



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

KARA LYNN
RUSSELL

CONSIDERING LILY

Considering
Lily

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by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Considering Lily: An Orchard Hill Romance

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Dedication

To a loving and gracious lady, my grandmother

Prologue: Pansy

Pansy Parker surveyed the disaster area that was her kitchen. When she'd left this morning, it had been pristine. She'd washed the cup, spoon and cereal bowl she'd used, and then put them away before leaving for work. While she was gone, it seemed there had been a tornado in her kitchen.

The sink was filled with dishes. The counter had crumbs scattered across it, and the refrigerator was decorated with greasy smudges.

"He's one person," she muttered as she grabbed a dish cloth and began wiping the counters. "How much mess can one person make in just a few hours."

"Hi Mom," Perry said striding into the kitchen. "Don't worry about that. I'll clean it up later. I made a cake for after supper tonight."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Pansy said, trying to dredge up appreciation. What were the two of them going to do with a whole cake! Especially one that was made with the whole wheat unbleached flour that Perry had brought home from the grocery store yesterday.

He had the classified section of the newspaper in his hand. No doubt the rest of the paper was scattered across her sofa. "Any luck in finding a job today?"

Perry sighed. "No. But, I thought maybe I'd take out my own ad. See if anyone needs a handyman. It doesn't seem like there are any construction companies hiring now."

Great. He'd never earn enough money as a handyman to get his own place. "I suppose you have to start somewhere, dear."

"It's a long way from being a construction site foreman, but I guess I can't afford to be choosy."

"Perry, dear, I don't know why you quit your job in the first place."

"I needed a fresh start, Ma. I just had to put

everything behind me.”

“Lots of people get divorces, and they don’t quit their jobs and move in with their mothers.”

“I don’t have to stay here if you don’t want me. I have a little money saved up. It could see me through until I get on my feet. I could be out by the end of the week. Just say the word,” Perry said, and the worst part was, she knew he meant it. He was a good boy, after all.

Pansy forced a smile on her face. “Of course I want you here. I just feel bad for all that you lost.”

Perry rubbed his forehead. “It was my own fault. I quit paying attention to Jean a long time ago. If I hadn’t, none of this would have happened.”

“Do you miss her?” As annoying as living with Perry was, she did love him.

“That’s sort of the worst part,” he admitted. “I don’t miss her. It just tells me how far apart we drifted before she found her new ‘Mr. Right.’ If I ever get married again, I’ll do things differently.”

“Get married again? Do you think you will?”

Perry laughed. “I’m fifty-three years old; I have more forehead than hair and no place to call my own. I don’t think it’s going to happen, Ma.”

An idea sparked in Pansy’s head. “You never know, dear,” she said. She’d find a match for Perry and count it toward the challenge. But who to match him up with? She’d have to think about it. She’d find someone by the time she finished with her current project—Lily Robinson and Ian O’Neil.

Chapter 1

Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

—Luke 12:27

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance...

—Ecclesiastes 3: 1 & 4

She was dancing. A soft, slow song was playing and someone's arms were around her. Lily looked up and saw his face. It was Ian O'Neil. She knew it would be. The dream was always the same—she and Ian dancing together at the New Year's Eve dance.

That part had actually happened. Lily had avoided things like dances and parties since she'd moved to Orchard Hill, but she'd gone to the New Year's Eve dance for Grace, her best friend. Grace had been jilted by her fiancé not a month before. Lily thought going out would be good for her.

At the dance, Grace had ended up with longtime friend Riley O'Neil and Lily, not wanting to intrude, had asked Riley's brother Ian to dance. A dance was nothing, she figured. She could handle it.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! From the moment Ian had pulled her close, he made her feel special—cherished. That was why she had to avoid him now. Because those were the kind of feelings that led to dependence on someone, and Lily had learned it was better to only depend on yourself.

She'd succeeded fairly well in avoiding Ian in real life but not in her dreams. In her dreams, they danced every night. His arms held her tight, and she rested her cheek

against his broad chest where she could feel the steady beat of his heart. Then the music would fade away, but Ian would still hold her to him. She'd look up, and his green eyes would gaze back at her through his gold rimmed glasses. He'd lower his head and her eyes would drift shut waiting for his kiss...

And that's where the dream ended every time.

The stupid dream had kept Lily tossing and turning all night. When she finally drifted off, Lily slept so soundly she didn't hear the alarm. She came awake some time later, noting the beams of light shining through her curtains. She rolled over to check her clock: 8:30! Lily threw off the covers and jumped out of bed. She was going to be late for church.

After a quick shower, she dressed and dried her hair. Even though she ran a beauty salon, and knew how to do all sorts of complicated hair styles, Lily was glad she kept her own dark hair in a simple layered cut. It was easy to deal with on mornings like this. She grabbed a granola bar and was out the door of her small apartment which sat over her shop, *Gilding by Lily*. It was small but at least it was included in the rent she paid for the shop. She had to watch her pennies.

The Orchard Hill Community Church was only a few blocks from her shop. Lily walked there as quickly as she could in heels and a straight skirt. She hurried into the narthex, grabbed a bulletin and slipped into the sanctuary. The congregation was already singing the opening hymn. No time to look for Grace. Luckily there was an empty spot near the back.

As she slid into the pew, Lily noticed with annoyance that she was sitting directly behind Ian O'Neil. Just great.

The hymn ended, and Pastor Isaac began to speak. Lily forced her mind away from Ian and onto the service. Her willpower was successful; she managed to forget about the man in front of her by concentrating on the words and music of worship, until...

It was time for the passing of the peace. Everyone rose and exchanged handshakes or hugs with those around them. Lily shook the hand of the person to the right, and then turned to greet the people behind her.

When she turned toward the front again, there was Ian holding out his hand to her.

Lily felt her smile freeze upon her face. She couldn't let him see how she felt about him. She steeled herself for the warmth of his touch when his much larger hand enveloped hers.

"Peace be with you," said Ian solemnly.

"God's peace," Lily mumbled back. There. That wasn't so bad. She could handle Dr. Ian O'Neil. With a jolt, Lily realized that everyone was sitting down, and she was still standing there holding Ian's hand.

She snatched her hand from his grasp and sat down quickly, glad she wasn't prone to blushing. If she were, she'd be beet red right now. As Ian also turned to sit, she noticed a small smile of satisfaction on his lips. It took all her self control to keep from kicking him under the pew.

At the close of worship, Pastor Isaac reminded everyone of the coffee hour to be held in the fellowship hall, and then he said "I've been told that Riley O'Neil and Grace Randall have an announcement to make."

Lily watched as Grace and Riley stood up, holding hands. Riley cleared his throat. "Grace and I would like to announce..."

"That we're getting married," finished Grace. Riley held up her left hand so everyone could see the sparkling ring she was now wearing. Applause broke out, and those nearest the happy couple offered hugs and hands to shake. Then the organist began to play the postlude hymn and people started gathering their things and filing out of the sanctuary.

Lily sat there, stunned. She had no idea things were that serious between Riley and Grace. They'd been dating a little less than two months.

"Did you know about this?"

Looking up, she saw Ian standing there, towering over her.

"I had no idea." Lily grabbed her purse and stood. "I guess I'd better go congratulate them."

"Good idea. I'll go with you."

She stifled a groan, but didn't protest, not even when he took her arm to help steer her through the throng. In the fellowship hall, there was already a crowd of well-

wishers surrounding Grace and Riley. Lily and Ian hung back until most of them had moved away. Then, Lily approached first, holding out her arms to hug her friend.

"I can't believe this," she told Grace as they embraced. "You've been dating such a short time."

"Yes, but we've known each other all our lives," Grace explained. "So it didn't take us long to make up our minds, I guess."

"Once I got her to consider me at all," added Riley, hinting at Grace's initial reluctance to date him for fear of ruining their friendship.

"Congratulations," said Ian, offering his hand to his brother. "I think you guys are perfect for each other."

Then, he turned to Grace and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "If I have to have another sister, I'm glad it's you."

"Thank you Ian. It won't be so bad having you for a brother."

Reluctantly, Lily turned to Riley while Grace and Ian exchanged their good wishes. "Congratulations, Riley."

"Thank you Lily," he answered. "And don't worry, I'll take good care of Grace."

She forced a smile. "I know you will."

"But you're not happy about this."

How could he tell? "I'm just surprised, that's all."

"Hey, you two," Grace broke in. "Come to brunch with us. We want to talk to you."

The Apple-A-Day Café was a homey place in the downtown, busy now with the after-church crowd. The walls were painted green and hung with apple plaques, apple clocks, and pictures of apple trees or bowls of apples. The tables had red checked table cloths and the salt and pepper shakers were shaped like apples, with the salt being a red apple and the pepper a green one.

Ian cast a sideways glance at Lily who was sitting next to him. She seemed tense and ill at ease. He wondered what the problem was, but knew he wouldn't ask. She was touchier than a nervous cat and just as likely to lash out.

Small talk prevailed until the waitress, a teenager with the mandatory green and white checked apron, came

to take their order. When the waitress swished away a silence descended over the table.

Riley and Grace were holding hands on the opposite side of the table, and Ian wished he could take Lily's hand like that. Most likely she'd smack him if he tried. He was annoyed with himself because he couldn't get this crush on her out of his system.

"We want to get married this summer. In August, maybe," Grace announced, bringing Ian's attention back to the matter at hand.

"Why the rush?" asked Lily. "Won't it be hard to arrange everything that fast?"

"I don't think so," Grace replied. "We want a simple wedding, and that doesn't take so much planning. The church is free on several weekends over the summer, and we can have the reception in my parents' back yard if the weather is nice."

Lily arched an eyebrow. "And if it isn't?"

Riley waved a hand dismissively. "We'll deal with it. Hey, maybe we could have it at The Grace Place."

"It might be big enough," Grace considered. "It depends on how many of your relatives from out of town decide to come, Riley."

"Wherever you have it, I'm sure it will be great," Ian assured them, hoping to cut off any tendency Grace might have to go on and on about dresses, flowers and the like.

"We also won't have a hard time coordinating the schedules of the wedding party," Riley said.

"Oh, why is that?" asked Lily.

"Because we're only going to have a maid of honor and a best man. No other couples," he finished.

"That simplifies things," Ian said absently, his attention already wandering to the ads on the placemats. Should he put one in for his veterinary clinic the next time the printer called?

Grace took up the thread of conversation. "And we want you two to be them—our maid of honor and best man."

Ian's attention snapped back. "Me, Riley? Your best man?" While Ian didn't have much use in general for all the fuss associated with weddings, he was touched that his brother was asking him. As Grace had already pointed

out, they had no shortage of relatives.

“Yes, you. Will you do it?”

“Of course I will. Wait a minute. What exactly does a best man do?”

Riley grinned. “Plan the bachelor party.”

Lily rolled her eyes, and Grace elbowed him in the side.

“That’s only one of the best man’s duties,” She reminded her fiancé tartly.

“I bet that will be his favorite, though,” Riley teased.

“No, it won’t,” Lily broke in. “Ian hates crowds and loud noise. Be prepared for a small, quiet party if he’s planning it.”

Everyone stared at Lily. “How do you know that?” asked Grace.

“I pretty much figured that out at the New Year’s Dance.”

Ian didn’t say anything, but secretly he was pleased. Lily had been paying attention. He thought she might like him if she let herself.

“You never answered me Lily.” Grace reached across the table and covered Lily’s hand with her own. Will you be my maid of honor?”

“You know I will.”

It suddenly occurred to Ian that if he and Lily had to stand up together at his brother’s wedding, they may have to spend some time together. This best man thing was starting to sound good, in spite of the bachelor party. Maybe Lily would finally let her guard down and he could get to know her.

On the other hand, it could mean a whole lot of awkward silences.

Chapter 2

"I'm so glad you could fit me in on short notice," said Pansy Parker as Lily lead her to her stylists' chair. "Betty, my usual stylist has the flu today, and I do hate to miss an appointment. Appearance is important, and I do represent the church in my job, you know."

"It was no problem Mrs. Parker," Lily assured her. It was a relief actually. Mondays were usually a little slow, and that had left Lily with far too much time to think about Riley and Grace—and especially about Ian.

"Isn't it wonderful about Grace and Riley," Pansy exclaimed. Lily nearly groaned out loud. "I wasn't expecting them to make an announcement so soon."

"You don't think it's too soon, do you?" Lily began to comb through Pansy's hair, which she'd already washed and was about to set in curlers.

"Not at all," Pansy said, obviously delighted in the situation. "They've been friends forever. I'm only surprised that it took them so long to figure out that they were perfect for each other."

"Well, there was Steve, you know," answered Lily, referring to Grace's former fiancé.

Pansy sniffed. "It definitely took her too long to figure out he wasn't the one."

"When your boyfriend skips town and takes another woman on your honeymoon, it's pretty obvious he's not the one."

"Definitely."

Lily opened a drawer filled with curlers. She selected one and began to roll Pansy's hair.

"And what about you, dear?" she asked. "How long have you been with us here in Orchard Hill?"

"A little over two years." Two years, three months and five days of freedom from her ex-husband, but who was counting?

"You must be settled in pretty well by now."

Pinning another curl in place, Lily answered “I think so. I like it here a lot.”

“Yes, but living all alone, don’t you get lonely?”

What was Pansy getting at? “No, not really. You live alone, don’t you?”

“My....my son Perry is living with me now.” The cheer in Pansy’s voice suddenly sounded a little forced.

“That’s nice. Do you enjoy having him home?”

“Yes. Of course.” She answered with a complete lack of enthusiasm. “But enough about me. What about you, Lily? Don’t you wish you had someone to come home to at night?”

“No. I’m happy by myself.” Surely the woman wasn’t suggesting...

Pansy sighed. “That’s too bad. I thought you might be interested in adopting a pet.”

Relief seeped through Lily. So that’s what this was about.

“The animal shelter is organizing a spring adoption fair.”

“That’s nice.” She was almost done rolling up Pansy’s hair. “All pets deserve a good home.”

“I just knew you’d feel that way,” Pansy gushed. “I told Mary you would.”

“Mary? Who’s Mary?”

“Mary Kingsley. She’s the volunteer coordinator at the shelter. Such a lovely woman.”

Forty five minutes later, Pansy’s hair was its usual cotton candy perfection, and Lily was a member of the planning committee for the adoption fair. *How did that happen?* In the end, Lily just decided to be glad that Pansy wasn’t one of her regular customers.

Riley and Ian played basketball in a community league on Tuesday nights. Afterwards they usually shared a pizza before going home. Tonight was the first time in a while that it had been just the two of them at the pizza place.

“Where’s Grace?” asked Ian. “She hasn’t missed a game since you two started dating.”

His brother grimaced. “She’s at her mom’s place. Wedding plans.”

“Aha,” he laughed. “It’s begun.”

Riley slouched down in the booth. “Geez, who knew there was so much to do for a simple wedding? I suggested pot luck for the reception yesterday, and Grace just about bit my head off.”

“See what you got yourself into?”

“It will be worth it,” Riley assured Ian. “to have Grace as my wife.”

Ian’s amusement faded, and he was hard-pressed not to notice a prickle of jealousy. Would he ever find someone he could feel that way about? Lily’s face flitted through his mind, but he mentally squelched that idea as he picked up the menu. “The usual?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?”

The conversation turned to a rehash of that night’s game, and then to sports in general. They didn’t talk about anything more personal until they were on their last slices of pizza.

“You know,” said Riley around a mouthful of pizza, “this wedding stuff may help you get to know Lily better.”

Ian shrugged. “So?”

“So, you like her.”

He thought about denying it, but figured it was a waste of time. “She doesn’t seem to like me.”

“Lily is kind of against the male species in general, in case you haven’t noticed.” Riley’s half smile softened his criticism. “She doesn’t dislike you more than anyone else as far as I can tell.”

“Thanks. That’s encouraging.” Ian pushed away his plate. “I’m stuffed.”

“Me too,” Riley admitted, leaving his last slice half eaten.

“I should get home.”

“Wait.” Riley fidgeted with the grated cheese shaker. “Grace wanted me to tell you something.”

Ian settled back in his chair and waited.

“She says don’t give up on Lily. Grace thinks you guys would make a great couple.”

“What Grace thinks doesn’t matter.” Ian shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with the conversation and impatient to get going. “If Lily isn’t interested, I’m not going to pine away. It’s no big deal.”

“Lily’s the first woman you’ve been interested in since you moved back home.”

“Yeah, well I’ve been a little busy setting up my practice.”

“I know, but now that you’re established...”

“Riley,” Ian cut in “I can manage my own social life.”

“Right,” grumbled his brother “Because there’s so little to manage.”

The committee heading up the organization of the Orchard Hill Pet Adoption Fair met in one of the rooms in the community building the next week. In spite of the fact that they’d just turned their calendars to March the weather was bitterly cold and by the time she’d walked the few blocks from her shop to the building, Lily was frozen solid.

She came into the room hesitantly and took a seat in the middle of one of the tables, set up in a U shape. She didn’t see anyone she knew, so she began to read over the handout in front of her.

Someone slid into the chair next to her, and Lily was glad it was someone she recognized.

The petite redhead held out a hand. “You’re Lily, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said shaking the offered hand. “And you’re Angel, right? I’ve heard you do some fabulous paintings.”

Angel blushed. “Thank you. I do my best.”

The artist had only recently moved to Orchard Hill. Lily had seen her at church a few times with her cousin Misty Green and lately with Jeff Bradley, the real estate agent whose office was near her shop on Blossom Street. “So how did you get roped into serving on this committee?”

“I adopted a stray when I first came here. It’s a long story, I’ll tell you another time. But Cherub, my dog, had to have some stitches removed and when I took her in, Ian told me about the adoption fair and I decided to volunteer.”

“That was nice of you.”

Angel shrugged. “It’s a good cause, and I thought it would be a good way to get to know people.”

“That’s true,” Lily agreed. When she’d moved here

she'd made no attempt to get to know people outside of her work. She'd been filled with a fierce drive to show that she could make it on her own, to prove to herself that she could be independent.

Most of the committee had gathered, and the room was now filled with the noise of chatter and paper shuffling. Mary Kingsley, the chair of the committee banged her gavel and called for order. Silence came by degrees, and just as everyone had settled in, the door opened one more time.

Lily looked up to see Dr. Ian O'Neil himself walking in. She turned her attention back to the papers in front of her and pretended not to see him, but it didn't do any good. Angel waved him over and he slid into the empty seat next to her. He was two seats away from her, but Lily thought it was still too close. Fortunately, there was only time for a nod of acknowledgement before Mary began the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting was for everyone to get an overview of the project. First, Mary asked them all to introduce themselves. After giving their name and occupation, each was supposed to share a favorite pet-related memory.

Lily racked her brain for a memory. The truth was, she'd never had a pet. Her father had been terribly allergic to animal dander. Too soon it was her turn.

"My name is Lily Robinson," she began. "I own 'Gilding by Lily,' the salon on Blossom Street. I...I've never had a pet of my own, but when I was ten our neighbors' cat had kittens. When they were old enough to be running around a little she invited me to come and see them. It was summer, and the kittens had a box on the sun porch of the house. There were five of them—three tiger-striped and two orange balls of fluff. They were all over the place, running, pouncing and wrestling. My neighbor caught one of them and let me hold it. It... it was very nice," she finished lamely. Not much of a memory, but it was all she had.

Angel was next, and Lily was glad when Angel jumped in and started her own introduction right away. Almost everyone's attention moved from Lily, but she caught Ian looking at her. She lowered her gaze to the

table. He probably thought someone who'd never had a pet was strange.

It was a good thing she didn't care what he thought.

She focused on Angel and the story she was telling about how she got her dog, Cherub. Then, it was Ian's turn. Lily guessed she was about to hear a dog story, or possibly a horse story. She couldn't have been more wrong.

Ian cleared his throat and spoke out in his soft baritone voice. "I'm Ian O'Neil, and I work at the Orchard Hill Animal Hospital. When I was a kid, I wanted a dog more than anything. But we had a big family, and it seemed we were constantly on the run between piano lessons, sports practice, play rehearsals and just about anything else a kid could get involved in. So, my parents thought we wouldn't be a good family for a dog. Still I had high hopes of getting a puppy for my twelfth birthday.

"When the day arrived, I was wildly excited. I kept listening for a puppy bark. I knew it had to be hidden in the house somewhere. When my mom handed me a wrapped box with air holes, I thought this would be it. I ripped the paper off and opened the lid."

He paused and grinned at everyone. "It was a guinea pig. I couldn't believe it. I wanted a dog, and I got a ridiculous ball of hair instead. I tried not to show it, but I was disappointed. Then, after I had the guinea pig for a while, I started to appreciate him. He couldn't do tricks or run along with me while I rode my bike. But Stanley—that was his name—was an excellent listener. I told that poor creature every secret, every problem, every embarrassing moment I'd ever had. Plus, I found out that when they're tame enough, guinea pigs are great cuddlers. Not that I cared about that when I was twelve."

A ripple of laughter went around the room. Then the next person began their introduction, but Lily didn't hear it. She was captivated by the idea of a twelve year old Ian and his guinea pig. Before she knew it, the introductions were finished and Mary was directing their attention to the handout.

Lily learned about the purpose of the adoption fair, which was not just to find the shelter animals good homes, but also to educate people about the

responsibilities of owning and properly caring for a pet. They finished up by discussing what needed to be done to get ready for the fair, and the particulars of the next meeting.

As soon as Mary banged her gavel to close the meeting, a wave of chatter erupted. Lily quietly gathered her things and pulled on her coat.

“Bye Ian, Lily,” said Angel. “I have to go. Jeff’s working late, and if I don’t make him go home, he’ll be at the office all night.”

“Are you walking?” Lily asked. “I’ll walk with you.”

Angel wrapped a colorful scarf around her neck. “All right.”

“I have a better idea,” said Ian. “I’ll give you both a ride. It’s freezing out there.”

“It’s only a few blocks,” Lily protested as she pulled on her mittens. “Your car won’t even be warm by the time we get there.”

“Still, with this weather, I’d rather ride than walk,” Angel chimed in.

Lily gave in, and the three of them went out to Ian’s car. Angel scooted into the back seat so Lily was forced to sit next to Ian. She noticed with satisfaction that the seats were as hard as concrete from the cold. Riding would not be any warmer than walking.

Apple Blossom Realty was their first stop. There was a light shining and Jeff’s profile could be seen through the window. Lily felt a twinge of jealousy as Angel slipped inside. Lily had no one waiting at home for her.

But that was the way she wanted it, she reminded herself. No one waiting for her, but no one to accuse her of being unfaithful when she went out by herself, no one to belittle her intelligence or magnify every mistake she made. It was better this way.

“So, you’ve never had a pet?”

Lost in her thoughts, Lily had almost forgotten about Ian. “No. I suppose you think that’s terrible.” She wanted to cringe at the sharp tone she heard in her voice, but she also didn’t want to start any cozy conversations with Ian.

“No. Not everyone should have a pet.”

“Are you saying I couldn’t take care of a pet?”

“No, that’s not what I said at all.” Ian pulled up in

front of the shop. "Why are you determined to take everything the wrong way?"

Lily was filled with embarrassment. Suddenly she didn't want to be known for her sharp tongue. "I...I'm sorry. Maybe I'm just afflicted with chronic crabbiness."

Ian laughed as he turned off the car. "Maybe there's a cure?"

"If you find it, let me know. Why did you turn the car off?"

"I was going to walk you to your door."

"Why? You didn't do that for Angel?"

"I knew Jeff was waiting for her. You're going into an empty apartment."

"Oh, please, this is Orchard Hill. I hardly think I'll walk in on a burglar or something." Irritation laced her voice.

"You never know. My mother would never forgive me if I didn't walk you to your door." Ian got out of the car.

Lily followed suit. "And just how would your mother know?"

"You never know," He grinned at her. "This is, as you pointed out, Orchard Hill. Gossip spreads like wildfire in a small town."

"Then I think it would cause more gossip for you to come up to my apartment." Ha. Let him get around that one.

"Not if I don't stay long."

She gave up. It was cold and she wanted to be inside. "All right. Come on."

She had to stifle a giggle when he answered with, "Thanks for the gracious invitation."

She let him in by the side door and up the stairs to her apartment. The phone was ringing. She tried to hurry but as soon as she unlocked the door they heard the answering machine pick up. Lily took two steps into her apartment and heard her ex-husband's voice.

"It figures you aren't home. I suppose you're out with some new boyfriend. There's always someone with you, isn't there. Well, you'd better call me back when you get home, and I mean it."

The voice went on, and she stopped in horror, knowing that Ian was hearing every word of his venomous

tirade. She wanted to stop the machine but was afraid if she cut it off, Ted would know she was home and call back.

Finally he ran out of horrible things to say and hung up. Lily wrapped her arms around herself, embarrassed, mortified beyond measure. Would Ian believe the horrible things Ted accused her of? Without turning around, she said "Thank you for walking me up, Ian. I'll see you at church."

She waited to hear the door closing. Instead, she felt his hand on her shoulder. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Was that your ex-husband?"

She nodded. Tears were welling up, choking her. She couldn't speak.

"Does he call you often?"

She didn't answer, hoping he'd go away. But instead, he shut the door and moved in front of her. He didn't ask any more questions, just drew her into a hug. A hug that seduced her with its offer of comfort and support. She wanted to hide in the circle of his arms.

Instead she said "Don't Ian. Don't be nice to me." She tried to push him away, but he tightened his arms around her, and she felt herself give in, tears sliding down her cheeks.

Ian held her and stroked her hair. He murmured soothing words to her, and it was more than she could take. The sobs she'd been holding in escaped.

Suddenly the phone began to ring again, shattering the stillness. Lily lifted her head and stared at it. It had to be Ted.

Before she could stop him, Ian picked up the phone. "Hello."

There was a pause, and then she could hear Ted's voice through the phone. "Who is this?"

"Who is *this*?" Ian countered.

"I want to talk to Lily. Get her on the phone."

"She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Who are you? Her boyfriend?"

"I'm a friend."

Lily tried to wrestle the phone away. Ian wouldn't let go. She could hear Ted's voice, hear how angry he was.