life of the party, depressing you.”
“No you’re not. I’m really glad you’re here.”
“Well, your father is going to be just fine.”
“Sure he is.” Randy stood up and walked across to the other side of the garden. He turned back and smiled at Kari. “I remember when Dad brought these bleeding heart plants home to Mom.”
Kari stood and joined him, gazing at the green plant. She slipped her hand back into his.
“You should see it in the summer with the little pink and red hearts hanging on each branch.” He stopped for a moment, collecting his thoughts as he felt Kari’s fingers intertwined with his. “Dad brought them home one day and told Mom he couldn’t pass these up. He said they made him think of her because she was such a bleeding heart—soft and caring for everyone.” Randy stopped, emotion welling up inside of him.
With tears clinging inside his eyes, he looked at Kari again. “I don’t know what I’d do without him. He means so much to me. I know I haven’t been the best son lately, but I want to be. I know God let me make up with him for a reason. He and my mother accepted Christ last week. Did I tell you?”
Kari shook her head.
“Listen to me, Randy.” She let go of his hand and placed her palms along his jaw line so his face was only inches from her own as she looked straight into his eyes. “Whatever happens, you will be able to handle it. God is with you every step of the way. You have your family and friends. You won’t be alone.”
Her eyes never veered from Randy’s, and in that moment he knew how very much he not only loved her but needed her. It seemed that with every day his love for her deepened and intensified.
With her lips only inches from his, he gave in to his emotion and reached behind her, pulling her close to him. He leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. It only lasted a moment, but it was a wonderful moment—one he would never forget. When he parted from her, she didn’t look displeased. She stood by him and in renewed silence, they walked around the rest of the garden hand in hand. Together, they watched the sunrise which wrapped the area in a golden blanket. That’s exactly how Randy felt, enclosed in an enormous warm blanket of love and acceptance.
“It’s probably past six o’clock now. You should try to get some sleep before you go see your father this morning.”
Randy smiled. “Thank you, Kari. I needed you today.”
“We’re friends. I’m glad I could help.”
She left him and headed back into the house, leaving Randy feeling haunted by her words. We’re friends. He had hoped his kiss had communicated to her how much he loved her. But she saw it as only a friendly kiss for a friend in need. He stood outside for a few moments more and then followed Kari inside. He slowly walked back to his room and climbed into bed hoping to catch a couple hours of sleep. With all that was on his mind, though, he wasn’t sure that was possible.

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Chapter Eighteen

Kari hurried down the stairs and headed for the dining room at nine o’clock. She was unsure of how long everyone else would sleep, but she was starving. She hoped it wouldn’t just be her and Randy sitting down to eat. Continuing down toward the main part of the house, she questioned how she let him kiss her in the garden. He was just caught up in the moment, she was sure. He hadn’t really meant anything by it. She’d never experienced anything quite like it. His kiss had been tender and seemingly full of so much meaning. It was the kind of kiss you always dream about. It had taken all of her strength not to pull him back and kiss him again, but it wasn’t like that with Randy. They were friends.

She knew Randy had tried to ask her out once and that hadn’t gone all that well. She assumed he’d given up on the idea since it had never come up again. But maybe he meant something in that kiss. There was so much in it. I can’t stop thinking about it. How will I face him this morning? Face him like every other time. He’s just glad you’re here as a friend at a time when he needs support.

As she approached the dining room, the aroma of coffee and toast surrounded her, causing her stomach to rumble. Walking through the doorway, she saw Alice sitting down enjoying her morning meal.

“Oh hey, Kari, come sit and have some breakfast with me,” said Alice with her coffee mug in hand.

As Alice drank from her mug, Kari sat down beside her.

“I’m sure Mary will make anything you want.”

A small laugh escaped Kari, “Oh no, toast and coffee sounds perfect.”

Alice slid over a silver covered plate. Raising the cover, Kari pulled out a piece of toast. Then from a ceramic coffee service she poured herself a steaming cup of coffee. Taking the cup into her hands, she took a deep sip.

“Did you sleep well, Kari? I always sleep like a log when I’m home.”

“I fell asleep quickly, but I woke up at five this morning.”

“I hope you fell back to sleep.”

“Not really. This coffee is great or maybe I’ve just had too much campus coffee.”

Alice laughed. “No, Mary’s coffee is the best. I don’t know what she does, but it’s always wonderful.”

“Good morning everybody,” said Randy as he walked in wearing jeans and a T-shirt. His recently showered hair was still damp and curled up around his forehead.

“You seem well-rested,” said Alice.

“Not at all,” said Randy cheerfully. But his eyes reflected his somber frame of mind. “I barely slept at all. I finally got a couple hours just as the sun came up.”

“Well, maybe you can take a nap after we go see Daddy.”

“Maybe, but I was thinking about going out to the lake.”

“The lake in December? I don’t think so. I’m going to curl up by my fireplace and read a book, I think.”

Randy poured himself a cup of coffee and glanced over at Kari. She gave him a smile and he responded with a half smile out of the side of his mouth before bringing his mug up for a sip.

****

An hour later, Amanda Steele joined them, and they all took off for the hospital. Randy drove them in the Steele’s late model BMW. With Mrs. Steele in the front with Randy, Alice spoke quietly to Kari in the back.

“I’m glad you’re coming with us. Daddy will be happy to see you, too.”

“How do you say that? He barely knows me.”

“He was impressed by you. He told me.”

“He was?” A tiny thrill of surprise thurmmed in her heart.

“Sure. I think lots of company will make him happy anyway. He loves people.”

Kari lowered her voice even more so Alice had to lean in towards her to hear what she was saying. “Your parents seem really great. It must have been hard for Randy to be separated from them over the past few years.”

“It was. Dad and Randy were like best friends when he was in high school, but he had to stand up to Dad and do what he knew was best.”

After entering the hospital, the family walked to ICU and past the nurse’s station. As Randy had been there the day before with his mother, he led the way to Mr. Steele’s room.

“Mr. Steele.” They all turned to see an attractive young nurse calling to Randy. “Mr. Steele, we moved your father this morning. A private room opened up. I can show it to you, if you like.” She looked at Randy with large, engaging eyes.
“Thanks, but I think we can find it. Uh, this is my sister, Alice.” He pointed to Alice. Then his eyes moved over to Kari. “And this is our good friend, Kari Montgomery.”

“Oh sorry only immediate family is allowed.” She inspected Kari, narrowing her eyes in scrutiny.

Alice spoke up. “She is family. She’s about to marry my brother.”

Kari and Randy both looked at Alice with surprise and then they smiled at the nurse without saying a word.

After giving Randy a lasting glance, the nurse said, “He’s in room 312,” before she walked away. Randy started toward his father’s room with the others following behind.

Upon reaching the door, Randy turned the handle and walked in followed by his mother. Kari grabbed on to Alice. “I don’t think I should go in. It should just be family.”

“Come on, Kari. I mean it. Daddy would love to see you.”

“Maybe later. I’ll go back to the waiting room. I’ll see you later.”

“All right, Kari, if that’s what you want.”

Kari returned to the waiting area, purposefully avoiding the young nurse who they had spoken with a few minutes ago. Finding a seat, she picked up a magazine and tried to read. As she flipped through the pages, all she could think about was Randy and their early morning tryst in the garden.

After only a couple more minutes, Randy stalked into the waiting area with concern on his face. He moved right in front of her seat. “Why didn’t you come in? I wanted Dad to see you.”

“I just thought it should be family, real family. I’m really tired of this fake engagement stuff that keeps popping up.”

“I’m tired of this fake engagement stuff, too.”

Kari couldn’t erase the emphasis Randy put on the word ‘fake.’ She shifted in her seat. “You really should go back.”

“Only if you come with me.”

“Fine but only for a few moments.”

Kari returned with Randy and visited with Mr. Steele, who did seem happy to see her, and asked her to call him Philip. A half an hour later, the entire family minus Philip left the room and made their way back to the car. It was lunchtime when they made it back to Steele Manor as Kari called it in her mind. Amanda walked straight into the kitchen to inquire about lunch with Mary. After lunch, Kari walked back outside all bundled up and meandered back toward the garden.

“It’s just the pretension.” Randy smiled wryly and then held the gate open for her as she followed him down the snow-covered path that led to the front yard.

****

Randy gazed at Kari as they walked along, imagining what it would be like to walk with her for the rest of his days.

“Your house is not pretentious,” said Kari replying to his comment from a few minutes ago. “It’s magnificent and your parents are dears. You’re lucky to have them.”

“I am; you’re right. I’m sure I take my parents for granted like every other person. My father’s heart attack has made me realize how important they are to me.”

Kari smiled up at him and continued walking.

“When I saw you on Thanksgiving, you said you had something to talk to me about,” said Randy.

“Oh,” said Kari, seemingly caught off guard. Then she looked at him resolutely. “Yes, I did. I ran into Geoffrey again a couple weeks before Thanksgiving.”

Randy felt incensed that this guy kept bothering her. “Did he do something to you?”

A smile curved in the corner of her delicate mouth. “Well, he tried.”

“Kari, this can’t go on. Something has to be done about him. You can’t live your life like this.”
“Randy Steele, you really are too sweet.”

Randy wanted to sweep her into his arms and keep her safe for all eternity—safe from the Geoffreys of this world, safe from anything and everything that could bring her sadness and grief.

“I don’t think Geoff will be any trouble for me anymore.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, the night I told you about, he came because he felt lost. Blair had thrown him out and he didn’t know who to turn to.”

“So, he came to you.” Anger began to build inside him more and more. His hands folded tightly into fists as they swung by his sides.

“That’s right. He tried to grab me. I felt empowered for some reason and shook his grasp off. We were by the river and he fell right in.”

“That’s horrible, Kari. Did you tell the police?”

“No. The thing is I saw it as being…funny.”

“Funny? Kari, how can this be considered funny?”

“Well, I guess because it was so horrible and because for the first time in a long time, I could see myself clearly. Geoffrey realized how awful he’d been and I told him he needed to get to church with his wife. I also told him to find God and allow Him to work in their marriage.”

“What did he say?”

“He agreed. After he left, I sat on the ground and laughed so hard I thought I was going to die.”

“You laughed.”

“I laughed. I’ve been so silly for so long. I thought I was mourning the loss of Geoffrey and that after him I couldn’t trust my heart to anyone. But that night I realized I wasn’t really mourning Geoffrey; I was mourning what he represented.”

“And what was that?”

“To feel loved and secure, to be a part of a family—my own family. I’ve missed that for so long.”

Randy realized how important family was to Kari and how much she needed that while he’d been disregarding his parents for five years.

“I also understood I was never in love with Geoffrey, just with the idea of him.”

She looked at Randy with her vivid green eyes sparkling in the sunlight. In his heart, Randy mouthed the words, I love You. I need you. I will give you love and security. But he couldn’t get the words out. Although he was sure of how much he loved her, he was beginning to believe he and Kari just weren’t meant to be.

“I’m glad you worked all this out, Kari. It must bring you some consolation.”

“I am happy for Geoffrey and Blair. I saw them yesterday. They’ve been going to church and are trying to build a Christian marriage.”

“I’m happy for them too.” Inside he wanted to be happy for Geoffrey, but he still resented him and all the pain he had brought to Kari. He paused for a moment before continuing. “So, what do you do now? What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a smile. “But I have hope. I started leading a teen girl’s Bible study and we’ve been discussing dating. The idea I came back to was I have hope. God gives me hope.”

Hope.

****

The rest of the day went by quickly. When the phone rang, it was the hospital. The doctors agreed that Philip Steele was going to be okay. It was a mild heart attack. He would be able to come home in a few days and he didn’t need surgery. Kari told Randy and Alice she was glad she could be of help, but she really should get back home.

As Randy drove her to the train station later that night, flurries of snow fell down onto the windshield of his car. “Kari, you really don’t have to go. Alice and I are going to be driving home Sunday afternoon.”

She played with her fingers in her lap without looking at him. “No, I really need to get back.”

They stopped in the parking lot of the train station. “Well, I don’t know what to say but thanks for all you’ve done,” said Randy.

Kari took his hand as they sat there. “I’m glad to help. I hope I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Definitely.” Randy wanted to tell her more. He wanted to tell her he loved her. That kiss. It had meant so much to him. He wanted to kiss her again in this car before she left and let her know just how much she meant to him.

“Randy, about that kiss…”

“Yes?” he answered, his voice wavering.
“I don’t want you to feel strange about it. I know it didn’t mean anything more than you needing a friend’s support during this time.”

“Sure, a friend.” His heart fell, depression setting in.

“Well, goodbye. I’ll see you soon.” She had a smile on her face but it didn’t reach her eyes. It was as if she didn’t really mean what she was saying.

“Goodbye, Kari.”

Kari shut the door and Randy drove off with a hurting heart. He’d opened himself up to her again and she’d ripped his poor heart out once more. She hadn’t meant to, but she had. He didn’t know how he would be able to face her the next time he saw her.

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Chapter Nineteen

Kari was wracked with guilt the week following her trip to Sackets Harbor. When she left Randy that night, she had made light of his beautiful kiss. She’d seen pain in his face when she suggested his kiss meant nothing more than friendship. She wondered if maybe he still did care for her, as more than a mere friend. She thought about asking Alice but the idea just made her cringe inside.

What if I’m wrong and he does just consider me a friend. She’ll tell him I asked. I know she will.

With the arrival of the last week of classes, students all over campus were hitting the books unlike they had done all semester. Exams were taken, projects were finished, and papers were written. It was finally time for Christmas break. Kari was glad for a vacation from school, but she wasn’t sure what she was going to do for Christmas, exactly. More than likely, Emily would ask her to spend it with her and John. Although she loved her cousin, she hated to intrude on their first Christmas together as man and wife.

Three o’clock on the last day of classes, the dorm had cleared out of most of the girls. It was eerie how quiet it was when Kari came down the stairs dressed in jeans and a turtle neck sweater. She had a cup of tea in her hand and a book in the other as she walked down to the parlor for some quiet reading time. From the back, she spotted Randy and Alice walking down the hallway.

“Alice,” called Kari.

Both Randy and Alice turned around.

“Kari,” said Alice excitedly. “I wanted to find you before I left, but big brother here,” she stuck her elbow into Randy’s chest, “thought you might be busy with the semester ending.”

“Can’t you see how busy I am?” She held up her tea and book for them to see. “The end of the semester signals quiet for me. Of course, I have a mountain of exams and essays to grade, but I’ll attempt them tomorrow. So, you’re staying with Randy over the holiday?” Kari glanced at Randy as she finished speaking and then turned her eyes back to Alice.

“Just for the weekend. Monday, we drive back home. It’s going to be a great Christmas this year. Mom and Dad are so excited about going to church and everything.”

Kari turned to Randy. “How is your father?”

“He’s great. He’s been taking it easy. Mom has totally changed his diet, which he hates, but other than that he seems to be doing well.”

“I’m glad. I’ve been praying for him—for all of you actually.”

“I’m going to drop all this stuff at the car, Randy. Have a great holiday, Kari.”

“You too, Alice.”

“So, do you have plans for Christmas, Kari?” asked Randy after his sister had left. He didn’t smile at her like he usually did. She didn’t even detect a hint of humor in his eyes.

“Nothing set yet.”

“I, uh, well, I guess, I should get back to Alice.”

Without letting her heart communicate with her head, Kari spoke up. “Randy, remember back in October when you asked if I wanted to go out some time?”

Randy’s face took on a guarded expression. “Sure, I do.”

“So, do you still want to?”

“You’re asking me out…on a date?” He appeared completely surprised by her offer.

“If you still want to.”

“Of course, I do.”

“You do?” Kari felt a chill of embarrassment or maybe it was the thrill of looking into Randy’s eyes and seeing him look at her with such joy.

“I’m not leaving for Sackets Harbor until Monday. Why don’t I pick you up tomorrow night.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Bye Kari.” He smiled at her.

There it was again that irresistible, devastating grin. She hadn’t seen that particular smile in awhile. It was good to see that it was back. “Goodbye, see you tomorrow.”

Randy left through the main entrance, but Kari remained nailed to her spot for a few moments longer. Then she walked into the main kitchen and set her mug in the microwave since her tea was now glacial. As she waited for the timer to beep, she thought about what she had just done.

Am I the biggest idiot in the world? Did I really just ask Randy Steele out? And he said yes? What am I
doing?

She thought about his brilliant smile and wonderful eyes, and she knew at that moment more than anything she wanted to keep looking into those eyes for a long, long time. Maybe even forever.

****

On Saturday night, Randy drove along in his beat-up sedan really wishing he had a nicer car to take Kari out in. He knew she had commented on him having his priorities straight and that she didn’t mind his car. But that was then, now he was taking her out on their first official date. He wondered why she had asked him out and what had made her do it. When he saw her last, she mentioned their kiss and how it was all about friendship. Maybe she just wanted to spend time with a friend. But then why did she call it a date? He took a deep breath and tried to relax.

Dressed in his best dark suit, Randy knocked on Kari’s room door. She opened it looking her most charming. She literally took his breath away, wearing the quintessential black dress and her hair worn up on her head with loose pieces curling around her face. His eyes swept over her appearance approvingly. He couldn’t help saying, “You’re beautiful.”

She didn’t seem to mind his compliment. “So, glad you approve.” She curtsied. “I didn’t know what to wear so I pulled out my old staple—the black dress.”

“I’m sure you’ll be the loveliest one out tonight.”

She colored fiercely. “That’s enough from you. So, where are we going?”

“Well, to begin with I thought we would try San Raphael’s. I heard from Emily that it’s a favorite of yours.”

“You’ve done your homework, Pastor Steele,” she said with clear approval in her eyes.

Randy took her to his car and drove to the overstuffed restaurant with people standing or sitting everywhere. They were seated within only five minutes since Randy’d had the foresight to call ahead for reservations.

When the hostess left them alone, Randy turned his eyes up to inspect Kari in the dim lamplight as she studied the menu. It was an old-fashioned Italian restaurant with red-checkered tablecloths and real candles on the tables. It was family owned and Mr. San Raphael himself greeted them at the door.

“I haven’t been here in months, Randy. Thanks for bringing me.”

“It was definitely all my pleasure,” he said, drinking her in with his eyes.

“Remember when we met?” asked Kari.

“Sure.”

“Did you imagine that we’d be sitting here together?”

“At the time, I wondered.”

“Did you really?”

“Sure, you were unknown and interesting.” In fun, he raised his eyebrows at her.

She titled her head to the side as she placed her menu back onto the table. “How was I interesting?”

“I guess it was the washed out look.”

“Ha, Ha, how funny. I was a mess that day. I’m not sure how I got myself to look presentable after all that rain.”

He smiled at her again, recalling the day in question and how she had looked more than presentable that day and every other day that he’d seen her. Her mere presence seemed to bring him joy and contentment.

Dinner came, and they ate, laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. As they walked out of the restaurant, Kari wanted to know where they were going next.

“It’s a surprise,” he said as he drew his eyebrows together, trying to be playfully mysterious.

“Are you sure I’m dressed appropriately.”

“You’re perfect.” And he meant it.

****

When they arrived at the ice rink, Kari couldn’t believe it. She hadn’t been ice-skating since she was in high school. One of the many winter frolics she’d enjoyed while growing up.

“Randy, I had no idea we were going to do this. I am not dressed for this.”

“You’ll be fine. When are you going to start trusting me?”

Kari surveyed his confident manner and smiled, loving the look in his eyes. “Now, right now.” She took his hand and strolled over with him to rent the skates.

With her hand in his, she felt a bottomless peace and satisfaction. She wasn’t sure what he wanted from her. She only knew she loved him. It was like her heart had taken wing as it flew through the trees of her abundant happiness. For the first time, she fully understood the meaning of her favorite Elizabeth Barrett
Browning poem. She loved him from every direction, every depth. It had been there for a long time, but she had pushed it aside saying it was too soon after Geoffrey and that she wasn’t ready to fall in love again. But the heart is an interesting thing; it is very hard to control.

She tried to figure out when she started to love Randy. She thought it must have started from the first time she looked into those steel blue eyes as he helped her during that rainstorm the day of Emily’s wedding. But it really began to kick in when she heard him preach. So much of who he was and where his heart lay came out that day. She shrank away from him because it scared her that she was falling in love not again but really for the first time.

With her skates on, Kari felt a bit nervous. She hadn’t been skating in about ten years. She looked down at her dress thankful she’d worn the one with the full tulip hemline. Her confidence spiraled upwards as she felt his hand between her fingers again. In her favorite black three-quarter coat and blue scarf, she stepped out onto the ice holding Randy’s hand.

With the night sky containing innumerable stars blinking brightly overhead, the rink filled with all kinds of happy Christmas revelers. The inside wall of the rink was covered in colored Christmas lights and decorated Christmas trees lined the walls around the outside.

Once on the ice, Randy let go of her hand, and they started to race across the ice. It all came back to her. There is just a smell that hits you when you get out on the ice. Kari won the first race, but Randy caught her the second. Then they slowly skated side by side and started talking again.

“So, how am I doing on this date?” asked Randy.

“Great,” Kari admitted with a laugh. “You, of course, know you are God’s gift to women.”

“What? What is that supposed to mean, Dr. Montgomery?”

“Like you don’t know. Wherever you go women seem to follow you with their eyes. Don’t even get me started with the young women at your church.”

Amusement flickered in the eyes that met hers.

“Why haven’t you married one of those girls, Randy?” asked Kari seriously.

Randy would have none of that. “Because none of them fell for me, plopping into my life amongst a ravaging rain storm. Besides, who says I’m even ready for marriage. It would take a special woman to marry me.”

“How special?”

“Very special.” His gaze lowered as did his voice. “I have a remarkable job. The person who marries me would have to understand that and want to serve God with me.”

“I’m sure whoever that lucky lady is will be overjoyed to share that responsibility with you.”

“Lucky? Why I’ll drive her to distraction with my audacious behavior and unsightly housekeeping.”

“Ah ‘tis very true. It will take a special woman to take you on. You are quite a chore.”

“Almost like Kate in Taming of the Shrew just in reverse.”

“Exactly.”

A light snow started to flutter down on them in the open rink. It was magical. Kari’s heart beat faster as he took her hands and swung her around in circles. She screamed as they went faster and faster. When he let her go, she slid to the far side of the rink. After turning to see him coming toward her, she took off in the opposite direction. He started after her at a fast pace finally catching her.

Gathering her into his arms, he held her tightly. It felt natural to Kari, like she had always been meant to be there just under his chin. She tilted her head up to look at him. He locked eyes with her and then pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss as tender and light as a summer breeze. She never wanted to leave this place but to be here with him always.

Kari felt their bodies separate with his blue eyes meeting her green ones in an expression of pleasure. He took her hand, leading her off the ice. Even though the weather outside was turning bitterly cold, Kari felt a warm glow flow through her. She finally felt the love she’d always wanted.

****

“I thought about taking you for some tea at The Tea Shoppe tonight, but it is turning so cold, I thought you might want to go home.” Eyeing her, affection rose in his heart as he felt her fingers laced between his.

“We can go back to the dorm and I’ll make us some tea there. So many of the girls are gone now that it should be pretty quiet, although, I can’t guarantee it.”

They walked back into Palmer House to an unnatural silence. The girl at the front desk nodded to them as they walked in. Kari led Randy back to the house kitchen and pulled out two mugs.

“If we were upstairs, I could brew you some tea with my hot tea maker, but as we are down here, we will have to use the microwave.”
“It’s the only way I take my tea these days.”
“You mean since Hayley and Mary aren’t around to make it for you?”
“Ouch. I guess it’s true. I was a little spoiled before going off to school and trying to make it on my own.”
“I’m sure it was good for you.”
“Most definitely. I know Mom tried her best with me, but she’s used to having money. I don’t know what she’d do without Mary.”
The microwave suddenly beeped; they both started at the sound. Kari pulled out the mug and sunk a teabag inside while Randy placed another mug in the microwave. When they both stood with teacup in hand, Kari led Randy to the parlor. After she flipped on the light, they sat down on the comfy couch. Together they sipped their tea, talked and laughed until Randy noticed it was midnight.
“I had no idea it was so late,” said Kari.
“Where did the last two hours go?”
Kari walked him to the back door to avoid observation by the girl manning the front desk. They stopped at the door, and Randy stared at her. He knew he wanted to kiss her again and tell her how much he loved her.
“This was fun; we should do it again,” said Kari lightly as she moved her hands behind her back. “Isn’t that what everyone says after a date?”
For a long moment, he just looked back at her. “Uh, yeah, I guess so.” But all I want to say is I love you. A wave of apprehension flickered through his entire body. “Well, I’ve got to go. Good night, Kari.” Before he could say anything more, he was back out into the cold night air.
He stalked back to his car, wondering what was wrong with him. This was the worst ending to the best date he had ever had. He glanced back at the building, trying to decide if he should run back to her. He decided against it. Into his car he slid, and he quickly raced out of the parking lot and out onto the highway.
****
Kari remained at the door after Randy’s inauspicious exit. She wondered what on earth had happened. Everything had been so great, so relaxing, and so perfect. But by the way he left, she was beginning to think she had imagined it all—that he didn’t really care for her after all.
Confused, she wandered slowly up the stairs to her room. She stripped out of her dress and slipped on some soft comfy pajamas. After pulling back the blankets from her bed, she got inside and covered herself up, attempting to contain the tears building beside her eyes. She closed them now and the hot tears slipped quickly down her face. She kept her eyes closed hoping there would be no more. Deep sobs racked her insides and in this frame of mind she eventually stumbled into sleep.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Twenty

Randy didn’t know what had led him to behave as he did. He’d acted horribly with Kari Saturday night. It was now Monday evening, and he was sitting in his old bedroom waiting for his mother to call him down to decorate the Christmas tree. He felt restless and irritable, but he knew it was all his own doing. Kari had been great. They’d had a wonderful time together. Then when the moment that mattered had come and he could tell her how he felt, he bolted—bolted like a bronco out of the yard.

What must Kari think of me? Here I’m supposed to be a man of God working to serve you, Lord, and I treated her abominably. The thought shot through him that she might never want to see him again after the stunt he pulled on her. He could still see the disoriented look on her face when he shut the door and left.

“Hey brother,” called Alice from the doorway. “You can’t waste away the night thinking about Kari.” She gave him one of her humorous grins.

Unfortunately, Randy was in no mood. He turned and looked at her with annoyance. “Does Mother need me to do…something? I need something to do.”

“What’s wrong with you, Randy? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this distracted. Didn’t your date with Kari go off well?”

“IT went great; Kari was great.” He tried to maintain an easygoing expression, but irritability had slipped into his tone and he knew it.

Alice walked in the room and reclined on his bed. “Okay, now when are you going to tell me the truth,” she asked, her eyes sharply assessed his face.

Randy lay back on the bed next to her and took in a deep breath. “The date really did go well. We had a lot of fun together.”

“Did you kiss her?” she whispered in his ear.

“Alice!” he answered with surprise.

“You did. I can see it in your eyes…You love her!” Alice realized, as she sat up. “So, what happened? Don’t tell me she doesn’t care for you? I’ll never believe it.”

Randy sat up, too. “You sure know how to jump to conclusions.”

His sister flashed him a knowing smile.

“Okay, you’re right,” he finally admitted. “I did kiss her, and I…I do love her. But when it came down to it the other night, I panicked and fled like a coward. She must hate me now.”

“Randy, if she really is the one for you then she won’t hate you. She’s probably just confused and possibly mortified. You better let me take over from here on out.”

“Thanks, Alice, but I can handle this. Actually, there is something you can help me with.”

****

As Kari packed her bag, she wasn’t sure if she really wanted to spend Christmas with Emily and John. They were going to be all cute and happy and she already felt alone and depressed. She almost wished she could just stay here by herself and celebrate Christmas alone, but then she knew she’d just cry again. No, it was best if she was around people, happy people. She needed to focus back on the reason for the season—Christ’s birth.

When the phone rang, she picked it up expecting to hear Emily’s cheerful voice. “Hello? Uh, hi Alice. How are you?”

“I’m great; how are you?”

“I’m okay.” She sat down on her bed, unsure of the reason for the phone call.

“So, do you have plans for Christmas?”

“I was invited to my cousin Emily’s.”

“Well, do you think there is any way you can get out of it and spend the holiday with us?”

“I…I suppose so, but I wouldn’t want to impose on your family.”

“You wouldn’t be. We really want you here.”

“Really, Alice? I don’t even know if Randy would want me there.”

“Are you kidding?” Alice lowered her voice as she continued. “Listen, he would be so angry if he knew I told you; but he’s the reason I’m calling. I mean Mom and Dad really want you here, but he especially wants you to spend Christmas with us.”

“Well, all right. I’ll come. I guess I could take the train tomorrow morning and be there by afternoon.”

“Excellent. We’ll see you then.”
“See you.”
Kari hung up the phone with her heart racing and wondering what she had done and if she was about to suffer more hurt and humiliation.

****
Kari disembarked from her train at five p.m. at the Sackets Harbor depot. She had intended to walk outside to look for a taxi but she saw a familiar face.
“Does the lady need a lift?”
“Does the gentleman intend on giving the lady a lift?”
“Indubitably.”
Kari smiled at Randy with reserve not quite sure of what to expect from him. He took her bag and walked her to his parent’s car. On the ride back to the Steele home, they talked about random topics and never even approached the subject of their date or his behavior.
She entered the Steele vestibule to behold it decorated to the hilt. If she thought the house was beautiful before, now she though it was magical. Someone had even climbed up to the cathedral ceiling and draped yards and yards of Christmas garland. Philip and Amanda greeted her with smiles and hugs. Alice was, of course, as lovable as ever. They led her into the living room, and she gaped at their eight-foot Christmas tree decorated not with the perfect store bought ornaments she was expecting but homemade ones from over the years, as well as, other sentimental decorations.
She touched a picture frame ornament containing the picture of a ten year-old boy with familiar, stunning steel blue eyes. Kari glanced back at Randy. “This is you, I assume.”
“The one and only. See I was cute then, too.”
The clock in the hallway announced it was six o’clock. “Oh it’s time for Christmas Eve supper,” said Amanda Steel. “But first I want Randy to put up the Christmas star.” She glanced at her husband and said, “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.” Philip Steele stood beside his wife and placed his arm around her shoulders as they watched Randy put up the star. Kari eyed Philip and Amanda with a tingle of envy. She missed the days when her parents were alive and she could watch them together like this. Everybody including Kari clapped when Randy placed the star on the top of the tree and then Alice led the caravan into the dining room.
After dinner, they returned to the living room and sat around the tree. Randy led them in one Christmas carol after another. Afterward, he pulled out a small New Testament from his back pocket.
“Well, we couldn’t go to church tonight since Dad wasn’t quite feeling up to it, but I still want to read the Christmas story out loud while we’re all together.
Kari eyed him attentively as he started to read from the book of Luke. “‘In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world…’” Randy read. His deep, smooth voice held everyone’s attention. He really was wonderful. She looked at his humorous mouth and how a lock of dark wavy hair fell on his forehead. She wanted to touch that lock and move it back into place just so he’d have to look at her with his amazing eyes. She loved those eyes. It wasn’t just that they were beautiful. It was more than that. They reflected the warmth and understanding she had come to know and love about him. She couldn’t imagine not seeing those eyes each and every day.
“‘Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’”
Randy lifted his eyes from the page and settled his gaze on Kari as he smiled at her. He returned to the Bible again. Kari looked on, trying her best to contain the excitement traveling all the way down to her toes. It was thrilling and terrifying at the same time to be here and not know what was going on in Randy’s head.
“‘The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.’” Randy finished the reading and looked around the room. “I’d like to pray now. Dear Heavenly Father, …”
A few moments later, everyone looked up. Amanda Steele was the first to speak. “That was beautiful, son. I’m so glad you’re here.” A couple tears streamed down her face.
Randy stood from where he sat on the floor by the coffee table and made his way over to his mother. Kneeling beside her, he said, “I’m glad I’m here too, Mom.” He hugged her and his mother let out a muffled sob. When they came apart, she looked at everyone. “I’m sorry. This is a happy time. I really am happy. Well, I will just see if Mary has finished those Christmas cookies. Does everyone want a cookie?” She wiped the moisture around her eyes.
“Sounds great, Mom,” said Alice. “I think I’ll join you so I can have the first one out of the oven. I love Mary’s cookies.”
“I think I’ll stay here and read the paper, dear,” Philip said to his wife.

After the departure of Alice and Amanda from the living room, Randy moved toward Kari. “So, how are you doing? Having a good time?”

“Fine,” she said, filling with uneasiness and hoping her face didn’t reveal how unsure she felt.

“Hey, I’ve had an idea.”

“Just the one?” she quipped with a small smile that just seemed to escape her. Her humor always seemed to pop up at the most tense moments in her life.

“Ah ha, it’s good to see you smile again. No really. I was thinking about going for a walk. It hasn’t snowed in a couple days; so, it shouldn’t be too bad outside. I know how you like the cold weather. How about it?”

Kari wasn’t sure what he wanted. He’d been so strange since they parted last. Then again, she wondered if he might explain himself. She knew she had to give him that chance.

“All right, I’ll get my coat.”

“Great, I’ll meet you by the front door.”

****

Randy nervously collected his coat from the hall closet and prayed quietly that he would deal with Kari in the right way and that the Lord would guide his words and actions.

They stepped out the front door and strolled toward the frozen pond located in the center of the housing development. “As a kid, I loved going to the pond. In the summer time, my friends and I used to jump in and have a great time. Then there were times as a teen that I just ran over here to get away from my parents or just to be alone.”

They approached the pond and started around the circumference. “It’s very beautiful here, Randy, especially with the little bit of snow and icicles hanging off the edges.”

“I thought you’d enjoy it.”

Randy took her hand as they walked along. Kari’s ungloved hand felt cold in his. “You should have brought gloves. You’re hands are freezing.”

Kari only smiled and nodded.

“You want me to go back and get some?”

“No, I’m fine.”

His heart thrilled to feel her near him again. The last couple days had been agony for him. He had wanted so desperately to see her and tell her what an idiot he’d been and then confide in her all that had been on his heart. Tonight he hoped to rectify the situation and to surprise her as well.

They walked a few moments more in silence, hand in hand circling the pond until Randy decided to speak.

“I know I left a bit abruptly on Saturday,” Randy admitted, looking out at the pond. Kari remained silent as if waiting for him to finish. “I was so stupid.” He looked at her now. “I wanted to tell you something.” He stopped walking and turned her so that she faced him. Her eyes were large oval pools of green looking at him, wanting to know what he had to say.

“Oh, Kari, I’ve practiced this so many times and now I’m tongue tied again.”

“What is it, Randy? What do you want to say? I’m not going to judge you as you’ve told me before. We’re…friends, right?”

“Well, that’s what I wanted to tell you. I don’t want to be friends with you anymore.”

“You don’t?” An indication of hurt flicked in her eyes.

“No, I can’t handle that any longer.”

He placed his hands around her waist and pulled her towards him. She instinctively threw her arms around his neck. He nuzzled his face in her hair and whispered. “I love you. I think I always have.”

“Oh, Randy,” cried Kari. “I love you too.” She raised her face, looking into his eyes, and he lowered his head to meet her lips. The kiss sent wonderful passionate shocks through Randy. The first two times he’d kissed her had been wonderful accidents. This time he knew he was going to kiss her and therefore every fiber of his being joined in to form this kiss.

When they parted, Kari looked at him with renewed eyes. “I was so afraid when you left the way you did the other day. I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I was scared. I don’t know why except I’ve never been in love before.”

“Neither have I.” He questioned her with his eyes. “I was never in love with Geoffrey. I realized that the day I knew I loved you.”

Randy bent down and kissed her again.

Afterwards, they walked silently together again, savoring the time and thrilled at just being near each
Out of the silence Kari said, “It’s funny to think back to that rainy August day and remember how we
met.”

“God brought us together.”

“And to think I used to hate the rain.”

Christmas morning Kari rose from her borrowed bed and dressed. Coming down the stairs, she could
smell coffee and pancakes. The joyous sounds of laughter echoed through the halls. When she entered the
dinning room, the chatter ceased and the entire family looked at her with conspiratorial smiles—Randy’s the
largest of all.

“Good morning, Kari,” said Alice walking over to her. “Come have some breakfast with us.”

“Good morning everyone,” called Kari to the entire Steele family. “And Merry Christmas.”

In unison Philip and Amanda said, “Merry Christmas.”

Kari took a seat between Alice and Randy. They both filled her plate to the point of overflowing with
pancakes, eggs, and pastries. Randy didn’t say a word, but his eyes were as overflowing as Kari’s plate. He also
looked amused, almost like he’d just heard a funny joke. She’d seen that look before when he forced her to sing
karaoke. In the small recess of her mind, she was worried he had worked out some other embarrassing activity
for her.

After breakfast, they returned to the living room and the colossal Christmas tree. Kari sat in the chair
adjacent to the tree while Randy sat on the arm of the chair next to her. Philip and Amanda relaxed on the
couch together both looking at each other with a seemingly happy anxiety. It was Alice who put on a Santa hat
and walked over to the tree.

“I’ll pass out the presents today. Let’s get this over with because I have plans. I don’t know about you old
folks, but I have a social life.”

Alice began distributing the gifts. A putter for Dad, a platinum diamond drop pendant for Mom, a bottle of
Alice’s favorite perfume, and Randy got the European coffee maker he’d been wanting. Kari received a cute
sweater from Alice and a 1940 edition of Pride and Prejudice from the Steele’s.

“It’s to replace the ruined one,” said Philip. Evidently, Randy had shared their accidental meeting during
the rainstorm.

Kari also brought gifts for the Steeles. New Bibles for Amanda and Philip with their names imprinted on
the cover in gold foil and for Alice a biography of her favorite female journalist, Nellie Bly, along with a t-shirt
that said “Ace Reporter.”

She had a hard time figuring out a present for Randy. When she knew she was going to be seeing him for
Christmas, she wasn’t sure where his affections lay. She finally decided on a book of poetry from the Romantic
Period as well as a music CD from that same period. That way he could read his Byron and Keats while
listening to the likes of Beethoven and Chopin.

When it appeared that all the presents had been opened, Alice called out. “There’s one more gift here
under the tree.” She pulled out a narrow rectangular box and handed it to Kari.

Kari glanced up to see all eyes on her. Lifting the cover of her box, she saw a small black umbrella nestled
within the confines of the tissue paper lining. She smiled at Randy who seemed to be glowing with happiness.
On top of the umbrella lay a note. Kari pulled it out and read it silently.

I would never want you to get the wrong impression of me. I do have inappropriate behavior that has been
called unforgivable at times. Please accept this umbrella with the hope that it can cover those mistakes and lead
to a life of love and understanding firmly planted in God. I love you, Randy.

Kari pulled out the umbrella and held it up. Dangling from the handle by a string was a tiffany cut
diamond. She looked swiftly from the ring to Randy and then back to the ring. She couldn’t believe this was
happening. The joy that had bubbled up into her laughter, she could now feel in her heart.

Randy kneeled down in front of her and took the umbrella from her hand. He untied the ring and with love
in his eyes said, “Kari, I love you with all my heart. I know God had us meet for a reason and the reason is that
we both needed each other. I know He will be the foundation of our marriage and bless our lives.” He paused
and took a deep breath. “Will you marry me?”

A cry of happiness broke from her lips. She couldn’t believe he had asked her to be his wife, to share his
life, and to be a part of this wonderful family. She flew down to the ground next to him and threw her arms
around him. “Yes, oh yes.” When she met him, her heart was empty and hurting and now it was overflowing
with joy.

And there in front of the entire Steele family, who had quietly observed this intimate and lovely scene,
Randy kissed Kari again, sealing the pact of their future marriage.

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Kari forgot about her heartache…

His dark hair ruffled in the billowing wind with a single lock falling forward on his forehead. For the first time in a long time, Kari forgot about her heartache. A sudden shiver skittered down her back. She wasn’t sure if it was caused by her soaked condition or the man who somehow sent her senses spinning.

She pushed her wet tawny hair back from her face before accepting her waterlogged book from him. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said after releasing the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “It’s just this rain… and I’m late.” Her voice wavered. “I can’t seem to find the place I’m supposed to be. I’m in a wedding this afternoon.” She tried to hide how awkward and strange she felt standing a few inches away from a stranger.

He smiled teasingly as he looked over her outfit of Capri pants and tennis shoes. She’d never seen such an authentic smile. It was as if it started in his eyes and traveled down to his genial mouth. “And that’s what you’re wearing?” he asked as his eyes returned to her own.

“No, of course not. I…” She shivered again.

“Well, maybe I can help you out with directions.”

She replied with the name of the church and he provided her with yet another devastating smile. “Sure I know the place. You passed it at the beginning of this block. Just turn down the street and you’ll see it. If you don’t mind, I could come along with you. It’s on my way.”

“No need and I’m really in a hurry. Thanks.” She started to head off when he stopped her, causing her to jump at the gentle touch of his hand on her arm.

“Here take my umbrella,” he offered.

She faced him again, taking the handle of the umbrella. “Are you sure? You’ll get soaked. I don’t want to impose and I won’t even know where to return it.”

“Consider it a gift then. And who knows, we just might bump into each other again sometime.”

“Yes, but hopefully it will be less jarring in the future,” she said with the hint of a smile on her lips, trying to be just as witty.

He tipped his head close to hers. “I doubt that.”

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
by
Cindy K. Green
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Your Wedding
Chapter Four

Kari entered the office of Ellen Bradstreet, the Assistant Director of Archives at the Wellington Opera House. A large valanced window graced the back of the room, allowing warm afternoon sunshine to fill the office. As she took a seat on the plush couch covered in a floral tapestry material, a wave of nervousness soared inside her stomach. Her eyes glided around the room past the small, white shelf containing a set of antique books and then settled on her friend.

“Kari, thanks for coming in today. I know it’s short notice, but this will really help me out.” While Ellen spoke, her attention was focused down on the papers in front of her. When she was finished, she looked up and smiled at Kari from across an ornate nineteenth century cherry wood desk which was covered in files and papers, order seeming to be nowhere in sight.

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“It makes you wonder if you should have gone into public history, doesn’t it?” Ellen flashed her a large smile.

“Sometimes,” Kari answered with a shrug.

“That reminds me. How’s your book coming?” asked Ellen, playing with the pen in her hand.

“Okay. I’ve had more time to work on it these days.”

“Still based on your dissertation?”

“Yes and growing.”

“Sounds like fun. Well, I have to get going.” She dropped her pen and started straightening the disorganized papers on her desk. “Your tour group should be getting together in a half an hour or so. Until then just relax in here.” Taking the papers, she slipped them into a manila file folder.

Kari gave her a fleeting smile before Ellen left. While still sitting in her chair, Kari mentally walked through the script she had put together for her Opera House tour.

Ten minutes later, she stood and stared out the window to the street below, observing the crowd forming at the door of the Opera House. Peering at the people, she thought she saw Randy Steele among them. She shook
her head, thinking she must be mistaken but found herself looking again, trying to focus in on the faces. A tall man with hair like coal glanced up at her and smiled. It was Randy. Kari stepped back from the window and sat in a nearby chair.

What is he doing here?

She had been surprised to see him at Palmer House two days ago, but after she recovered from the shock, she just wondered what had brought him there. Now he was here again. Sitting back in her chair, she wondered what it was about him that made him seem so different. She chuckled to herself when she realized it was his sense of humor. Even in high school, she always ended up choosing funny before good looks. Randy was blessed with both. She moved over to the window again, casting a guarded look down below. After seeing the young pastor with the rest of her tour group, she quickly moved away from the window, returning to the seat she had just vacated.

Her heart seemed to be keeping time with the lighthouse clock hanging on the wall as the second hand moved around with a loud tick, tick, tick. As the time for beginning the tour approached, Kari took a deep breath, rose from her seat, and then walked to the door closing it behind her. Stepping into the early afternoon sunshine, she faced the crowd with a smile as she clasped her hands tightly behind her back, attempting to avoid locking onto a certain pair of steel blue eyes.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I want to welcome you all to the Wellington. My name is Kari Montgomery and I will be your guide today.” After the introduction and opening remarks, she started in on her script. “Built in 1874, the Wellington is one of the oldest entertainment venues in the state. It was built by Abraham Beatty and so it was first called the Beatty Opera House.”

“And how did Mr. Beatty afford to build such a building?” asked a familiar voice out in the crowd. Kari glanced around to spot the owner of the voice and stopped on Randy. A tiny smile teased at his mouth and she couldn’t help the slight curving of her own lips in return.

“A good question…sir,” she responded to Randy. As if she had no control over herself, she smiled again. “Mr. Beatty was a coal and lumber merchant who was quite wealthy by the time he built the Opera House. In fact, this was the site of his uptown coal and lumber yard.” After answering his question, she returned to her script, feeling a little bit more at ease.

“This building is one of the best examples of American Victorian architecture in the country.” She went on to describe some of its outstanding features. Before leading the group inside, she pointed up at the black marquis with the golden lights spelling out “Wellington,” explaining it had been put in place in 1932.

After walking into the lobby, Kari led the group past the staircase and began the tour of the building, imparting the history and significance of the structure as they went. At the end of the tour, she took them to see the Wurlitzer Organ, which was installed in the twenties to accompany silent movies. The white instrument gleamed under the lights as she stood next to it and explained the history of the organ and the extent of its restoration.

At one-thirty, she ended the tour and said her farewells to the group as they went their separate ways. She started to walk back inside when someone called her name. She turned to see Randy walking toward her.

“Good afternoon, Pastor Steele. Enjoying the cultural amenities we have here, I see.”

“It was Alice. She asked me to come spend the day with her and at the last minute she got called away. A ‘journalism class fiasco,’ I believe she called it. She told me to check out the Opera House tour. I was surprised to see you as my tour guide.” He slipped his hands casually into his pockets.

“I don’t usually lead the tours. I went to school with the archivist and I like to help her out from time to time. I love local history. I’m a historian, if you didn’t know.”

“My sister told me you teach history.”

“Teach it, live it, breathe it.”

“Something you are passionate about.”

“Sometimes it seems like it’s all I have.” Kari stopped and looked away from him. Why had she conveyed so much personal information to him? She shifted from foot to foot and glanced around at the opera house gardens nervously. She recognized she put more into her job and researching her articles and book than she should. Yet deep down inside she knew it was really all she had these days since Geoffrey had exited her life and Emily had gotten married and moved away.

“You worked hard this afternoon. Why don’t I take you to lunch?” offered Randy. His expectant expression was hard to resist with that particular pleasant smile gracing his face. A gentle wind lightly ruffled his soft, dark hair as he waited for her answer. “Please don’t refuse by saying you have too much work to do. We always have too much to do. Sometimes you just have to stop and do something fun.”

Kari gazed at Randy with her head cocked to the side as she considered whether to agree or not. She knew
she needed to get back to campus and start on her Sunday school lesson. But there was just something about him that pulled her towards him. Despite her better judgment, she began to think he was right.

“I do have a lot to do. I would normally refuse, but I have to eat. Okay let’s go to lunch.” She released a smile at him. “And I even know the place.”

After going upstairs to fetch her purse, Kari led Randy to a nearby deli on Market Street. They ordered their lunches and sat down at one of the umbrella adorned outdoor tables. The sunlight shimmered down through the branches of the cherry trees that lined the street, casting shadows all around them.

They both just sat with their sandwiches before them until Randy suggested he’d pray. As he bowed his head, Kari followed his lead. “Dear Lord, Thank you for this wonderful day and the pleasant weather. Please bless this lunch, the food and the fellowship. In Your name, Amen.”

Randy lifted his sandwich but before taking a bite said, “I enjoyed your tour today, Kari. Very informative.”

“You mean boring, right.”

“No, I really enjoyed it. I didn’t realize there was so much history behind a building.” The wind blew a piece of his dark hair across his forehead. He pushed it back into place and again it slipped down onto his brow.

“I love old buildings especially Victorian ones. There is so much in the architecture alone that tells a story.”

“And the Philharmonic.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant as she stared back at him.

“You love the Philharmonic as well, or do you just enjoy spending time with…Dr. Hamilton, was it?”

“Linus? Oh, he’s just a friend.”

“Just a friend?” He lifted his left eyebrow at her, questioningly.

“Actually, he’s more of a colleague. I met Linus last summer when we were assigned to teach a joint class — Comparative Literature of the Early United States. It was half literature and half history. I haven’t been on a real date since…” Kari stopped amazed at herself for again conveying to him more than she had intended. What is it about him and his soothing voice?

“Since…?” he encouraged her to finish as he arched his brows.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to talk about that.”

“About what?”

“I’m sure my Aunt Patty has told you my entire life history.”

“She told me your father died when you were in high school and you helped your mother out considerably until she died last year.”

Kari looked down, feeling that particular pang of loss over her parents once again. Still staring at her half eaten turkey sandwich she replied, “Yes, I’ve lost both my parents; I still miss them.”

“I’m sure you do.” He took another bite of his sandwich before continuing. “So, you haven’t had a date since your mother died? Is that what you were going to say?”

Kari wanted to agree with him. It would make it simpler than admitting the truth, but she couldn’t lie to him. She eyed her glass of iced tea innocently, “Uh, no, it wasn’t. I haven’t had a date since I broke off my engagement.” Picking up her glass, she took a big gulp while looking straight at Randy.

His astonished expression revealed his surprise. Evidently, Aunt Patty had exercised some restraint because she had clearly neglected to fill in the young pastor as to the details of Kari’s broken engagement.

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard on you, especially with losing your mother, too. You seemed in good spirits last month at Emily’s wedding though.”

“Actually, I was feeling a bit down until I…” A slow smile emerged. “…well, until I talked to you. I guess your antics took my mind off it.”

Randy smiled at her with satisfaction. Kari felt the affect of it with goose bumps tingling at the back of her neck.

“You mean you’ve forgiven me?” he asked still smiling while tilting his head to the side.

“Forgive one another as I have forgiven you,” Kari paraphrased from Ephesians.

“You know your Bible, Miss Montgomery.”

“I hope so. My father and mother had me memorize a chapter a week from the time I was ten.”

“Good for them. I wish more parents took that much interest in their children’s moral upbringing.”

“You’re the youth pastor at Grace, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I love it. Of course, Alice says it’s because I’m as juvenile as they are.”

“Is that true?”

“Well, I’ll just say that I take pleasure in being able to serve God, stay young, and even enjoy my job.” He
playfully raised his eyebrows at her as he took a sip of his soda.  
“What brought you to work with the youth?” She knew her questions were becoming probing and personal, but he was the one who insisted on having this lunch so she figured she’d ask the questions.  
“I love working with them so it was never a question.” A harsh expression crossed his face, but as soon as it had arrived it was gone. “Actually that’s not true. When I started college, I was going to be a lawyer like my father, but I knew God was calling me to be a pastor. I finished my degree in pre-law to please my parents and then went off to the theological seminary.”  
“Your parents aren’t happy about your chosen profession,” said Kari more as a statement than a question. She was amazed at how free and open he was with his personal history. She very rarely revealed herself to anyone.  
Randy laced his fingers together in front of himself. “No, Dad is still reeling I didn’t go to law school. He wouldn’t pay for the seminary. He kept hoping I’d give up this nonsense and go on to law school later. I didn’t.”  
“Where do your parents live?” She leaned her cheek into her open palm, her elbow supported on the table as she asked her question.  
“I grew up in upstate New York, Sackets Harbor. It borders on Lake Ontario.”  
“Sounds lovely.”  
“It is. You’d like it; there’s a lot of history. It was a great place to grow up. We were members of the country club and the yacht club, but I always felt like something was missing from my life.”  
“Your parents weren’t Christians?”  
“Nope. Not then, not now. My father is what you would call an agnostic. Although before I decided to go into church work, he was just ambivalent to God. Now it’s like he has declared war. He wants nothing to do with anything Christian. He’s still angry I chose to follow God instead of practicing law.”  
“So how did you and Alice become Christians?”  
“When I was 17, a revival came through and I decided to go. Alice was always tagging along with me, and in the end we both went forward and accepted Christ. My life has never been the same since.”  
“I’m sure it hasn’t. God has a way of doing that to you.”  
“Amen to that. When did you become a Christian?”  
“Well, growing up in a Christian home, I felt like I always knew the gospel, but when I was seven I realized I hadn’t actually asked Christ into my heart. I asked my mother about it and prayed right in my bedroom one night. My life has been fairly normal—no drug stories, no awesome transformation.”  
“That’s great. God doesn’t want us to suffer. He instructs in His Word how to live not as a stranger who wants to keep us from fun but as the protecting father who wants to guard us from harm.”  
“Very true.” Kari was intrigued by the man sitting next to her. He was so honest and open. And every time he looked or smiled at her she felt her heart lurch inside. It was a worrisome feeling. She looked down at her watch. “I really have to get back to campus and prepare for tomorrow.”  
“What are you doing tomorrow?”  
“Usually it would just be another day at church, but I’m teaching a Sunday school class for a friend of mine who has been sick with the flu this week.”  
“Well, I wouldn’t want to interfere with that. I’ll walk you back to campus.”  
“No. Please don’t bother.”  
“I insist,” he said with a playful smile.  
Kari was tempted to give into him as she glanced at his blue eyes glistening in the sun, but her intuition was twittering around inside her, telling her it wasn’t a wise decision. She was already feeling a bit too close and comfortable with him as it was. She needed to place some distance between them and the best way she knew how to do that was to think of him as a pastor rather than as a man. “I really appreciate you taking me to lunch today, Pastor Steele, but…”  
Please, you’ve got to drop the Pastor Steele. Call me Randy or at least call me what everyone at church calls me, Pastor Randy.”  
“Okay, Pastor Randy, thanks for lunch, but I really need to get back. I’m sure you have to catch a train so don’t put yourself out for me.”  
“It’s no trouble.”  
His gorgeous smile was just too unnerving. He was like the proverbial knight in shining armor. But as much as she enjoyed his company, it scared her. Her stomach tightened, and she just wanted to get away. “I really wish you wouldn’t.”  
Randy’s smile slid off his face instantaneously as if he had received a silent message. His face clouded
over with irritation, and he sat up straight. “Sure. I understand, Miss Montgomery. Thanks for taking the time to humor the pastor kid.” He stood up with precision. The muscles in his jaw were tight, and the expression in his blue eyes was intense and troubling. “Goodbye.” Without another word, he took off down the street toward the train station.

Kari remained in her seat stunned by his departure, a knot forming in her stomach. She never even tried to stop him from leaving or explain what she really thought of him. She just sat there like an observer to the whole scene. When his shrinking silhouette was all she could see of him, Kari rose from the table and walked off in the direction of the college campus, her heart full of concern.
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