



Keeping Faith
KARA LYNN RUSSELL

Keeping Faith

An Orchard Hill Romance

by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Keeping Faith: An Orchard Hill Romance

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Dedication

To my very favorite uncle, Uncle Les.

Prologue: Pansy

Pansy Parker paused in pushing her cart down the grocery store aisle. She scanned the produce section in front of her, taking in the range of customers. She needed a new “project” to work on.

Pansy and Misty Green, her nemesis in matchmaking, were keeping track of all the matches they made this year. The one with the most matches at the end of the year would be acknowledged by the other as the best matchmaker in town. Pansy didn’t intend to lose.

Of course no one knew about this except for herself and Misty. But that was enough. No one else needed to know. She couldn’t wait to see Misty’s face at the end of the year when they totaled everything up and Pansy came out the winner.

Now, who needed her services?

Another cart turned in and crashed into her while she stood there lost in thought.

She was startled to see a stranger—a man of about her age pushing the offending cart. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Excuse me,” he said, backing up. “I didn’t see you there.”

She smiled at him, noting his full head of gleaming silver hair. Not many men their age still had all their hair. Okay his hairline had receded a bit, but not much. “That’s quite all right. I was just sitting here wool-gathering. I’m Pansy Parker.”

The man returned her smile and extended his hand to her. “I’m Arthur Green. I’m in town visiting my daughter. I love her dearly, but she’s such a health nut. I’ve got to have some real food or I’m not going to last until I go back to Florida.”

“What a shame. Now I’ve always thought that a man needs the kind of food that sticks to his ribs. I’m making pot roast for myself and my son tonight.”

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“Now that sounds heavenly.”

“Would you like to join us?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Not at all, we’d love to have you.”

“Well, in that case...”

It wasn’t until Pansy had given Arthur her address and told him to be there by six, that she realized his last name was Green. There was only one health food obsessed woman in town with that last name—Misty Green! She’d just invited her rival’s father to dinner.

Chapter 1

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

—Hebrews 11:1 NIV

“Dad, you have to listen to me. You need to get out.”

“I get out,” Andrew Thomas protested, irritation lacing his voice. He didn’t want to spend this phone call with Robin talking about his social life—or lack of one.

“Sure you get out—to school board meetings and PTA pot lucks.”

“What’s wrong with PTA pot lucks? Besides, as principal of the elementary school, I really do have to attend.” He swore he could *hear* the nineteen-year-old’s eyes rolling.

“Dad, I really appreciate all the attention you gave me when I was growing up. I know being a single parent is tough. But now that I’ve moved out, don’t you think it’s time for you to find a new focus?”

Andrew frowned. “Like what? A hobby?”

“A date, Dad. Go on a date.” Robin sighed. “I know how much you loved Mom, but she’s been gone a long time. She wouldn’t want you to be alone.”

“So that’s what this is about? You don’t think the old man can take care of himself now that you’ve gone away to college.”

“I know you can take care of yourself,” Robin said, as if she were talking to a very slow child. Andrew’s annoyance meter went up a notch. “I just don’t want you to be alone. You deserve to get out, enjoy yourself a little.”

“I like my life the way it is.”

“Then, why don’t you find someone to share it with?”

Exasperation mingled with affection filled him. Robin was a great kid, the best daughter he could ask for. She was only acting like this because she loved him, he reminded himself.

“Okay, if I promise to ask someone out on a date, can we talk about something else?”

“Will you really do it?”

Andrew shrugged. “Sure.”

“I think we both know who you should ask.”

“Really? I don’t have any ideas.”

“Oh, come on, Dad.”

“I’ll give it some thought.”

He was grateful when Robin allowed him to steer the conversation to more normal topics then, such as her classes, her grades and *her* social life. When he finally hung up the phone, he had a smile on his face.

He was so proud of his daughter. She’d hinted that he’d given up things for her, but Andrew couldn’t imagine anything else he’d have rather done than spend all the time he had with her. Now she was grown, and he’d probably only see her on holidays and over the summer. A wave of loneliness did sweep over him then.

Maybe Robin was right. Maybe he should try to develop a bit of a social life. A date, though? Well, he’d promised. She’d reminded him of it before they had said good-bye.

Now who was he going to find that would go out on a date with him? His administrative assistant, Faith Fielding flickered into his mind. Faith was far more than just a secretary to him. She’d come to him, a widow with a young son, trying to rebuild her life after her husband’s unexpected death in a work related accident, and she’d been there for him when his own wife had died after a short illness. Over the years they had become close friends. She’d helped him out when he needed a woman’s perspective for Robin, and he’d helped her with her son, Kevin. She was, in fact, his best friend.

Yes, Andrew reflected, he should definitely talk to Faith. She’d know who he should ask.

On Monday morning, Andrew sauntered into the office, a mug of coffee in hand. Faith was already at her desk, going over the calendar for the week and putting together the morning’s announcements.

Soon, the halls of Orchard Hill Elementary would be filled with children—laughing, crying, shouting children.

He thrived on it. But once the busy school day started, it would be difficult to have a personal conversation with Faith.

“Can you come into my office for a minute?” he asked.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Sure.”

Andrew loved her smile. Faith’s smile could light up a room. She was a pretty woman, with softly curling brown hair and friendly blue eyes. Her presence made the school office feel warm and welcoming. No wonder the children adored her.

He settled himself behind his desk, and Faith took a chair on the opposite side, a pad of paper and a pen in her hand.

“What’s up, Andrew?” she asked.

“Well, this is a personal matter,” he admitted. “Robin asked me to do something, and I need your advice.”

“Oh, how is Robin doing?” asked Faith eagerly. “I got an email from her last week, and it sounded like her classes were going well.”

“Yes, she’s fine,” Andrew told her. Normally, he would be happy to go on about his daughter. But now, he wanted to put this promise behind him.

“I’m so glad. I know she was nervous about going away this fall, but Robin’s got your charm, Andrew. She must have oodles of friends already.”

“And admirers lining up to carry her books,” Andrew added wryly. “But as I was saying, she made me promise something last night, and I want to take care of it.”

“Oh?” Faith tilted her head at him, curiosity in her eyes. “What did you promise?”

“I promised to go out on a date.”

Faith felt herself go still. A date? Her heart sped up. For years, she’d been hoping Andrew would ask her out. Was this it? Was it finally going to happen?

Wait a minute. Did she want him to ask her out just because Robin told him he needed to go on a date? But maybe it wasn’t that way. Maybe it was more that she’d given him her blessing. Faith knew Andrew would never get involved with someone Robin didn’t like.

Oh, who was she kidding? She’d take a date with Andrew any way she could get it. Even when she’d first started at the school, she thought Andrew was strikingly

handsome. In the ten years they'd worked together, his salt and pepper hair had gone completely to silver. But she thought it looked great on him and made his gorgeous dark blue eyes stand out even more.

But, as handsome as she thought he was, physical appearance was the least of the reasons Faith loved him. His sterling character, charismatic personality and generous heart drew her to him. "So who's the lucky lady?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." Andrew leaned over the desk, and Faith found herself drawn to him as if he were a magnet and she a hunk of steel. "I wanted to ask you..."

"Yes?" her voice came out barely louder than a whisper.

"I wanted to ask you...who I should ask."

Faith leaned back until she felt the solid wood of the chair behind her. "You want me to tell you who you should ask out on a date?"

"Yes. Surely you have a friend or know someone..."

Why not me? Faith wanted to scream. But she couldn't. Instead she rose and said "Andrew, that is a decision you have to make for yourself."

He had the nerve to look surprised. Faith was tempted to smack him over the head with her pad of paper.

"You mean you won't help me?"

"No, Andrew. You'll have to find your own date. Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do to before the bell rings." She strode out of his office, out of the school office and down the hall to the supply closet. Faith stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Then, she actually locked it.

She wanted to scream, but even here she'd be overheard. She'd have to wait until she was home, and then she could scream into her pillow until her voice was hoarse if she felt like it. She counted to ten and didn't feel better. She counted to one hundred and still didn't feel better. She paced furiously and even punched a roll of craft paper. *Ouch*. That definitely didn't make her feel better.

Why should she be surprised that Andrew hadn't

thought of asking her out? When had he ever thought of her as a woman? When he'd needed someone to take Robin shopping for new bras or to give her the talk about the birds and the bees; that was when.

There was a mirror on the back of the door. Faith stared into it for a minute. She wasn't a beauty queen, but surely she was still good looking enough for a man to notice that she was a woman, for crying out loud. Forty was looming on the horizon, and she knew her curves were a little fuller than before, and a few laugh lines were beginning to show, but still... Faith turned away from the mirror. Whatever it took to catch Andrew's eye, she didn't have it.

Dropping her head, Faith said a quick prayer. "Lord, I don't know what to do about all of this. Just help me hold it together today, and I'll sort it all out with you later."

Finally, she felt a little better. She took a deep breath and unlocked the door.

Andrew stared at the empty chair where Faith had been sitting. She'd left in a hurry. What happened? Was she mad at him? Had he done something lately that upset her? Maybe that was why she was refusing to help him find a date.

"Excuse me."

Looking up, he saw a woman standing in the doorway. Her brown hair, highlighted with red, fell just past her shoulders. She smiled at him. "I'm here to speak to Mrs. Lindeman's class. Can you tell me how to find it?"

Realization dawned. This was Harmony Solberg, the host of "At Home with Harmony," a regional television program that was quite popular with Orchard Hill residents. She'd just recently moved into town.

"I'll be happy to take you there myself." Where was Faith? It wasn't like her to leave her desk for long without telling him.

"Thank you."

"What are you speaking about today, Ms. Solberg," he asked as they made their way down the hall.

"Nutrition. I'm going to be explaining the food pyramid and giving the children a few simple recipes they

can try at home.” She smiled at him. “With proper adult supervision, of course.”

Andrew returned her smile. “Of course. Do you speak at schools often?”

“Oh no. I’m not really experienced with children. But Ms. Lindeman was very persuasive.”

“I’m sure she was. She’s extremely enthusiastic in pursuing anything she thinks will help her students. Are you very busy now? Are you taping a new season of “Harmony at Home, perhaps?”

She shook her head. “I’ve retired from television, at least for a while. I’m writing a cook book.”

“Really? That sounds wonderful.”

“I’m sure it would seem very boring to most people.”

Andrew felt an idea form. “Not at all. I’d love to hear more about it.”

“Really?” Harmony looked skeptical.

“Yes. Maybe I could take you out to dinner sometime.”

“Is this the way you treat all your guest speakers Mr...?”

“Thomas. I’m Andrew Thomas.” He was botching this. It had been so long since he’d asked anyone out--more than twenty years. “And no, I don’t usually ask out guests at my school.” He thought about trying to play it cool and realized what a hopeless attempt that would be. “To be honest, I haven’t asked anyone out since before my daughter was born. She’s a freshman at college this year and thinks I need to get out more. She made me promise to ask someone out on a date.”

That’s right. He’d only promised to ask someone out. If Harmony said no, he’d still have fulfilled his promise and he’d be free.

“I assume you don’t have a wife? I wouldn’t think so, but it never hurts to check.”

“No, my wife passed away about eight years ago.”

“That’s a long time to go without a date.”

Andrew shrugged. “I was busy raising Robin. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you. It was inappropriate. Here’s Mrs. Lindeman’s.” He was about to open the door for her when she stopped him.

Harmony reached into her purse and pulled out a

card. She handed it to Andrew. "I admire your honesty. I think I would like to have dinner with you, Andrew. Please give me a call—if you still want to, that is."

When Andrew returned to the office, Faith was sitting at her desk again. "Where were you?" he asked.

"I had to...get something from the supply room. Where were you?"

"Harmony Solberg is speaking to Mrs. Lindeman's class. I just showed her the way."

"I'm sorry I should have been here to do that."

"No, no it worked out quite well."

"What do you mean?"

Andrew rocked back on his heels, feeling pathetically proud of himself. "I asked her out, and she accepted. I guess I didn't need your advice after all, Faith."

Faith stared at him. "I guess you didn't," she echoed faintly.

"It's time to do the announcements," he said, glancing at the clock. "Are they ready?"

"Of course," Faith replied, handing him a sheet of paper.

As Andrew took the paper he noted a bruise forming along Faith's knuckles. That hadn't been there before, had it? He took her wrist in his other hand. "What did you do?"

She tried to pull away. "It's nothing. I...uh...fell and caught myself on my hand."

"You must have landed in an awkward position. Did you sprain your wrist" he asked.

"No, it's fine Andrew, really."

Andrew studied Faith's face. Something *was* wrong, but this wasn't the time or the place to push her. He let her wrist slide through his fingers. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Then let's get to the announcements."

Chapter 2

After work that day, Faith stopped at The Green Scene Natural Food Market. She had started coming to Misty's store years ago, after the doctor had determined that Kevin was allergic to milk. At the time, The Green Scene was the only place that sold soy milk and cheese. Now the local grocery store sold it, too, but Faith had become fond of the organic produce and the herbal teas Misty sold, so she kept shopping here.

"Faith Fielding, where have you been?" Misty called out as she walked into the store. "I haven't seen you in ages."

Faith attempted to smile back. "Spring is always busy at the school. Every one is counting down to summer vacation. And there are all those 'lasts'"

"What do you mean 'lasts'" asked Misty.

"Oh you know, the last field trip, the last concert, the last art project, and so on and so forth. It keeps the calendar full. I think May is busier than December for us."

Misty leaned forward and studied Faith's face. "You look tired. I hope you aren't letting yourself get run down."

"No, I'm all right."

"Well, just in case, you should pick up some of that immune system boosting tea."

"Thanks, I will."

"And how is your boss holding out through all this? I hope he's not leaving you with all the work."

She shook her head. "No, of course not. Andrew does more than all of us."

"Hmm, maybe you'd better take some tea for him, too."

"I'm not his wife. He'll have to look after himself," Faith said, a tinge of bitterness in her voice.

"Faith, what's going on with you?"

“Nothing. Maybe I am tired.”

Misty studied her. “Is Andrew seeing anyone?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact, I believe he made a date with Harmony Solberg today.” Faith hoped she sounded nonchalant.

“Really.”

“I’ll definitely take some of that tea. Can you hold it up here while I look at your produce?”

“Of course, honey. You go look. I’ve got some early strawberries that are absolutely delicious.”

When Faith came back to the counter a little while later, Misty had the box of tea waiting. She placed her other items on the counter and Misty began to ring them up.

“You’ve worked at the school a long time, haven’t you, Faith?”

“Yes, this is my tenth year.”

“Maybe this tiredness isn’t physical,” Misty suggested as she weighed the strawberries.

“What else could it be?”

“Maybe it’s a tiredness of the soul.”

Faith looked at her skeptically.

“You know, maybe what you need is a change of scene, a new challenge.”

“Are you saying I’m in a rut?” she asked.

“Yes, I guess. Do you think so?”

Faith considered as Misty bagged the groceries. There was one thing she was definitely tired of—tired of waiting for something that was never going to happen. And she’d probably never move on while she spent every day with the object of her unrequited affection. “Maybe you’re right, Misty.”

That evening Andrew paced in his living room. The television was on, but he wasn’t paying any attention to it. Finally, he picked up the remote and muted it. Then he took Harmony’s card out of his pocket and looked at it.

She said she’d like to have dinner with him. Why should it be so hard to call and set up the details?

Andrew reviewed what he knew about the woman, which wasn’t much. She’d been the host of a regional

cable show, she was writing a cook book and she didn't have much experience with kids. She was attractive and pleasant.

"What will we talk about all night?" Maybe he should invite her to a movie or something. Then he wouldn't have to talk for at least an hour and a half.

"What am I thinking?" Andrew chastised himself. "I carry on conversations with people I hardly know all the time. What could be so hard about this?"

It was the whole date scenario that was throwing him. Though it had been more years ago than he wanted to think about, Andrew remembered feeling like this in junior high when he'd asked Emily Dubrowski to the 8th grade dance. Had he made so little progress in the three decades he'd lived since then? He'd experienced marriage, parenthood, and widowhood. He'd earned several degrees and built a respectable career.

Yet here he was, reduced to sweaty palms and a knotted stomach at the thought of calling a woman for a date. Where was the fairness in that? A lifetime of experience in maintaining poise in difficult situations surely must count for something?

Andrew wiped his moist hands on his pants. Apparently not.

The most ridiculous part about this whole fiasco was that he was only asking Harmony out because he'd promised Robin. It wasn't as if he was attracted to her. At last, disgust with himself beat out anxiety, and he picked up the phone.

Andrew was feeling pretty pleased with himself as he walked into school the next morning. He'd called Harmony, and they'd made plans to go out for dinner that weekend. He'd done it. Robin would be proud of him.

Faith was already at her desk. "Good morning," he called to her as he sailed through the office. Her response was less than enthusiastic.

Andrew paused. "Everything all right, Faith?" he asked.

Faith looked up from her work. Her eyes and nose were red. "I think I've picked up that cold that's been going around. But I'm all right."

“Are you sure? You’re never sick.”

“Yes, I’ll make it through the day.”

But by that evening, Faith knew she was done. Her throat hurt, her head hurt, her nose was running like a faucet, and all she wanted to do was curl up under a quilt and watch sitcom re-runs.

“You okay, Mom?” asked her son, Kevin, when he emerged from the cocoon he called his room in search of food, his dog on his heels, as usual.

“Not quite, I’m afraid,” Faith croaked. She hated being sick, but she had to admit this bug was getting the best of her. “Do you think you can make yourself some supper?”

“Well, sure. I can heat up some leftovers or something, but what about you?”

“I’m not hungry. I’ll have something later.”

Kevin was silent for a moment. Then, he came over to the couch and knelt down by her. “You wouldn’t let me skip supper if I were sick.” He placed a hand on her forehead. “I think you have a fever, Mom.”

“I’ll check it in a few minutes. I don’t feel like getting up now.”

“What about eating? I could make you some soup.”

“Thank you, honey, but I don’t think I could get it down.”

Kevin disappeared into the kitchen to make one of the soy cheese pizzas from Misty’s—and to sneak treats to the dog, she assumed.

About ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. Before Faith could convince herself to move from the couch, she heard Kevin open the kitchen door.

Did he invite a friend over when I’m sick? He wouldn’t do that to me, would he? Now she really had to get up and see what was going on. And she would. In just a minute.

“She’s in here,” Kevin said, and then Andrew’s face was in front of hers, concern written all over it.

“Faith?” he asked

“Andrew? What are you doing here?”

“Kevin called me. He said you were sick.”

“You knew I had a cold. It’s no big deal.”

He knelt down beside her and laid his hand on her

forehead. "Get the thermometer, Kevin."

"I've got it right here."

"I'm fine," Faith protested weakly as Andrew popped the thermometer in her mouth. Well, maybe not fine, exactly but surely not in need of this kind of attention. She just wanted to lie on the couch and relax. Was there a law against that?

"She asked me to make my own supper," Kevin whispered to Andrew, as if that was a crime.

"But..."

Her protest was cut off by a stern look from Andrew. "Don't try to talk."

With a sigh, Faith sank back into the cushions. After a minute, Andrew checked the thermometer.

"What does it say?" Kevin asked, leaning over his shoulder.

"One hundred and one. It's official. She's sick."

"Do we have to take her to the hospital?"

Andrew chuckled. "No, I think it's just a virus. Your mom needs rest and a lot of fluids, mostly."

"I need to be left alone," she mumbled, but they ignored her.

"I offered to make her soup. She said she didn't want anything."

"Well, we can't have that, can we," Andrew said. "Let's go see what we can do in the kitchen."

Twenty minutes later, Andrew and Kevin were munching on pizza while Faith sat up on the couch staring at her unappetizing bowl of soup.

"Would you rather have some of the pizza, Mom?" Kevin asked.

"No. My throat's too sore. But thank you, honey."

Andrew moved over until he sat next to her on the couch. "I know it's hard, but you have to eat Faith. You have to keep up your strength." He put his arm around her and she, weak soul that she was, leaned her head on his shoulder, soaking up the comfort he offered.

"Take a bite," he urged her.

Faith complied, saddened by her lack of willpower where Andrew was concerned. Maybe if she finished the soup he'd go away. She took another bite.

She couldn't taste anything, and her throat burned.

Why did he have to be here now, when she was a complete mess? Now, that would be a picture to compare to Harmony Solberg when they went out.

Harmony always looked perfect. Of course she looked perfect on TV, but even the few times Faith had seen her around town, she appeared to have just stepped out of a salon. Her clothes were pressed and perfectly fitted, never a hair out of place.

Faith sighed. And here she was—runny nose, red eyes and dressed in a ratty bathrobe that should have been thrown out years ago. Life was so unfair.

She leaned forward and plunked her bowl on the coffee table. “I can’t eat any more. I think I’ll just go to bed.”

To Faith’s horror, Andrew got up and followed her. “Well, take some cold medicine first. With juice maybe. And keep some water by your bed.”

Faith took the pills he offered because she didn’t have the strength to argue with him. She accepted the glass of water he gave her because she was too tired to complain, but she rallied when he tried to follow her into her bedroom.

“Andrew, you are not tucking me in,” she protested. “Thank you very much for your help, but I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

He shook his head. “No way. You’re staying home tomorrow.”

“But I never miss work.”

“This time you will. And that’s an order.” Andrew put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “I need you. Get better.”

Faith slumped against her door as he walked back to the living room. He needed her. If only he wasn’t talking about someone to take his messages and keep track of his schedule.

This cold was making her overly emotional. Maybe she should stay home and sleep tomorrow. She certainly felt like she could sleep that long.

Back in the living room, Andrew sat down to finish his pizza. “Do you want to work with Davy tonight?” he asked Kevin.

Davy was the terrier-type dog Kevin had adopted

recently. Andrew had volunteered to help train the dog. At first, Kevin had wanted to call him Goliath, but Andrew pointed out that since the dog was done growing, he would likely never fit that name. "He's more of a David than a Goliath," Andrew had said and the name stuck in slightly altered form—Davy.

"Nah," Kevin answered. "He's doing okay. Besides, what if Mom needs me?"

"I think she'll be all right. You do understand it's just a cold, don't you?"

"I know...But Mom's never sick. And Robin said..."

"Robin said what?"

"Robin said her mom got sick before...before she died. Maybe you should spend the night."

Andrew studied the boy. These fears seemed a little childish for a thirteen year-old, but then again Faith was remarkably good at avoiding sickness—a must for anyone who worked in a school—and Kevin had already lost one parent.

"That's true. But Robin's mother had a lot more than a simple cold. You just haven't seen your mother much when she's sick. Trust me, there's a big difference between a cold and cancer."

"Okay," said Kevin. "If you're sure you don't want to stay."

Andrew laughed. "I don't think your mother would appreciate it."

"I guess not," he agreed. "Oh, I almost forgot. I have to tell Robin what you said."

"Tell Robin?"

"Yeah, while I was waiting for you I IM'd her and told her about Mom. I have to tell her you said it was just a cold."

"IM?"

"Instant Message. Geez, Andrew, you work with kids. You should know this stuff."

Now that he was sure his mother wasn't dying, Kevin was back in full teenage mode, Andrew noted, attitude in tact. He'd seen enough of that over the years that it didn't faze him. "Sorry," he chuckled. "I'll try to stay on top of it. If you're going back to the computer, I'm going to head home."

Keeping Faith

“Do you think Mom will need anything tonight?”

“Probably not. But if she does, she should be able to get it herself. You can always call me if you need me.”

“I know, Andrew.” Accompanied with eye roll.

“Remember that I said she wasn’t supposed to come in to work tomorrow. Don’t wake her up when you leave for school.”

“I never have to wake her up. She’s always up before me,” Kevin protested.

“Well, don’t count on it tomorrow,” Andrew said before he slipped out the door.