



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

*Saving
Gracie*

KARA LYNN RUSSELL

Saving Gracie

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by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Saving Gracie: An Orchard Hill Romance

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad. If I could have chosen my own
parents, I couldn't have picked any better.
Thank you.

**One Day Naomi, her mother-in-law said to her,
“My daughter, should I not try to find a home
for you, where you will be well provided for?”**

—Ruth 3:1 NIV

Prologue: The Matchmaker Match

Pansy Parker lingered in her office at the Orchard Hill Community Church on Wednesday afternoon. Pastor Isaac had already left for the day. She was finished with all her work, but still she puttered about, straightening papers that didn't need straightening, untangling paper clips, and checking the plants she knew full-well she'd watered yesterday. When she'd just about run out of reasons to stay, the person she'd been waiting for breezed in.

Pansy smiled sweetly. “Why hello, Misty, dear. You're running a little late today.”

The woman in question turned from the bank of cubbies that stored “mail” for all those who held leadership positions in the church. Misty was the choir director. “Oh, not really, Pansy, *dear*, but you're here late. I thought by now you'd be home with your feet up.”

The two women eyed each other, sizing each other up. Pansy noted that Misty was wearing her silver and blonde hair loose—hair that was too long for a woman in her fifties and especially if that woman owned and ran a health food store that featured a large produce section and bins of bulk food. She wondered if Misty wore a hair net when she worked. Probably not.

She patted her own hair, cut, curled and tinted with a light blue rinse. Pansy considered Misty to be positively scruffy. Look at her in that long, flowing skirt, with bare legs underneath, no doubt. Pansy

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would never wear a skirt without hose and low-heeled pumps. “So, Misty, what have you been up to lately?”

“Oh, not much Pansy. How about yourself?”

“Me? Oh nothing much. But I did hear that Mary Gruenwald started dating Peter Hanstad lately.”

Misty narrowed her eyes. “Oh, really.”

“Yes. I’d heard you thought Peter would be a good match for Heather Barnes. I’m sorry that didn’t work out.”

“I wonder why?” Sarcasm dripped from Misty’s voice.

Pansy smiled. “I’m sure I don’t know. But I think Mary and Peter make a lovely couple. I have a good feeling about this relationship.”

Misty looked around, as if to check for anyone who could be listening. Then she shut the office door and walked back to Pansy.

“All right, let’s cut the saccharine. You and I both know that I’ve been trying to set up Heather and Peter.”

Pansy feigned innocence. “Have you?”

“And you set him up with Mary first.”

Pansy lowered her eyes and said with false modesty “I may have had something to do with that. I’ve been known to make a few matches in my day.”

“Yes, you’re quite good.”

Pansy preened until Misty followed up with “almost as good as me.”

“You?” gasped Pansy. “You’re a rank amateur. I’ve got years of experience on you.”

“Well, you’ve got years on me, I’ll give you that.”

Now that was hitting below the belt. Pansy responded with an equally nasty jab. “A woman who’s never had a husband doesn’t qualify as a true matchmaker.”

“Why not? Because I’m not stupid enough to settle for the first guy who asks me. I’m holding out for the real thing—true love.”

Pansy snorted. “I don’t believe in that whole destiny rigmarole. You find a good man and you make the best of things. That’s the way it works.”

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“So your husband was no more to you than a ‘good man.’”

Stepping back, Pansy put a hand to her throat. “How can you say such a thing about my sainted Frank? He was the best, the *best*, of men.”

Misty smirked. “I think you just proved my point.”

“Fine.” Pansy’s eyes snapped with anger. This meeting wasn’t going as she’d planned. “But I found him. You’re still looking for your prince charming.”

“They don’t just fall out of the sky, you know,” protested Misty. “If they did, surely you’d have found another one in the last fifteen years or so.”

“If there was one to be found in Orchard Hill, I’d have found him,” Pansy declared. “I’ve made more matches than any matchmaker in the history of Orchard Hill.”

“That’s a little difficult to prove, isn’t it,” Misty pointed out. “No one keeps records of that sort of thing, do they?”

“Well, I could beat you at matchmaking any day of the week.” Pansy was not normally a woman who boasted, but Misty just pushed her over the edge, and making matches was her only true talent. She wasn’t about to be one-upped by a tofu eating pseudo-hippy like Misty Green.

Misty was silent for a moment. She put a hand to her chin as if contemplating something. “How about we put that to a test?” she finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“One year, starting at New Year’s. We’ll keep track of our matches all year long and the one that has the most at the year’s end, wins.”

“Wins? What does she win?”

Misty shrugged. “The knowledge that she’s the best, and the other one knows it.”

It was good enough for Pansy. “But betting...I don’t know if Pastor Isaac would approve.”

“It’s up to you. It doesn’t bother me. I know I’d win anyway.”

“Now just a minute. You can’t say that if we don’t

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have the contest.”

“You just said we couldn’t have the contest.”

“I said no such thing. The pastor doesn’t have to know everything.”

Misty smiled.

Pansy thought it was a very catty expression.

“Then you accept the challenge.”

Pansy liked the word ‘challenge’ a whole lot more than ‘bet.’ “Yes,” she replied. “I do.”

Just then, there was a knock on the office door. One of the choir members poked his head in. “We’re waiting for you to start, Misty. Will you be much longer?”

“No, I’m coming right now.” Before the blonde went out the door she looked over her shoulder at Pansy and winked. “New Year’s” she said and closed the door behind her.

The nerve of that woman! Pansy fumed as she gathered her things to go home. She’d show that Misty Green. Before the next year was over, Pastor Isaac would be up to his eyebrows in wedding preparations.

She’d see to that.

A friend loves at all times...

—Proverbs 17:17 NIV

Chapter 1

Riley O'Neil wondered how he got himself into these things. His plans for the day had not included sitting with Grace...who was crying...in the ladies room...at church.

He sighed with frustration and glanced around, noting the flower-covered wall paper, the ruffled, lacey curtains and the bowl of potpourri on the sink. He could feel the testosterone draining from his body with each passing minute.

He put a comforting arm around his friend. "Come on Gracie. You have to stop now. You'll make yourself sick." Everyone else called her Grace, but she was always Gracie to him.

As a boy, Riley remembered being curious about what the ladies room looked like. This was definitely one secret he wished hadn't been revealed to him. His grandmother used this room!

No, Riley did not want to be here. He would very much like to be with his best friend Steve, so he could punch him in the nose. But Steve was on a plane going to Hawaii with Tami, who had betrayed Gracie and stolen her fiancé.

Steve—Riley's so-called *friend*—had called him on his cell phone even as the guests were filing into the church. "Sorry, Riley. I just can't go through with it. Cold feet I guess. Grace is going to be mad, so I'm using the honeymoon tickets and going to Hawaii until this blows over."

He felt his jaw drop. "You're doing what?"

"I can't help it. I just can't go through with it."

"What about Gracie?" Riley had shouted. Then,

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taking note of his surroundings, he lowered his voice. “How can you do this to her?”

“I know, I know. But in the long run this will be better.”

Riley could hear someone talking to Steve in the background. “Who’s that? Is someone with you?”

“Well, there are two tickets, you know.”

Riley was sure he heard a woman’s voice.

“What?” said Steve “Oh yeah, tell Grace that Tami won’t be in to work on Monday...and for a couple of weeks after that.”

Tami was a waitress at The Grace Place, the coffee shop Grace owned.

“Come on Steve, the plane is boarding,” Riley heard Tami call, with a giggle.

“Take care of Grace for me, Riley. I’ll see you when we...I mean when I...get back.” He’d hung up before Riley could say another word and suddenly he was the one stuck with the task of ruining his other best friend’s special day—her wedding day.

Grace had looked forward to this day for years—since she and Steve had become high school sweethearts, really. The day she had spent months planning. She and her mother had even made all the table favors themselves. They were little bundles of candy, wrapped in red netting and tied with gold ribbon and sprigs of fake holly. Grace had said they were perfect for a December wedding. He remembered how she and her mom had cut out all those squares of netting, how they’d taken the time to curl all the ribbons

Wait a minute. What was he doing, obsessing over table favors when he was supposed to be comforting Gracie. How could he do that? At that moment, no amount of faith or Christian principle could prevent Riley from loathing Steve with all his heart. This was not how he had expected to fill his role as best man.

“Riley,” said Grace when her sobs subsided. “You’re the best friend ever. Thank you for sitting with me.”

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Like he had a choice? He was the only one she'd let in the room.

"You're welcome." Even though Grace's face was red with crying, she still looked beautiful to Riley. With her dark gold hair, creamy skin and warm brown eyes his Gracie had true beauty, inside and out. What man in his right mind would give her up? And for what? A little fun in the sun with a woman who changed boyfriends like she changed her shoes? And that woman had a different pair of shoes for every day of the week. "I'd give you a hug, but I'm afraid I'd ruin your dress, Gracie."

She gave him a wobbly smile. "It doesn't matter anymore if the dress gets ruined. Give me a hug.

So he gave her a hug like they'd shared so many times over the years, and then she started to cry again. Riley pulled another tissue out of the box and handed it to her. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the look on her face when he'd told her. It hurt him more than the time he'd fallen out of the maple tree in her yard and broken his arm.

"I hope that plane crashes," he declared vehemently.

"Oh, Riley, that's awful," said Grace. "Think of all the innocent people."

"Okay, how's this. I hope Steve gets a third-degree sunburn in Hawaii." He thought a moment, then added with a wicked smile "while sunbathing nude if possible."

He succeeded in making Grace laugh, if just for a moment. Her face quickly crumpled again. "I just don't understand how I missed it. He was dating Tami all this time behind my back. I feel so stupid."

"Gracie, he's the one who messed up. You have nothing to feel bad about." There was no way he was going to let her take the blame for this fiasco.

"Oh no? What about all those wedding gifts I'll have to return? What about all the gossip that will be buzzing by tomorrow? I'll be facing all that while he's frolicking on the beach with Tami."

"I wouldn't worry about the wedding gifts. I think

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most people just took them along when they left the church.”

“Well, that’s one thing I won’t have to take care of anyway.” Grace sighed. “Do you think everyone is gone yet?”

“I’ll go check.” Riley quickly grabbed at the chance to escape from the ladies room.

Grace’s mother and her friend Lily were waiting in the hallway. “How is she?” asked her mom.

“She’s holding up Mrs. Randall. She doesn’t want to come out until everyone is gone.”

“I wish she’d let us help,” said Lily, still wearing her festive red bridesmaid dress.

“Surely a girl would want her mother at a time like this.” Mrs. Randall gave him a pleading look.

“No,” said Riley firmly. “I’m sorry ladies, but I have my orders.”

Grace’s mom sighed. “All right. Tell her to call if she needs anything.”

“Men are pigs,” growled Lily. She glanced at Riley. “Present company accepted of course.”

“Don’t worry. Even I’m inclined to agree with you at the moment.” Lily had carried a chip on her shoulder since her messy divorce, so he didn’t take her attitude personally.

Grace’s mother sighed. “I suppose I’d better go make sure Ed has taken his blood pressure pill. Something tells me it would be a bad day to forget. Take good care of my Grace, Riley.” She patted his cheek and headed for the door, ready to go search out her husband. Lily followed.

“I will,” Riley assured them, holding the door as they exited. When they’d gone, he continued through the building, checked the sanctuary and the fellowship hall. They were both empty. Everyone must be gone. He turned to go back to Grace.

Riley decided to grab a fresh box of tissues first. The supply closet was in the church office. Luckily the door was unlocked.

Pansy Parker, all dressed up for the wedding that wasn’t happening, sat behind her desk. She smiled

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warmly at him as came in. "How's Grace doing?"

"She's going to be fine. She'd just rather not talk to anyone now."

Pansy nodded. "I understand. Poor Grace. She's so sweet. She doesn't deserve this heartache."

Riley inched his way toward the supply closet, hoping to get the tissues and get out quickly. "You can say that again."

"Of course, she sort of brought this on herself."

He stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Grace was the only one in town that would give Tami a job after she broke up Edie and Mel's marriage. Remember she was Mel's assistant before she worked for Grace."

"I remember."

"And the girl Grace hired before that, remember how she stole money from the till and just took off?" Pansy sighed. "Poor Grace. She's too kind for her own good. Someone really needs to watch out for that girl."

Riley had always thought Steve did a poor job of watching out for Grace. Now he wouldn't be there for her at all. He pushed away the notion. She still had her family. Not that they were doing the greatest job either. They hadn't been able to save Grace from being left at the altar.

"What was it you came in here for?"

Riley dragged his mind back to the situation at hand. "Tissues. I wanted a new box of tissues for Grace."

Pansy shook her head as she crossed to the supply closet. "That poor girl, crying her eyes out over some worthless man. It's too bad she didn't choose more wisely."

Why *had* Grace chosen Steve? They'd been dating on and off for years, breaking up one week and back together the next. If their dating life was that unstable, how had she ever thought they could keep a marriage going?

"You'd better get back to her now, Riley." She held out the box of tissues for him.

"Huh? Oh yeah. See you later." He grabbed the

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tissues and turned to go. As he was leaving he noticed the peculiar smile Pansy gave him, but he didn't have time to consider what that was about.

Grace told herself for what seemed like the hundredth time that she wasn't going to cry anymore. She was angry at herself for making such a spectacle. She preferred to be behind the scenes, not in the spotlight. Today, though, she had actually wanted to be the star of the show—but because she was getting married, not because she'd been left at the altar. Getting married and eventually starting a family meant more to her than anything—even her business.

Her mind went back to earlier in the day. Riley had knocked on the door of the dressing room. When Lily had affirmed that they were all dressed he came in. The first thing he did was to send everyone else out of the room. Then he came over to her and took her hands.

“We need to talk.”

“About what Riley? For the last time, you can't come to Hawaii with us.” She felt her smile begin to evaporate when Riley didn't react to her joke. The look in his eyes set her heart pounding. Something was very, very wrong.

“Gracie, he's not coming.”

“Who's not coming?”

Riley seemed to be having a hard time getting the words out. “Steve just called me. He isn't coming.”

“Is he sick?”

Riley released her hands and walked a few steps away. She couldn't see his face anymore and that frightened her. “He called from the airport. He's...he's decided he doesn't want to get married.”

It took a few moments for his words to sink in. “I'll just use the other ticket and go after him. He doesn't mean this.”

Riley turned back to her, but didn't say anything. She could tell by the look on his face that there was more. She waited.

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“The other ticket is being used.”

“Used? By who?” By his expression she knew he was about to hurt her again, and he was dreading it. “Just tell me, Riley. Get it over with.”

“Tami is with him.” His words fell like stones, pounding into her heart.

“Oh, I see.” Her brain wanted to reject his words, but Riley would never lie to her. She could see how hard it was just for him to tell her about Steve’s defection. “Riley, I just need a moment alone.”

When he left, Grace began to think about all the people waiting for her in the church. How could she face them? They were all family and friends and seeing the pity in their faces was more than she could bear. Grace took the coward’s way out. She locked herself in the bathroom. No amount of reasoning, pleading or threats could make her come out. Finally, she had agreed to let Riley in.

And now, an hour or so later, she was still sitting here, trying to make herself stop crying. “God,” she prayed “Why did you make hearts so fragile? You must have known that we would break them.”

Riley hurried along the hall and back into the ladies room. He had the new box of tissues tucked under his arm. Stopping to talk to Mrs. Parker had delayed him, and he was impatient to see if Grace was all right. He didn’t stop to knock, but walked right in. “Gracie, I think you can come out now. It’s looking pretty bare in—” He stopped in his tracks. Grace had taken off her wedding dress and was wearing only her slip—which actually covered quite a lot, but just the idea—Riley gulped. “I guess I’ll wait for you outside.” He backed out as fast as he could and slammed the door behind him.

“How’s Grace?” Riley almost jumped through the roof at the sound of his brother Ian’s voice coming from behind him.

“What are you still doing here?” Riley was almost shouting.

“Well, I wasn’t lurking around the ladies’ room at

least.” Ian smirked, and then his eyes changed from teasing to serious. “But really, I wanted to make sure you didn’t need any help with Grace.”

“No, I don’t need any help with Gracie. She’s going to be fine.” Then, to get back at him for the comment about lurking Riley added “and Lily has already left the building, so there’s no reason for you to stay behind, either.”

“Lily? What does she have to do with anything?” Ian tried to act nonchalant, but a tell-tale redness crept up on his neck. Ian and Riley looked a lot alike. Both had red hair, green eyes and a tendency to blush when embarrassed or trying to lie.

“Nothing.” Any other time, Riley would have played this to the hilt, but now all he wanted to do was get rid of Ian. “Gracie won’t come out until everyone is gone, so...”

“All right, all right,” Ian conceded. “I’m going. But Riley—”

“I know, I know. I’ll call if Gracie needs anything.”

Once Ian ambled off, Riley took a deep breath. And thought about Gracie.

“Okay, Riley,” he told himself, “Get a grip. You’ve seen her wear less at the beach.”

“Of course,” a little voice—a *traitorous* little voice—deep inside him whispered “she wasn’t available then.”

Steve and Gracie and Riley had been friends since grade school. Steve and Gracie had been dating on and off since high school. Gracie had always been strictly off limits. Even in those periods when she and Steve weren’t dating, Riley had never asked her out; because he would have felt as if he were betraying Steve.

But now...

No, no, no. She’d just been left at the altar and totally humiliated by her fiancé. How could he even be thinking about this now? It would take time before Gracie was ready to start a new relationship.

“Okay, I’m ready now,” said Grace, coming out of

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the ladies room, dressed in jeans and an old shirt, carrying her dress bag over her arm. "Sorry about that. I thought I'd have plenty of time to change before you came back."

Riley could feel the heat creeping up his cheeks and knew his face was turning as red as his hair. "No big deal," he said, hoping he sounded unaffected. Inside his head that little voice had become a loud voice, and it was screaming "Big deal! Very big deal!"

"Do you want to change before we go?"

"Sure," said Riley. "I'll make it quick." He ducked into the men's room, glad to be back on familiar ground. No flowers, no ruffles and definitely no potpourri.

Chapter 2

The town of Orchard Hill was actually a valley. The name came from the apple orchard at the top of the hill overlooking the town. No one complained about the inaccuracy. It was a nice name for a town.

On Monday morning Riley drove to work. He thought he could drive the route blindfolded if he had to. He'd spent almost every day of his adult life at O'Neil's Handy Hardware and many of his childhood days, too, "helping" his Dad. He turned onto Blossom Street and drove by the old fashioned town square with a park, police station, library and community building. Next came the downtown shops—Apple Blossom Realty, the Green Scene Natural Food Store, Gilding by Lily Beauty Shop, The Grace Place and finally his family's store. He pulled around and parked in the back.

Before opening the store, he walked over, as usual, to the Grace Place. Riley knew that making coffee at home and putting it in his travel mug would have been a lot cheaper than buying it here every day. But he enjoyed stopping and seeing Grace each morning before walking back down the street to O'Neil's Handy Hardware and opening up.

Today, he wouldn't see Grace though. She was on vacation. Certainly not the one she'd planned, but he supposed she'd need some time off to recover from the emotional devastation of the weekend. Maybe he'd call her later and see how she was doing.

"Hi Jeff," he called to the real estate agent from across the street. He was new in town, but already Riley liked him. Jeff was leaving the coffee shop as Riley was going in. "How's it going?"

"Not bad. How are things with you?"

"I'm here, aren't I? That's about the best I can

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expect for a Monday.”

Jeff laughed as he slipped out the door with his to-go cup.

The Grace Place not only had excellent coffee, they also sold tea, smoothies and soft drinks. In the morning there were donuts and pastries and in the afternoon they served soups and sandwiches. To one side of the shop, there was an area displaying cards and ‘gifts,’ which he thought of as useless junk, but his mother and sisters loved it, so Riley supposed Grace knew what she was doing.

He was taking out his wallet and not looking as he walked up to the counter. The sound of her voice surprised him.

“Hi, Riley. The usual?”

He snapped his head around. “Gracie? What are you doing here?”

She grinned at him. “It’s my place. It says so on the door.”

“You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

Her smile faded. “Yeah, funny thing, that didn’t quite work out.”

“I know that, but you should still take the time off.”

“I would,” she said flatly. “But I happen to be short one waitress.”

Ouch. He hadn’t thought of that.

She leaned over the counter. “Tell you what, your coffee’s on the house today. Do you have time to talk to me for a minute?”

He really didn’t. There were things he needed to do before the store opened. And he could see Iris Covey sitting in her car by the curb. Riley knew she was waiting for him to open so she could buy her bulk birdseed and take it out to the nursing home, where she filled the feeders for the residents every week.

“I can talk for a minute,” he conceded.

She flashed him another brilliant smile as she filled his travel mug. “Thanks.”

“What do you need?”

Her smile faded again. “I need to know what

happened.”

“What do you mean?”

Grace looked out the window, avoiding his eyes. “What happened between Steve and me? Where did it go wrong? Did you know he was dating Tami?”

“I knew he was acting strange for the last couple of weeks or so, but I thought it was just pre-wedding jitters.”

“Has he ever done this before?”

Riley didn’t want to answer that one. “Rehashing ancient history won’t help any.”

“C’mon Riley. I need to know.”

By the look in her eyes he knew she was serious. She’d never let it drop until he told her. “Okay, Gracie. Since you insist, yes, I do know of one other time. But that was a long time ago, when you were away at college and you guys were fighting.”

“Is that the time when he showed up at my dorm in the middle of the night with flowers and a black eye?”

“Ye...I mean how would I know?”

“Did you give him that black eye?”

Riley hunched his shoulders and stared into his coffee.

“You can tell me. It was a long time ago, right?”

“All right, yes, I gave him the black eye, the money for the flowers and a ride to your campus.”

Grace reached out and pushed his hair out of his eyes. “You always look out for me, Riley. You’re like a big brother.”

That was the last thing he wanted to hear. He snapped the cover onto the travel mug. “I’ve got to go Grace. And you should go home and take some time off.”

“Sorry, I can’t do that. Remember, I need a waitress. I’m going to put an ad in the paper today. I should be able to start interviewing by the end of the week, I hope.”

He remembered the last two waitresses that Grace had hired. One stole her money and the other stole her fiancé. “I’ll find you a waitress before

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tomorrow,” he blurted. Why did he say that? How was he going to do that?

“How are you going to do that?” demanded Grace.

“See you tomorrow,” was all he said as he headed for the door.

Grace watched Riley walk out, wondering what he was so upset about. She didn't see Lily until she was at the counter.

She smiled that little half smile that Grace knew so well. “I know you probably don't want me to ask, but are you okay?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Grace replied, glad to see her friend, even if it meant bringing up Saturday's disaster. “If I keep busy I don't have to think about it too much.”

“I know what you mean. Starting my own business was great therapy after the divorce.” Lily was the owner of Gilding by Lily. She reached across the counter and squeezed Grace's hand. “In a way you were lucky, honey. You found out before you were married to him. It could have been worse. Take it from me; we're better off without men.”

Grace managed a small smile in return. “Not that you're bitter or anything.” She wished her friend could move beyond her own disaster. She'd never liked Lily's husband and wasn't surprised when the marriage didn't work.

She laughed, but to Grace it sounded hollow. “No, not me. Now how about some coffee?” She gave her order and Grace made it up in a to-go carton. She slipped a pastry into a bag and handed it to Lily.

“What's this?”

“Thanks for caring. I should have given one to Riley, too but he left so quickly.”

“If only they all would,” quipped Lily. Then she made a face. “Okay, I know that one was bad, even for me. Have a good day, Grace. Call me if you need anything.”

Riley was a firm believer in the value of