



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

KARA LYNN
RUSSELL

Accepting Charity

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by

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Dedication

To Theresa, for all the love and support she gave to me during a dark time, even though I was a stranger to her then.

Prologue

Pansy stared across the gathering space at the Orchard Hill Community Church as her son put his arm around—of all people—her arch rival, Misty Green. He even kissed her on the cheek. This couldn't be happening. It was like a nightmare that she couldn't wake from.

Misty's father, Arthur, walked over to the pair. When Misty introduced Perry, Arthur's eyes lit with recognition, happy no doubt, to be meeting Pansy's son at last. She had to step in and take control of the situation before Arthur gave away the fact that he and she were also a couple.

"Hey, Mom," said Perry as she crossed the floor to them. "I didn't know you knew Misty's father."

Oh no. Was she too late?

"Yes, we met at the grocery store." She refused to show any sign of discomposure.

"That's nice." He couldn't know. Perry would have a much bigger reaction if Arthur had told them.

"So tell me Perry, how long have you and Misty been seeing each other?" Pansy pasted a bright, cheery, totally false smile on her face.

"Hmmm, how long has it been? Since before Easter?"

Misty giggled nervously. "Has it been that long? Gee, time flies..."

"Yes, it certainly does. Before you know it, the year will be over and some people will

wonder where the time went and why they didn't get more done."

That had been vague, but Misty had gotten the reference to their little wager. She kept smiling, although her eyes narrowed slightly. "Then again, some people seem to be able to get lots done and still have time left over."

"Those people better make sure they're concentrating on the right things."

"You're absolutely right, Pansy. You know, I have something I need to talk to you about. Can we go into your office for a minute?"

"Certainly."

Pansy and Misty kept up their stiff pretense of being friendly until the door closed behind them. Then, their affected politeness dropped like masks, and Pansy pounced. "What do you think you're doing, dating my son? He just broke up with his wife. He's very vulnerable right now."

"I happen to care about Perry very much, and I don't think he's still pining over his ex."

"I know what this is really about. You're angry because I'm ahead of you in this contest. You're hoping to distract me."

"I don't need to resort to tactics like that. I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back."

"Hmmpf," sniffed Pansy. "I don't think much of a matchmaker who'd put herself together with someone who's obviously so wrong for her."

"Oh really? Did you know that Perry *loves* my cooking?"

Pansy gasped. They both believed that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. "Fine, you go ahead and work your wiles on my son, but don't think it will do you any good. He's too smart to be taken in by you forever!"

With that, Pansy stalked from the room,

almost slamming the door before she remembered where she was. She caught herself just in time to shut the door noiselessly.

Perry and Arthur were still talking. Without acknowledging Arthur, she grabbed her son's arm and began pulling him toward the door. "Let's go, Perry. I'm planning a big Sunday dinner. You'll love it."

Misty smiled at the picture Pansy made. If she were any madder, steam would be coming out of her ears for sure. Still, she hoped the woman didn't give her Perry too much of a hard time over this.

One thing Pansy had said was correct anyway. Misty had been neglecting the matchmaking contest, lately. It was time for her to get busy and make some matches. After all, she'd already decided on her next project. She just had to get started.

Chapter 1

Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

—Mark 10:14

Sarah Rogers walked toward the Grace Place in Orchard Hill. The July sun was warm, and she looked forward to stepping into the air conditioned coffee shop. This was the only thought on her mind as someone grabbed onto her from behind.

Sarah turned in surprise, and a smile lit up her face when she saw Charity Daniels standing there. She knelt down to the three-year-old's level, using both sign language and speech to talk to her. "Good morning Charity. How are you?"

The little girl stared back at Sarah solemnly and said nothing.

"Who are you with?" Sarah knew that Charity's mother had passed away recently, but not who was taking care of her now.

"She's with me. Charity, you can't just run off. I need you to stay close to me."

Sarah looked up when she heard the deep masculine voice. The man seemed to tower over her from where she knelt on the sidewalk. She tilted her head back to see his face and nearly tipped over.

He offered a hand and helped Sarah to rise,

but once on her feet she still had to look up to meet his eyes. “Do you know Charity?” he asked in a tight voice.

Sarah had learned to read people quickly. It was a survival skill for a kid being bounced around in the foster care system. He was upset, but not angry. “Yes. She and her mother belong to my church. Or at least they used to before...I’m Sarah Rogers.” What was she saying? Could she be more awkward? Handsome men always had this effect on her. And this man definitely ranked in the handsome category, with thick wavy hair the same shade as his chocolate brown eyes. The view didn’t deteriorate below that, either.

“I’m David Daniels. Charity is my niece.”

“Then I’m very sorry for your loss, Mr. Daniels. Maggie was a beautiful person.” That sounded lame, but what else did you say when meeting the relatives of the recently deceased?

“Thank you.” He looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

Charity saved them from their discomfort by tugging on the hem of Sarah’s shorts. “What is it, honey?”

Charity signed “Mom.”

Sarah’s heart ached for the little girl. “You must miss your mom,” she said and signed back.

“Why are you using sign language with Charity? She’s not deaf.” He was trying to ask politely, there was an edge to his voice.

“I know that. She has dyspraxia, so it’s difficult for her to coordinate the sounds and movements necessary for speech. Sign language reinforces spoken words and gives her another option for expressing herself.” Sarah tried to put a soothing tone into her own voice.

“She does speak, doesn’t she? She hasn’t said

a thing since I got here.”

“Strong emotion can make speech more difficult, and I’m guessing she’s been dealing with some pretty big emotions.”

The man’s eyes attested to his own emotions. He looked tired, overwhelmed and sad all at once. “Yes, I’m sure she is,” he replied.

“I’m sorry; I must be keeping you from something.” She took a step back, intending to exit gracefully from the scene.

“No, not really. You seem to know Charity pretty well.”

Before she could answer a fourth person joined their little group on the sidewalk. “Hello Sarah, Charity. Hello David,” she said offering him her hand. “I don’t know if you remember me or not. I’m Misty Green. We met a couple years ago when you were here visiting your sister.”

He shook her hand. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember you.”

“That’s all right. We only met briefly before. I’m so sorry about Maggie’s death. What a shock. Are you Charity’s new guardian?”

“Thank you. It seems that I am. Charity’s guardian, that is.”

“And how’s that going?”

Sarah’s mouth dropped open, and she forgot about leaving. She couldn’t believe Misty could just barge right into the conversation and ask personal questions like that.

“I have a lot to learn,” he admitted. “I didn’t know Maggie had named me as guardian in her will.”

“Well you’ve definitely found the right person to help you then,” declared Misty.

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t Sarah helping you out?” Misty elbowed her in the side and whispered “Close your mouth,

honey.”

Sarah snapped her mouth shut, but she was sure her eyes were still as big as saucers at Misty’s audacity.

“No, we just met when Charity went up to her to say hello,” David explained.

“Sarah is a speech therapist at Orchard Hill elementary. She’s great with kids.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Is she really?”

Sarah hated being in the spotlight, even if it was only for two people. Misty and David were both staring at her now. She dropped her gaze to the sidewalk. “I do work with kids.”

“I have to get back to my store.” She pointed across the street to “The Green Scene,” the health food store she owned. “I just wanted to say ‘hi’ to you, David and offer my condolences.”

“Thank you Ms. Green.”

“Oh, just call me Misty, honey,” she said. “Stop in and see my store sometime. I have the best organic produce around.”

“Um. Thanks.”

Misty patted Sarah’s shoulder. “And hang on to this one. She’ll be loads of help with Charity.”

David’s eyes followed Misty for a minute as she walked away. She didn’t seem to quite fit in, here in Orchard Hill, with her gauzy skirts and long silver and blonde hair. But even though she didn’t fit the mold, he could tell what her type was—church busybody. He’d gotten off lucky. She hadn’t even invited him to dinner.

His gaze moved back to the other woman—Sarah. Dressed in denim shorts and a loose fitting t-shirt, she looked a bit younger than he was and a little shy. He guessed she was the type of person who related better to children and animals than to adults. And he thought Misty might be right about her being helpful—and

right now he needed all the help he could get. He flashed her his best “close the deal” smile.

“Charity really does seem to like you. Can I buy you a coffee or something? Maybe you can give me a few tips.”

Sarah looked undecided. He thought she might refuse, but then Charity reached up and took her hand. He saw Sarah’s face soften as she looked at the little girl and she nodded. “All right.”

“I’m a stranger here, so you’ll have to suggest a place.”

“There’s only one coffee shop in Orchard Hill, and it’s just down the street a bit here.”

“Then lead on.”

Charity clung to Sarah’s hand all the way to the Grace Place. David opened the door to let the ladies precede him. Before Sarah reached the counter someone called her name. Her head turned and she smiled and waved at a couple seated in a corner.

“What do you want? I’ll order and you can go talk to your friends.”

“Oh, you don’t have to...”

“And you don’t have to sit with me while I pump you for information on Charity.”

“I guess not.” She gave him her order, made a suggestion for Charity, and then excused herself.

“Hi Hope, Oliver,” Sarah greeted her two friends who were still acting annoyingly lovey-dovey after recently becoming engaged.

Oliver acknowledged her with a nod, but Hope gushed. “Who’s the hottie, Sarah? Do you have a boyfriend you haven’t told me about?”

Sarah felt her face grow warm and she struggled for a bit of composure. “No, nothing like that. He’s Maggie Daniel’s brother, and

Charity's new guardian, I guess. He wanted to ask me a few questions about her speech difficulties."

Hope took a second look. "I didn't even see Charity there, poor kid. I guess I was distracted by her handsome uncle."

Oliver pretended to take exception to this. "Hey, I'm right here. You shouldn't be looking at other men."

Hope laughed. "I'm only looking at him, but I'm going to marry you."

There they went again, all mushy. Sarah decided it was time to make an exit. "I should go so..."

"Wait a second." Oliver momentarily turned his attention back to Sarah. "How is Charity doing?"

Sarah shrugged. "I just ran into them a few minutes ago. Misty told David I could help him."

"Call me and give me a report later," Hope demanded. "I want to hear all about Charity and..." she winked "her uncle."

"I saw that," protested Oliver.

Sarah slipped away while they were in the middle of another mock argument that would end up in kisses, no doubt.

Not that she wasn't happy for her friends. She was. But right now, she preferred to be happy for them from a distance.

David had found a table and was getting Charity settled with a glass of milk and a big oatmeal cookie.

Sarah joined them, but they couldn't seem to get another conversation started. Sarah sipped at her drink and David stared into his. An uneasiness descended over the table.

Finally David said "I don't understand why Maggie left Charity to me. I'm single, no kids, I

travel a lot for my job. Maybe...Maybe I should find someone else to adopt her. Someone who can really give her the time and attention she deserves.”

A familiar anxiety stirred within Sarah. “Is there anyone in your family that might take her?”

He sighed. “I’m thinking. I thought maybe our sister Karen would, but she says she can’t handle the three kids she has now. So I’ve been going over all our cousins and aunts and uncles in my head. I don’t know.”

“Does Charity know any of these people?”

Shaking his head, David replied “Not really. I don’t think she met any of them more than once or twice in her life.”

“Think very carefully before you place Charity in foster care. It’s rough for most kids, but for one with a disability...it can be a nightmare.” She knew it wasn’t her place to say so, but Sarah couldn’t hold back.

“You sound like you know from personal experience?”

Sarah shrugged. She wasn’t about to get into that.

“Besides, I never said anything about foster care.”

He hadn’t. But she felt she had to speak up, just in case. “For right now, you *are* caring for Charity. What can I tell you that will help?”

David leaned forward and rubbed his temples. Again she was struck by how tired he seemed. “Have you been handling everything since your sister’s death?”

He nodded. “My mom couldn’t cope so I had to step in. She’s not in the best of health. I guess that’s why Maggie didn’t leave Charity with her.” His gaze slid to his niece, quietly eating her

cookie, bit by bit. He reached out and stroked her head. Charity didn't respond. "What do I do with her?"

"Well, you feed her, dress her, bathe her, give her plenty of hugs. You love her, that's all."

A corner of his mouth twitched. "That's all."

"Pretty much."

"How do I communicate with her? It's so frustrating that she won't or can't talk to me. I don't know if I'm doing things right, if I'm giving her what she needs...She's probably scared to death, and I don't know how to comfort her."

Sara had always been a sucker for a sob story. One look into David's troubled eyes, and she knew she was hooked. She should have run when she had a chance, before Misty dragged her into it.

"Let me explain a few things to you. First of all, Charity's *receptive* language skills are exceptionally good. She understands what you're saying to her. Second, you'll have to let her *show* you some things, like what cereal she wants for breakfast. Ask her to get it, and she will. Third, you'll just have to be very observant. Watch her reactions to find out how she's feeling or what she's thinking."

David nodded. "That makes sense. Can you explain a little about this thing she has."

"Charity has been diagnosed with developmental verbal dyspraxia. Dyspraxia indicates a neurological problem. Her brain isn't sending her body the right signals, or her body isn't interpreting them correctly. This makes it difficult for Charity to coordinate the sounds and movements necessary for speech. It doesn't mean that she doesn't have something to say. She just can't always get it out."

"That must be incredibly frustrating. But is

it treatable?"

"Yes. The amount of success depends on how much the individual is affected, what kind of help he or she gets, and of course family support. It was lucky that Maggie realized there was a problem and got Charity help early on. She's already been enrolled in the early childhood class for this fall."

"Early childhood?"

"It's a class for three and four year olds with significant developmental delays. I work with a lot of kids in that class. In fact, I did Charity's evaluation when she was referred."

David raised his eyebrows. "I guess we were lucky to find you."

Sarah, always uncomfortable with compliments, looked down into her coffee cup. "I'm happy to help."

Charity started to cough and choke on her cookie, distracting them. Sarah held her glass of milk while the little girl took a drink. David hovered uncertainly until the coughing stopped.

"She does that a lot," he admitted. "Is that part of the dyspraxia? Not being able to coordinate the movements for chewing and swallowing?"

"It can be. You catch on quick."

"Not quick enough." He was back to brooding, staring into his coffee cup. "Sarah, I hate to be a pain, but would you...would you mind giving me your phone number, so I can call if I have any more questions?"

"I guess that would be all right." Sarah pulled a pen from her bag, wrote her work number on a napkin and slid it across the table to him.

"Thanks," David said. "I really appreciate this."

David spent the rest of the day attending to the details of Maggie's estate. He was so tired of dealing with all of this. Part of him still couldn't believe that Maggie was gone. He knew he'd see her again someday in heaven, but for now, her absence left a gaping hole in his heart.

Charity sat quietly and colored while he talked to the lawyer. This bothered him. No three year-old should sit so quietly for so long. Was this normal behavior for her? Or was this a reaction to the chaos caused by her mother's death.

Then, it was back to Maggie's house. He didn't plan on staying in Orchard Hill forever, but he thought for Charity's sake, he might as well stay here until Maggie's estate was wrapped up.

Then supper and bedtime. Remembering what Sarah had said about Charity, he asked her to pick out a book for story time instead of just grabbing one. She quickly went to the bookshelf and brought back a worn, well-used book. This must be a favorite, he thought.

When Charity was finally sleeping, David headed back to his computer and worked on a couple of projects that had deadlines looming. It was well after midnight by the time he shut down his laptop.

Tired, but still restless, David settled himself on the couch with the remote and turned on the TV. He surfed the channels for a while and finally settled on a late night interview show. The wise-cracking host failed to distract him from the many problems twisting themselves about in his brain.

First and foremost was the problem of what to do with Charity. He loved his niece, but a

heavy work schedule had prevented him from visiting often. Truthfully, he hardly knew her, and he had great doubts about his ability to be a decent parent to her.

He traveled a lot in his job as a computer systems consultant. He was good at his job, and always in demand. He supposed he'd reached the point where he could probably afford to hire a nanny, but was that really what Maggie would want?

He mentally reviewed the list of relatives that could possibly take Charity. In the end, he thought that Maggie had probably appointed him as Charity's guardian because, there really was no one else. But accepting Charity would mean some major changes in his life.

Maybe a close friend of Maggie's would be willing to care for Charity. He tried to remember the people who'd attended her funeral, but it was all a blur. David lay back against the cushions and rubbed his face. He needed to sleep, but sleep had eluded him lately. He felt so clueless where Charity was concerned, so afraid he'd let Maggie down after she'd entrusted him with her greatest treasure. He'd been praying for guidance and he was hoping that Sarah Rogers might be the answer to those prayers.

Hey, he thought suddenly. Maybe she'd know who Maggie's close friends were and if any of them would be suitable for Charity. Maybe she would even be a candidate. Charity was comfortable with her and seemed to like her.

He liked her, too. He thought of how her expression softened when she looked at Charity. She wasn't pretty in the conventional style. But behind her shaggy bangs she had marvelous blue eyes that changed colors as her emotions changed. There would never be any question of

how she was feeling. Her eyes were more telling than a mood ring.

It was while he was thinking of Sarah's eyes that David slipped into slumber, and that was probably why he saw them in his dreams. No other reason.