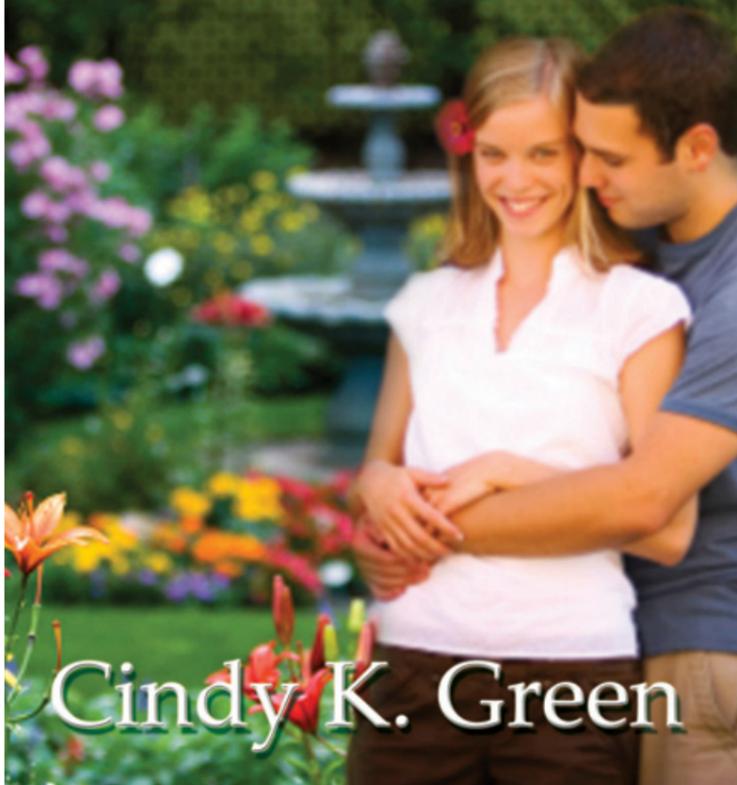


A Funny Thing Happened
on the Way to
Your Wedding



Cindy K. Green

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.”

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by

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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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Cover Art by *Tamra Westberry*

The Wild Rose Press
PO Box 706
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706
Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, May 2007
Print ISBN 1-60154-072-8

Published in the United States of America

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.

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.

“Three 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.

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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."

"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."

Kari's heart jumped once inside her chest and then settled down to its regular pace as the man who she'd met in the rain came into view. He stopped and then situated himself between her and her aunt.

"It was no trouble," the young pastor said in his warm, smooth voice. "It was only a couple blocks from the church which turned out to be an unexpectedly pleasant walk."

His eyes moved over and settled on Kari. She looked back, but under his gaze her cheeks began warming into another blush. She could only imagine what he thought of her after their brief encounter before the wedding.

His dark hair was cut short yet the ends still struggled to curl around his forehead. She gazed at his hands, observing the strong, slim fingers. It made her relive how he had grabbed onto her in the rain. Her heart reverberated in her chest again at the memory.

“Oh, yes, the rain,” said Patty. “Well, it really was so good of you.” She glanced over at Kari and then back to the pastor. “Let me introduce you to my niece, Kari Montgomery.”

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.

"Yeah, 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.

"Of course, I would never want you to feel guilty. I want you to keep it. I'm sorry if my behavior was inappropriate. I do that sometimes." 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. "Well, I won't keep you." She scanned the room for an exit. After returning her eyes to his she added, "I'm sure you were on your way somewhere before my aunt accosted you."

"What about you?"

She squared her shoulders before looking back at him. "I was just trying to get some fresh air."

"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. 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.

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, lets 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...”