



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

Entertaining
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by

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Entertaining Angel: An Orchard Hill Romance

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Prologue: Misty

“Hey Misty, how’s business?”

Misty Green looked up from her computer, where she was debating over how much bean curd to order as the postal carrier came into her store. “Just fine, Fred. Anything good for me today?”

“Just the usual.” He walked up to the counter and set down a stack of envelopes.

“It’s a cold day. Can I get you a cup of herbal tea?”

“No, I just had a cup of coffee at Grace’s. I think it’s a good thing she didn’t marry Steve. She and Riley seem perfect for each other. I wonder how long it will be before we hear an announcement from them?”

Misty’s smile froze on her face. “I’m sure I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, I’ve got to keep moving. Thanks for the offer of the tea, though.”

“You’re welcome, Fred. Anytime.”

Once the postal carrier left, Misty allowed her smile to disintegrate into a scowl. Her rival in matchmaking, Pansy Parker, had recently claimed the first match of the year, Grace Randall and Riley O’Neil. Now, Misty found herself O-and-one in the contest she and Pansy were having to see who could make the most matches in a year.

Well, what kind of challenge was that, anyway. Grace and Riley had been friends since kindergarten. Anyone could see they were perfect for each other. Once her fiancé, Steve was out of the picture, the two were bound to get together.

Now, *Misty* was the type of person who enjoyed a *challenge*. And that was just what she had in mind when she invited her cousin’s daughter, Angel, to visit. Once Misty had found out that Angel’s brother, Tony, had been the college roommate of Jeff, the new real estate agent in town, Misty had started thinking. And what she had come

up with, was that Angel and Jeff would be perfect together.

“Let’s see if you can top that, Mrs. Pansy Parker,” mumbled Misty to herself as she sorted the mail that Fred had handed her.

There was a letter from her father. He had moved to Florida years ago after he’d retired from his teaching job. Misty looked forward to his long letters.

She opened it and began to read. By the time she reached the end of the letter, her scowl had returned. “He’s coming for a visit. Why now?” She re-read part of the letter, and noted with relief that he wouldn’t be here until next month. That would give her plenty of time to wrap things up with Angel and Jeff.

Although Misty truly loved and admired her father, she preferred a long distance relationship with him. She was sure he’d frown on her hobby of making matches and try to discourage it. He had a tendency to meddle in her life, and if it was one thing she hated, it was a person who interfered in other people’s lives.

Misty shrugged. Her father never stayed long. She’d have plenty of time to visit with him and still beat the pants off Pansy Parker at matchmaking.

Chapter One

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

—Hebrews 13:2 NIV

“Please Jeff, I’m begging you.”

Jeff Bradley swiveled in his office chair so he could gaze out of his window at Blossom Street. Across the street, Riley O’Neil was going into the Grace Place where Grace Randall was waiting for him with a steamy mug of coffee and an equally steamy kiss. Jeff sighed and turned away from the window.

“Jeff are you there?”

“Yeah, Tony, I hear you. Why exactly does your twenty-two year old sister need a baby sitter?”

“Angel is... Well, she’s a bit inexperienced in the ways of the world. You know my Dad died when I was a kid, and my mom got sick when Angel was still in high school. Instead of going on to college like we did, she stayed home and took care of my Mom until she died.”

“I see,” said Jeff, mostly to assure Tony he was still listening. Which he was, sort of.

“So Angel’s life has been a little...sheltered. She’s awfully naïve for a woman of her age. And now that Mom’s passed away she has this idea about starting her own business. Dad’s cousin, Misty, convinced her that there was a market for her stuff in Orchard Hill.

“If she’s visiting Misty, can’t Misty keep an eye on her?”

“Misty has to work.”

“And I don’t?” Jeff drummed his fingers on his desk impatiently.

“You’re a real estate agent. You’re hours are...flexible.”

Jeff snorted in answer to that. "Listen, Tony I don't have time to entertain your sister right now."

"You wouldn't have to entertain her. In fact, remembering how you were with the girls in college, don't 'entertain' her—please. Just...just check in on her, and make sure she's okay."

"I would but, I'm so busy right now—"

"All right, I know I'm asking a lot," Tony pleaded. "But frankly I've always thought Misty was a little flakey. I'd feel much better if I knew you were keeping an eye on my little sister."

Jeff did not want to deal with this right now. His plate was too full as it was, with starting his own real estate office. He needed to work hard to establish himself, and all the while his very successful parents were looking over his shoulder. But Tony was a good friend, and Jeff didn't want to let him down.

"Fine. I'll check up on Angie for you while she's here."

"Angel. Her name is Angel."

"Right. Angel."

"Thanks Jeff. You're the best."

Jeff relaxed. This wasn't going to be so bad.

"Let me give you her flight number, so you can pick her up at the airport."

Jeff stifled a groan. He should have known he wasn't going to get off that easy.

Angel Marcel stepped from the plane into the Green Bay airport. Her stomach was still feeling a little queasy, but she attributed that more to nerves than to motion sickness.

At the ripe old age of twenty two, she was finally out on her own. Angel hoisted the strap of her portfolio to her shoulder and followed the sign to the baggage carousel.

As she approached it, she noticed a man standing nearby. It was hard not to notice him. He was on the short side, but that was no disadvantage to a pipsqueak like her. Beneath his well cut suit, he seemed fit and muscular. Add in the slightly shaggy light brown hair and the stormy grey eyes and—well, you had quite a package.

Angel sighed. That didn't concern her. This was a business trip. She found a spot at the end of the carousel

and planted herself. She'd get her luggage and then rent a car to drive out to Misty's place in Orchard Hill. She focused her eyes on the door her luggage would come through, determined not to give one more glance to Mr. Stormy Eyes.

Pointedly not looking his way, she focused on the carousel, and pulled off her bag.

"You must be Angel. I'm here to meet you."

The smooth baritone voice so close to her ear surprised her. Caught off guard, she swung around a bit too quickly and caught the man she'd been admiring squarely in the gut with her suitcase.

He grunted and then doubled over. Angel dropped the bag at her side, mortified at her clumsiness. "I'm so sorry. You startled me. Are you all right?"

He straightened and nodded. After a second he said "Just knocked the wind out of me."

"Do you want to sit down?"

The man shook his head. "No. I'm fine. Are you Angel Marcel?"

"Why?"

"Your brother, Tony, asked me to meet you. I'm Jeff Bradley."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say, so she just stood there blinking like an owl. She couldn't believe Tony would do this to her.

"So are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Angel Marcel."

"Oh. Yes, that's me, but I'm fine. I don't need a ride. I have everything under control. Thank you anyway." She turned, planning to make a smooth exit to cover her embarrassment, but Angel had forgotten that she'd dropped her suitcase and promptly tripped over it.

The handsome stranger—Jeff Bradley—caught her arm and saved her from taking an ungraceful dive all the way to the floor.

"I see you have everything under control," he said, his tone filled with impatience and sarcasm, "but since I'm already here why don't you just ride back with me?"

"I am perfectly capable of getting myself to Orchard Grove," She insisted.

“Um, that’s Orchard Hill.”

Angel smacked her head. “Of course. I knew that. I’m just flustered right now. I didn’t expect to be met and...and...”

Jeff picked up her suitcase. “Look, I’m here. I’m driving back to Orchard Hill anyway. It would be a waste for you to rent a car.”

Angel felt her face heat and knew she probably resembled a tomato. “How do I know my brother even sent you?”

“Do you want to call and talk to him?” He held up a cell phone.

Did she ever want to talk to him. But she couldn’t say what she wanted to say in front of an audience. “No thank you. I’ll ride with you.” This sounded too much like Tony for her to doubt it.

But it was humiliating, absolutely humiliating, that her brother had called someone to watch over her. She was an adult for heaven’s sake. It said so on her driver’s license.

Jeff examined his passenger out of the corner of his eye. What word had she used? Flustered? He was feeling a little flustered himself. He knew Tony’s sister was an adult, but from the way Tony had talked about her, somehow Jeff had been expecting a kid. This diminutive beauty with feminine curves everywhere and riotous red curls was clearly all grown up. He had a feeling she might need a bodyguard more than a babysitter once Orchard Hill’s single men got a look at her. Maybe Tony was right to be worried.

“So you’re staying with Misty Green?” Even small talk was better than the silence they’d had so far.

“Do you live far from her?”

“No, I live right in town. I have a real estate agency on the same street as her health food store.”

“Oh, good. You can drop me off there. I have an appointment this afternoon with someone named Grace Randall. Misty said it was close by.”

“Grace? She owns the coffee shop across from my office. Are you selling coffee?”

Angel gave a short laugh. “Hardly. I’m an artist. I’ve

developed my own line of greeting cards and stationary.”

“Oh right. Grace does have a gift section to her place. She has knick knacks and stuff there.” Jeff dismissed that as “girl stuff” for which he had no need. “So how long will you be in town?”

“I think for about a week, but it depends on how things go. Don’t worry, you won’t be called into service again. I’m sure you have more important things to do than to chauffeur me around.”

Jeff shrugged. “I don’t mind.” *Now why had he said that? He certainly did mind.*

Another uncomfortable silence settled over the car. He searched for something neutral to say, something that would keep them in safe territory, but she spoke first.

“How do you know my brother?”

He relaxed. This had to be a safe topic. “We went to college together in Madison. We roomed on the same floor in one of the dorms our freshman year. Later we got an apartment together with a few of the guys.”

Recognition dawned on her face. “Oh, you’re one of the Fantastic Five.”

“What?”

She blushed. “That’s what my Mom and I used to call Tony and his roommates. He brought home a lot of stories about you guys. Are you the one who, to quote my brother, ‘snores like a freight train?’”

Jeff frowned. “No, that was Cameron.”

“Surely you weren’t the slob, the one who wouldn’t do his laundry until he absolutely had to.”

“Definitely not. That was Dirty Larry.”

“I didn’t think that was you, since you look so nice. Oh. I didn’t mean... ”

She was blushing again. Jeff loved women who blushed. They were so much fun to tease. He flashed her a smile. “That’s okay.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not the computer geek.”

“No, that was Garth.”

“That means you must be...” She stopped abruptly.

“What? What label did I get?”

“Oh, never mind. It doesn’t matter.” Obviously, she didn’t want to tell him.

“You can’t leave me hanging like this.”

“Is it much farther to Orchard Valley?”

“Orchard Hill.” He took his foot off the accelerator. “And it could take all day to get there if you continue to withhold information.”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “You wouldn’t.”

The car slowed to a crawl. “I would. What did Tony say about me?”

“I don’t remember.” By now her face was as brilliantly red as her hair. But he could see she hid a smile behind her hands.

“Maybe I don’t remember the way to Orchardville.”

“Orchard Hill.”

“Come on, out with it.”

She said something in a voice so small he couldn’t hear it. He leaned over. “What was that?”

“Chick magnet,” she repeated louder. “Tony said that you were a real ladies’ man.”

Jeff laughed as he sped up to their former pace. “He should talk. He dated a different girl almost every week back then.”

“You should see him now.” Angel rolled her eyes. “He’s engaged. She’s a very nice girl, but he practically *fawns* on her. It’s disgusting.”

“I don’t believe that. He didn’t say anything about it to me. I hope he invites me to the wedding. I’ve got to see this ‘fawning’ behavior.”

“I’m sure he’ll invite you. What about you? Have you settled down with anyone yet?”

“Yes, but not with a woman. I’m married to my work right now. However, the right girl could convince me to stray.” Jeff winked at her just to see her blush again.

Then he realized what he was doing. He was flirting—with his friend’s little sister. The sister Tony had specifically told him was naïve and inexperienced. He had no business trying to make her blush—no matter how cute she looked.

“Um. Just kidding there. I didn’t mean to... .”

Now he had embarrassed her for real. She stared at her hands, clenched in her lap. “It’s okay. I knew you were joking.”

That uncomfortable silence fell again like a heavy velvet curtain, but Jeff made no further attempts to lift it.

Entertaining Angel

A drive in uncomfortable silence was way better than having to explain certain things to Angel's brother.

Chapter Two

Angel was drowsing by the time they reached the outskirts of Orchard Hill, so she was completely unprepared when Jeff slammed on the brakes.

Her body pitched forward and, in spite of her secured seatbelt, she smacked the side of her head on the dashboard as the car abruptly stopped.

She felt Jeff's hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Angel gingerly felt her head where she'd hit it. She winced. "What happened?"

"There was a dog in the road—"

"A dog!" No longer concerned about her own injury, Angel jumped out of the car, with Jeff right behind her. At the front of the car, she knelt by a small, brown dog, who whined and looked up at her with chocolate brown eyes.

"Be careful. It might bite if it's frightened," warned Jeff.

Slowly Angel extended her hand, and the dog licked it. "Where can we take her?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's hurt. Look, she's bleeding. We have to take her to a vet."

Angel saw him look at the muddy, bloody dog and then at his spotless new sports car.

"Jeff, she could die!"

"I know, I know." He took off his winter coat and then his suit jacket.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to wrap her up in my jacket."

"So she doesn't get your upholstery dirty?"

"No," snapped Jeff. "In case she goes into shock."

"Oh. Sorry." Angel took the jacket from him and wrapped up the dog. The dog yelped when Angel first touched her, but then relaxed.

Jeff opened the passenger side door and Angel slid in,

cradling the dog. Instead of shutting the door, he asked "Are you all right?" He cupped her chin and looked closer at her temple. "You've got quite a goose egg. Maybe we should go to the emergency room."

Angel pulled away from him. "I'm fine."

He didn't look convinced, but he backed up and closed the door. Then he came around the car and slid behind the wheel. "We'll take the dog to Ian's clinic. It's just on the other side of town."

"Is that far?"

"Don't worry. This is a small town."

Jeff was right. They arrived at the clinic in under ten minutes. He opened doors for Angel as she carried in the dog.

The receptionist took one look at them and yelled, "Ian."

A tall man with thick, auburn hair and glasses answered the call. "What's up?"

"Looks like someone hit a dog."

Ian hurried into the waiting room. "Jeff? Is this your dog?"

"No, I don't know who it belongs to."

"It's not yours?" Ian asked Angel as he took the dog from her gently.

"No, she's with me. This is Angel Marcel. Her brother is a friend of mine."

Ian acknowledged the introduction with a nod as he took the dog back to his examination room.

"Well, let's go," said Jeff. "She's in good hands now."

He started to move towards the door, but Angel wasn't following. "Don't you want to wait and see how the dog is?" She couldn't believe he could walk away and leave the injured animal without a second thought. How could Tony be friends with such an insensitive jerk?

"We can leave Misty's number with the receptionist. Ian will call you."

Angel silently acknowledged that that would be the sensible thing to do, but she thought about the dog's sad pain-filled eyes, and she just couldn't leave.

"You go ahead. I'll wait. Misty can pick me up later."

"What about your appointment with Grace?"

She had completely forgotten about that. "I'll call her

on my cell and reschedule.”

Jeff shook his head at her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“I would wait with you, but I’ve got appointments this afternoon.”

All right, maybe he wasn’t an insensitive jerk. He was just being a responsible businessman, she supposed.

“That’s all right. I’ll be fine.” She sat down on one of the plastic chairs and smiled brightly.

“I’ll drop your stuff off at Misty’s.”

“Great. Thank you so much for picking me up. Tell Misty I’ll call her when I’m done here.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jeff rubbed the back of his neck and eyed her speculatively.

Angel could tell he was feeling guilty about leaving her, and she didn’t need to feel like anyone’s burden. *She* would feel guilty if he stayed. She could tell he didn’t really want to. If he stayed, it would be because he’d promised to baby sit Tony’s dim-witted little sister. “I don’t want you to be late for your appointments.”

He sighed. “Right. I’ll see you around.”

“Okay.” She watched the door to the clinic close behind him then slumped in relief.

So much for Jeff Bradley. She pulled out her cell phone. She had a few choice words for her dear, sweet, meddling, overprotective brother.

But first she had to call and reschedule her appointment at The Grace Place.

Jeff spent the next couple of hours showing houses to a young couple whose growing family had them seeking a larger home. Usually he loved the challenge of trying to fit the right house to the right family, but today he was preoccupied.

And he didn’t want to be. There was no reason he should have stayed. She may be irresponsible enough to miss her business appointments but he wasn’t. He was determined to make his business a success.

Still, when he had finished with the couple, he found his thoughts turning to Angel..

At the airport, he’d been expecting someone who looked like Tony in a dress. Had he been wrong! Then

she'd tripped over her suitcase and got—what was it she said—*flustered*. It was a good look for her, Jeff decided, the color filling her cheeks and those big hazel eyes looking up at him...

Those big hazel eyes that filled with tears over a stupid dog. Maybe he'd better make sure she was all right. After all, he had promised Tony. And she had hit her head. Maybe he should have insisted on taking her to the emergency room. What if she had a concussion?

Jeff called Misty. "Is Angel there? I wanted to make sure she got to your place okay."

"No, honey. She hasn't called yet. She must still be at the clinic." Misty seemed awfully cheerful—overly cheerful—and Jeff felt the odd sense that he'd been left out of the loop on something.

He shook it off. "Oh. Okay. I'll try again later." He hung up the phone and walked over to Grace's for some coffee.

Grace was behind the counter when he got there. She was talking to Lily from the beauty shop down the street.

"...and she hit a dog on her way into town. She called me from Ian's to say she wanted to wait to see how it went."

"Poor girl," murmured Lily. "That's a rotten introduction to Orchard Hill. Now she's spending the afternoon sitting in Ian's clinic. That can't be much fun."

"Oh, hi Jeff," said Grace as he approached. "What can I get for you today? Your usual?"

Grimly Jeff shook his head. "Two coffees to go. And can you fill a baggie with some ice for me?"

Angel leaned back and closed her eyes. Over the last few years, she had come to hate doctors' offices. Waiting rooms were all the same: uncomfortable chairs, bad music and outdated magazines. It didn't seem to make any difference whether the doctor treated humans or animals. She wished she'd thought to get her sketch pad from the car before Jeff had gone.

But, her head was pounding from the bump on the dashboard, anyway, so drawing probably wouldn't have been the best idea. Still, she would have loved to try to capture the expression of the little boy who'd so proudly

brought in his new puppy for a check up. The puppy was his birthday present, he had told her.

Now, the office was deserted. It must be getting near closing time.

She heard the door open and shut, and her eyes fluttered open. Jeff stood in front of her with two steaming containers of delicious smelling coffee. She sat up—a bit too fast—and winced at the pain that shot through her skull.

He sat next to her and handed her a cup of coffee.

“What are you doing here?”

“I called Misty, and she said you were still down here.”

Angel felt a flare of annoyance, but the aroma of the coffee tickled her tired nose, and she let go of her irritation in favor of sipping the reviving hot drink.

“You didn’t have to check up on me. But thanks for the coffee.”

“Wait. I have something else.” He fished around in his pocket and pulled out a baggie filled with crushed ice.

If the coffee was nice, the ice was wonderful. She pressed the welcome coldness gently to her head.

“It’s probably too late to keep it from bruising, but it should still make you feel better.”

She peered up at him, suspicious. “My brother didn’t call you, did he?”

“No. I told you, I called Misty to see if you’d gotten home all right. She said you were still here.”

“It’s nice of you to check on me, but I’m fine, really.”

“What’s happening with the dog?”

“She doesn’t seem to be hurt too badly. She needed a few stitches but other than that, Ian is just holding her a little while for observation. Then I can take her home.”

Jeff’s jaw dropped. “Take her home? She isn’t your dog.”

“But if I don’t take her, they’ll send her to the shelter.”

“That’s what the shelter is for.”

“Jeff, if no one claims her, she’ll be put to sleep.”

“She must belong to someone,” he protested.

“I’ve given Ian my cell phone number. He can contact me if they find the owner.”

Jeff could see it was useless to argue with her. “How much longer?” he asked, sure that he couldn’t leave her here again without feeling the weight of guilt.

“Not too much longer. I think they’re about to close up for the night.”

He sighed and attempted to find a comfortable position in the unyielding plastic chair.

“You don’t have to stay.” Angel gave him a little smile. “I’m very good at these waiting room vigils. Don’t worry about me.”

Jeff remembered that Tony said she had nursed her mother through several years of illness before her death. He supposed she *was* experienced at this sort of thing. That only made him more determined to stay.

“Really, I don’t want to be a bother.”

She was a bother. She’d been a bother from the moment he’d laid eyes on her, but somehow he couldn’t just abandon her, even if it was in a place he knew to be perfectly safe.

“It’s no bother.”

“Well, that’s funny because you sure seem bothered.” She sounded thoroughly irritated now. “I don’t want to be seen as an obligation, and I don’t need a baby sitter. I’m an adult; I can take care of myself.”

“Fine. You can take care of yourself. I’m still staying.”

She glared at him with blazing hazel eyes, and he glared right back until the door to the examining room opened and Ian came out with the dog in his arms.

“Here she is. Oh, hi Jeff.”

“Hi. How’s the patient?”

“She seems to be fine. Just keep an eye on her for the next day or so. The stitches will have to come out in about two weeks.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be in town that long,” Angel told him.

“A veterinarian in your home town can remove them.”

While Ian gave her instructions, Jeff cleaned up the remains of their coffee and the ice.

Ian handed Angel the dog. “Are you sure you want to keep her? They have room for her at the shelter.”

"I'm sure," she said firmly. "You can call me if you find the owner. Otherwise, I'm keeping her."

"Send me the bill," Jeff said.

Angel's head whipped around. "You don't have to—"

"I hit the dog. It's my responsibility."

She looked as though she wanted to protest, but Ian broke in. "That's fine. I'm going to close up now. I had my assistant write up those instructions for you. My home phone number is included. Call me if you need anything."

She gave him a radiant smile. "Thank you for everything Dr..."

He smiled back at her. "Just call me Ian. Everyone else does."

"Yes, Ian. Thank you."

For some reason, Jeff didn't much like all this smiling business. "Let's go Angel. I'll give you a ride home."

She hesitated and Jeff swore if she turned him down he'd pick her up and carry her and that mutt out of here. Fortunately she relented. "I guess there's no reason to make Misty come all the way out here for me."

"No, there isn't. Thanks again, Ian. Bye."

He settled her and the dog in the passenger's seat and then took several deep breaths as he walked around to the driver's side. He hoped Angel Marcel wouldn't be in town much longer because if she was, he'd go crazy. He hadn't wanted to be in charge of her welfare, but he'd promised Tony and now here he was practically begging her to let him give her a ride. How had this happened?

Once they had pulled onto the road, Jeff turned to her and asked "Why do you make it so difficult to help you?"

"Why do you think I need help?" She shot back. "Because Tony called you and told you that his feeble-minded sister was on the loose and needed a keeper. And you're a nice and honorable kind of guy so you end up feeling responsible for me."

"You'd rather be with a guy that isn't nice or honorable?"

"No, I'm saying that it's insulting to be treated like a total idiot all the time. To be foisted on people as a burden rather than introduced as a potential friend."

She turned away then, but Jeff saw a tear slip down her cheek first.

“I know that Tony has a point when he says I’ve been isolated from the world because of taking care of Mom, but I deserve the same chance to be independent as any eighteen year old—even if I’m twenty-two.”

Jeff was silent for a minute thinking about what she’d said. “You’re right,” he finally admitted. “I won’t be your keeper any more. But I’d like to be your friend.”

Her face lit up when he said that. “Thank you, Jeff. I accept.”

She’d gone from anger to hurt to happiness in less than three minutes; she was one woman who was hard to keep up with.

But something made him want to try.