

# YOUNG LADIES OF DRYDEN



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CHARITY MAKES UP HER MIND



## CHAPTER 1



DRYDEN, TENNESSEE, 1874

“*W*e can’t count on your father giving in, Charity. It would be best for you to come with me now.” The tall young man, lithe but solid, held the hickory branch out of the way to allow the young lady at his side to proceed down the path through the woods unhindered. In his light grey suit, he was almost camouflaged against the early spring sky.

“No, Asa. I want to do this right. My father is a reasonable man. He’ll give us his blessing if we are patient. He’ll come around. He always does.” She picked up her dark pink skirt to step over a particularly large root jutting up out of the middle of the track.

In the gloaming, his dark hair shaded his face, but she knew what expression would be playing over his keen eyes and sharp cheekbones. While she loved his expressions, she could do without this particular one at this particular time. “It’s you who comes around, sweetheart. It’s been that way since you were a child. I’ve watched it happen time and again. You set your sights on something and he proves to you why you can’t have it. Your schooling,

the palomino, that dictionary set, all worthy objectives he has withheld from you, supposedly for your own good.”

“Now, Asa, Papa was right about the dictionary. What good will that do me when I’m taking care of our babies?”

“Do we want our children growing up thinking education is only for utilitarian purposes? Wouldn’t it be better for them to see that their mother has a love of learning? That’s just one of the main reasons I fell in love with you. That’s why it was so painful to me when your father made you leave school after the sixth grade.”

“I hated leaving too, but it was mostly because I had a crush on you and knew I wouldn’t be able to see you every day. When I learned you were going off to college, I wasn’t so disappointed.”

“But I know you missed the classroom. I’ve seen the essays you’ve written since you left. You’d have done well if you had continued in your studies. Your father didn’t want you learning to think for yourself.”

“And you like me to do so. That’s why I like you.”

“I hope you do more than like me,” Asa declared warmly. The look in his eye made Charity’s heart flutter like a bird in a spring shower.

She gave him a shyly coy smile in return. “You know I do. Now you’re just fishing.”

“A man’s got to have something to live on. A word, a look, a token... a kiss.”

She tapped his hand away with her fan. “You bold thing!”

“I’d be bolder still if you were mine. You should be mine. You’re old enough. You know your own mind and even in the eyes of the law, you’re allowed to make your own decision.”

Charity looked away from him, glad he couldn’t see her face too clearly. “And that is my decision. I want to wait for his blessing. He’ll give it. It’s nothing like the time I wanted the palomino.”

“So, you admit he... wasn’t showing the best of judgment there.”

“How can I claim otherwise? If that horse had been mine, I would have won the blue ribbon and you would have come in

second place. I do love my roan, but the palomino is the better horse, and we both know you would have let me buy him even though you saw him first." She hoped admitting the truth would pacify him while the change of topic might distract him from his purpose, but he was not so easily manipulated.

"The palomino is yours, in spirit if not in fact. As soon as we are wed, I'll put you on him and lead you around town in triumph. And I'll ride your roan, though I doubt the judges would give him the time of day without you leading him. He only won second place at the fair because they were so dazzled by your beauty."

Charity laughed again. "And of course you're not a bit biased."

Asa gave one of his rare but charming grins. "Of course I am biased. As biased as a man can be! I'm in love! But that doesn't change the facts in the case."

"Well, being a lawyer, you would know a fact when you see one, I suppose." She reached over and smoothed his lapels, expecting him to take her hands. Instead he put his arms around her back and drew her close. "Asa, wait!"

"I grow tired of waiting, Charity. I'm a patient man. Through long years of college and law school, I have put off the culmination of all my happiness, strengthened in my resolve by the security of knowing you were waiting for me at the end of my struggles. And now it seems I must wait even longer?" He bent down to brush the side of his face against her hair. "Come with me now. There's a preacher in Hazel Green who will—"

"No, Asa," Charity said clearly, pushing him away. "I won't come. Go on home now. I'll see you at choir practice on Wednesday evening." Their walk had brought them to the back gate of her home.

"I just don't understand the delay. Has this got something to do with Thomas Towery?" Asa's eyes narrowed as he said the other man's name.

Charity tried to laugh, hoping he would know that she was not playing games with him as other girls might. Some of the girls at

church were whispering that she was unfair to string both men along, but she knew the truth. “Mr. Towery holds absolutely no interest for me, and he knows it. Only in my father’s mind is there still any hope of that match. In fact, I think Mr. Towery is already looking elsewhere. I wish him every happiness... as long as he finds it with someone else.”

“Amen to that,” Asa declared stoutly. “I’ve got nothing against him, as long as you aren’t trying to keep two fish on the line.”

“Of course not. One wonderful catch is as much as I can handle.” She stood still as he bent his head to kiss her once again. Finally, she pulled back, but only after they were both breathless.

“Charity, sweetheart, please. As sweet as your kiss is, I need something more than that to hold to.”

“Here,” she said, suddenly inspired. Reaching around her neck, she unclasped her necklace and placed it in his palm, folding his fingers over it to emphasize her sincerity. “Take this locket. This is my promise to you that if within the month Papa doesn’t come ’round, I’ll leave with you and never look back.”

Pocketing the token, he caught her hand and pulled her to him, kissing her before she had a chance to get away. She melted into his caress as she always did. Knowing she should protest, sure that he would stop the moment she did, she allowed herself the pleasure of the embrace. It felt so good, so right to have him hold her, demonstrate his love for her, assure her of his longing for her. Time faded into the background and ceased its normal function until the sound of a fatherly throat being cleared startled her back to reality. As she tried to pull away from him, Charity noticed that Asa’s resistance to her motion seemed drawn out and exaggerated, as if he wanted her father to see the two of them together.

“That’s enough, young man,” Mr. Orel Caldwell declared. “Charity, get in the house. Now!”

“Mr. Caldwell, I assure you—” Asa began.

Charity thought she might take this opportunity to plead once again. “Papa, I—”

"I want none of your assurances, Kent. You know my objections. I've told you my decision and have nothing more to say to you. Charity, do not speak again. Go!"

Asa released her hand as tears of humiliation sprang into her eyes. While she trudged up the stairs, she wondered again if Asa was right. Maybe she should give up her hope that her father would ever change his mind. She hated to admit defeat, but she hated even more the thought of waiting any longer to marry Asa. Tall, handsome and with a promising career as a lawyer or even a politician in front of him, Asa wouldn't stay single forever. She knew more than one girl in town who was eager to try to steal him away from her. By the time she lay down for the night on her soft feather mattress, Charity had promised herself that if her father had not changed his mind by the end of the month, she would pack her valise and run away with Asa as he wanted, no matter what the cost.

They saw each other only briefly over the next two days. Either her father or her mother was with her constantly, preventing her from seeing Asa alone. By the end of the third week, she had begun to wonder if she would have to give up on her hopes of attaining her father's blessing. The time would come eventually when she would in good conscience go against her parents' wishes and elope with Asa but not yet. Coming home from choir practice one night with her mother, Charity went up to her room and discovered her father studying the little calendar where she had crossed off the days. The month was filled with little marks running across the page like birds on a fence.

The very next morning, Mrs. Lydel knocked on her door to wake her up.

Hastily, Charity penned a note and sent it with the girl who came to pick up the washing.

DEAREST ASA,



Something is terribly wrong. Mrs. Lydel is here. She says that in a few days we are going to visit Aunt Trudy overnight, but it's all so sudden, I'm suspicious. She only ever comes to escort me when we are traveling great distances. And we're not leaving in the middle of the afternoon as we usually do when we go to see my aunt. I think Papa may have something else in mind. What am I to do? Please send an answer back with Teeny.

Yours faithfully,  
Charity

WHEN TEENY RETURNED with her letter still in her hand, Charity's heart turned over. Had Asa refused to take the missive? "What happened, Teeny? Why do you still have the letter?"

"Mr. Asa wasn't at home, miss. They said something about him going over to the courthouse. You said as how I was to wait for an answer. Since there wouldn't be one, I didn't leave the letter with Mrs. Dunn down to the boarding house where I tried first."

"No, that was very wise, Teeny. Thank you. Much safer to leave it with the secretary at the Fenton offices where he works. Can you do that for me? I don't want you getting into trouble yourself, now."

"No, miss. Won't be no trouble. I'll take it when I takes Mr. Asa's shirts back this afternoon."

"That would be a comfort to me, Teeny. Thank you."

Charity found concentration almost impossible, but the afternoon finally wore away into evening. Instead of Teeny, it was Asa himself who brought the answer. She was on the front porch watching the sunset when he strode up, so she was able to greet him before her father could make him leave. "Oh, Asa, I'm so glad you've come. What are we to do?"

"You should come away with me now," he hissed, holding out his hand. "If you don't, your father may send you away with this Mrs. Lydel and hide you where it may take me weeks or months to find you."

“He can’t do that! I’m of age. That would be kidnapping.”

“Yes, but only if you pressed the charge against him. I could warn him of that possibility, but we both know he’d call my bluff, for bluff it would most certainly be. You wouldn’t ever press the charge.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Asa gave her a serious look. “What is it really, Charity? Why won’t you come away with me now?”

“I want to, Asa. I really do. It’s just that... well, there are circumstances you don’t know about.”

Charity could tell by the way Asa stiffened that he didn’t like what he was hearing. “What circumstances?”

“Well, I...” Her voice faded off, but before he could press his question, Mr. Caldwell came out onto the porch.

Asa stood back from Charity and offered his hand to Mr. Caldwell. “Mr. Caldwell, I think you know why I’m here.”

Refusing to shake the younger man’s hand, Caldwell stuck his thumbs in his suspenders beneath his suit coat and tried to look down his nose at Asa. Since Asa was so much taller, Mr. Caldwell couldn’t meet his eyes without tilting his head back to a ridiculous degree, so Charity thought his gaze probably fell somewhere around Asa’s middle waistcoat button. “Young man, if you intend to renew your suit, I can only repeat that I think it highly unlikely that anything you have to say will serve to sway my opinion.”

“Nothing I can say? Well then, is there anything I can do? Tell me how I can prove myself to you. You know my status in the community. As a lawyer, I command a certain amount of respect and a comfortable, secure living from the law practice my grandfather began. In fact, it still bears his name though he has retired. I keep the name out of respect for him. Further, I’m a leader in the church and I’m sure the reverend would vouch for me, as you well know. How can I prove to you my suitability for Miss Charity?”

“My daughter can do better than a country lawyer just starting out.”

“But Papa, I don’t want anyone else. I’m in love with Asa,” Charity protested.

Mr. Caldwell harrumphed disdainfully. “I’m only looking out for your welfare, my dear. It’s not enough to have made something of yourself, young man. My daughter’s husband must come from good stock. There’s much to be said for family connections and breeding. Caldwell is one of the oldest and most respected names in this town.”

Asa cocked his head and quirked his eyebrow as he did when he was about to ask for more information. Charity had seen him question a witness in court and he used that same expression. “The name of Fenton is not unknown in this region either. I think any outside observer would list both names among the influential and respected lineages locally.”

“Ah, yes, your grandfather is a Fenton, and as such commands great respect. Your mother, however, married a Kent. And where is she now?”

Asa’s face went red and then pale. He opened his mouth, but the words seemed to be trapped there, like a horse balking at a fence.

Charity tried to come to his aid. “Papa, you can’t be so prejudiced. Asa’s grandparents are some of the most prominent people in town.”

“It’s not only the name. How a man treats his mother is an important measure of character. As I understand it, he has not communicated with his mother in over a decade.”

Asa recovered his voice enough to say, “That is true, but it is by her wish that we are... estranged. I have offered and continue to offer to take care of my mother. It is she who refuses.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Caldwell’s tone sounded like that of a policeman to a boy with a baseball bat near a broken window.

“Shall I obtain proof of that point?” Asa asked evenly. “I can get written evidence. Would my grandfather’s statement suffice?”

Charity noticed that Asa didn’t sound hopeful or happy about this turn of events. This was the first time that her father had actu-

ally voiced this particular concern and Charity thought that it was a sign of real progress. Once this point was cleared up, surely her father would give his consent and they could be married. She knew that Asa carried a deep emotional scar due to his mother's rejection of him, but if he could face her just once more, it might mean the end of their waiting and separation. "Oh, certainly, it must, Papa!"

Mr. Caldwell cleared his throat. "If you could obtain such a statement from your mother, I might consent to read it."

"Very well," Asa replied.

Charity crossed to Asa and put her hand on his arm. "I know it will be hard for you, but—"

Mr. Caldwell followed her and pulled her back from contact with Asa. "Get inside now, Charity. This interview is over."

"Please, just let me say good night to him, Papa," Charity pleaded.

"No! Now, get inside this minute," Mr. Caldwell ordered her as he opened the door and pointed stiff-armed inside the house.

"I'll get the letter, Charity," Asa declared. "It may take a few days, but I'll get it."

The sadness in his voice broke her heart as she ran up the stairs. It almost sounded as if he didn't believe her Papa would be swayed by his mother's letter. Perhaps she should just go with him. Why not leave tonight and never look back? But it would be so unfair, so wrong. She would wait. Surely her father would give his consent. The more she thought about it, the more encouraged she felt. She stayed up late into the night working on her latest story.

Two days later, Charity woke early and dressed quickly to slip out of the house alone. Making her way quickly to the church, she scuttled down the stairs to the corner room where Miss Louise's class met every Sunday morning for Bible study. "Hello, Charity," chorused the three girls already in attendance.

Charity gave a rueful laugh. "And here I thought I might be the first one to arrive! How early do you girls get here?" she asked, taking off her bonnet and flouncing into a rickety wooden chair.

"I got here with Jenny just fifteen minutes ago," Minnie answered smartly, "but Kate was here before us. She's always earliest, but I get to read first because she still hasn't got a word on paper."

"Still, Kate?" Charity demanded. "I thought you had agreed to write a letter home to your mother in Ireland. We were going to help you correct it so when the school teacher reads it to her, he'll be proud of how well you write."

"And as good of a plan as it was, Miss, it only works if I find the time to write which I didn't all the long week, so there you have it. Come, come, Miss Minnie was just about to start with her newest poem."

Charity sat back and closed her eyes, as she knew Minnie liked them to do before she read out her verses. The poem was sweet and uplifting, just like the heart it sprang from. The young ladies of the class applauded when she was done. Several more young ladies had joined the group by the time she finished.

"Your turn, Jenny," Minnie declared after she had thanked them. "What are you giving us today?"

"I've written a new story for my primer. This would be for the second or maybe third time a child is trying to learn to decipher words with the long 'a' sound." The lovely blonde-headed Jenny read a short story about a boy named Abe who played in a cave with a spade and a rake.

"Most amusing, Jenny," Minnie declared when she was done. "And I'm sure any boy would love to read the part when Abe takes his rake into the lane and parades into the lake. Boys simply love that sort of splashing, messy humor."

Jenny laughed and waved away their praise. "It should sound familiar. You told me a similar story about one of your brothers, Minnie. But we're running out of time. Charity, we haven't time for you to read your latest chapter before Miss Louise arrives, but I must know what happens. Do give us a summary now, then you

can read us more after class. I simply can't wait to find out what happens to Lady Euphanitia."

Charity withdrew several folded sheets from her reticule. "Well, as you may recall, our heroine had just accepted her suitor's offer for her hand in marriage when her father the duke stepped in and objected to the match. This week we'll hear what Sir Lorenzolo's answer will be when she tells him that she wants to wait for her father's blessing."

Several of the girls sighed, but Minnie brought them back to practical reality by announcing, "If their names weren't so long, we might have heard even more, but here comes Miss Louise."

The faithful teacher, Miss Louise Seed, opened the door in her typical business-like fashion. Seating herself on the edge of the seat at the head of the little group, she arranged her large, black leather-bound Bible on her knees and called the girls to order, though a respectful silence had fallen already. "Good morning, girls." Suddenly, a huge grin split her face and she let out the chuckle that surprised so many people when they first met her. "Let's pray, then you just won't believe what happened to me on the way to church this morning."

While Miss Louise led the group in prayer, Charity felt a wave of affection come over her as it always did at the start of another morning's study. Though the topics might, Lord forgive her, become tedious, and her thoughts might wander occasionally, Charity could not possibly love her teacher or her fellow pupils any more than she already did. The little group expanded and contracted as visitors arrived or dear friends moved away, but always they welcomed strangers as friends and friends as sisters. Miss Louise led the way in this attitude, making every girl feel as welcome and valued as the one next to her, be she the mayor's daughter or the girl who came in to clean the grates.

The little writers' circle that had informally coalesced around the class added a new dimension of support and enjoyment, but their main objective was clear. They were there to learn the Bible's

teachings and carry out its precepts under Miss Louise's watchful eye and practical example. It was Miss Louise's love of words that inspired the girls to outdo themselves providing fitting and uplifting literature according to their tastes. Whatever form the writing took, each girl knew that she would find a grateful and supportive audience in the corner room under the church both before and after class, and often after the service as well.

On that particular Sunday, several of the girls asked Charity to stop in the park and read them the chapter she had written. Charity complied, trying to squelch her pride in their praise. She read out the pages in a dramatic voice, making the characters sound as different from each other as she could. When she finished, Jenny was first to sigh and comment wistfully, "That poor, poor Euphania! Will her father ever consent to her marriage?"

Minnie looked at Charity in a way that let her know that Minnie guessed the story to be a bit closer to home than the fantastical names and melodramatic settings would imply. "I'm afraid dear Euphania had better come up with another plan in case the duke does something drastic."

"Well, of course he'll do something drastic. It wouldn't be a romance if he didn't," Kate objected. "That's what makes it fun. Now, in the old tales Mum used to tell, this would be the time for the wee folk to carry the duke off, but that'd be a fairy tale, not a romance. Maybe he'll send her away to some far-off kingdom."

"That sounds like a lovely idea, Kate," Charity declared. "Can I use that?"

"Go right ahead, Miss," Kate replied, gratified.

"And I'll read it out next Sunday, right after you read us your letter to your mother," Charity promised. "But not until."

"If I bring it to you during the week, could I get a peek before then?" Kate begged.

Charity knew there was precious little during the week for a serving girl like Kate to look forward to. "Of course. Any time you like. Just remember to watch for Papa to leave the house first. You

know how Papa is. I don't want him making trouble for you with your employer."

"No, Miss. Learned my lesson there, for sure. I near got let go after that last time he complained to Miss Walpert."

The girls walked on, each peeling off to take her own path home until only Minnie and Charity were left together. "Lorenzolo's getting impatient, I take it? And really, Charity, those names? Can't you do something?"

"I've already changed them both a hundred times. I can't seem to make up my mind and keep it made."

"Really? Not you! It strains credulity!" Only a friendly smile softened the sarcasm.

"Oh, all right. You've made your point. One more little turn-about won't hurt. What would you like me to call him? Bill? That's nice and short. Or Ted? That's even shorter?"

"Now who's being sarcastic? Anyway, what's your Ted got to say about all this?"

"He says he'd like to get married now."

"Have you told him why you want to wait?"

"No, but there have been developments and I'm very optimistic," Charity returned.

"When are you anything other than optimistic?"

"Earlier this week, I wasn't. I just couldn't think of what we could do, and I don't think Kate's wee folk are coming to my aid any time soon. But somehow, Kate's done it again, seeing what she couldn't know. Papa has brought Mrs. Lydel in. She only ever comes to take me on long trips."

"Mrs. Lydel? And she makes you optimistic?"

"No, not that. See, when Mrs. Lydel showed up, I panicked and sent word to Asa. He came right over and asked Papa if there were anything he could do to prove he would make a good husband." She explained the rest of the conversation on the porch, finishing with, "So, that's why I'm optimistic. If Asa can just hold his nose and go see his mother one more time, Papa will have to give in."



“Your father isn’t noted for his tendency to capitulate, Charity. Just be ready, whatever happens. Like Miss Louise says, have a plan, then you won’t have to think of what to do when you’re on the spot.”

“I’ll try,” Charity promised.

“And do think about shortening those ridiculous names. I love your stories, but really!”