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HATCHER



A Wish and a Prayer

Excerpt

Prologue

Idaho, 1897

Having four legs and claws had its benefits, Angel Emeline decided as she scratched a hard-to-reach spot with her hind leg. But she would never admit it to Archie. If she did, the Archangel in Charge of Prayer Assistance might always give her this sort of assignment. And next time, he might send her into a less desirable creature than the noble cat.

When the itch was gone at last, Angel Emeline straightened and looked about her, wanting to get acquainted with her surroundings. The small house was simple, attractive, and tidy. She'd have expected nothing less from Miss Felicity Blessing of Appleton, Idaho.

Felicity was a dressmaker, a woman of thirty, never married. She'd lived in this house since the day she was born and had cared for her father—a drinker of strong spirits—after losing her mother eighteen years ago. The task had become particularly difficult after Samuel Blessing, drunk as usual, fell from a moving wagon, crippling his right leg and leaving him mean and bitter, a bitterness he'd taken out on his daughter until the day he died. That was the sum of what Angel Emeline had learned about Miss Felicity Blessing before arriving on earth in answer to her prayers.

The door opened, allowing golden sunlight to spill across the rag rug seconds before the subject of Angel Emeline's thoughts entered the house. Felicity's mahogany-colored hair was pulled back from her face in a severe twist and was topped with a straw hat that had nary a speck of decoration. Her tan and brown linen shirtwaist and skirt were equally plain and dull. Not even a bit of lace to lessen the severity.

My, my, Miss Blessing. However am I to help you if you don't help yourself?

For a moment, Angel Emeline wondered if this was a job too big for an Angel, Third Grade, to handle. But handle it she must if she wanted her promotion.

With a mental nod, she rose, arched her back, and meowed for attention.

Chapter 1

Felicity pulled the long hat pin from her bonnet as she glanced at the white cat standing on the sofa.

"Hello, Angel. Are you hungry?"

She dropped her straw hat onto the table near the door, then crossed the room and lifted the feline into her arms, rubbing her cheek against Angel's long, soft coat.

"Mrs. Babcock gave me two more orders today. The work will pay enough to see us through the month." A sigh escaped her. "But I don't suppose you worry about such things, do you? It must be nice not to have a worry in the world."

She stroked the cat, remembering how empty her house had seemed before Angel came calling at her back door, a tiny, miserable-looking kitten with a matted coat and a voracious appetite. Felicity hadn't been as lonely since that stormy night over a year ago.

Not *as* lonely ... but still lonely.

With another sigh, she set the cat on the floor and walked into the kitchen where she put the kettle on for tea.

Long ago, when she'd still believed wishes could come true, she'd wished for someone to talk to, someone who could talk back once in a while, someone to dispel the silence. Her throat tightened. Once, when she'd still believed in answered prayers, she'd prayed for someone to love her, someone she could love in return.

Angel brushed up against her skirts. Felicity smiled sadly as she glanced down. "You've always loved me, haven't you, pet?" Then she frowned.

Self-pity was most unbecoming, and it wasn't like her to give in to it. She'd chosen to be the mistress of her own life. She hadn't wanted to marry. After her father died, she hadn't wanted to give up her newfound freedom. She liked making her own decisions. Angel was all the family she needed.

And it wasn't as if Felicity had never had an opportunity to marry. She'd received a few proposals over the years. Women were at a premium in these parts, and even a plain-faced one like Felicity was desirable to a widower with a cold bed and half-a-dozen children who needed tending.

"Don't marry for any reason but love, Felicity." It had been eighteen years since her mother spoke those words to her, but it seemed like only yesterday. *"Better to be an old maid than to marry for less than love."*

The kettle began to whistle, intruding on her unhappy memories.

"I won't feel sorry for myself," she muttered as she reached for the delicate china cup she used when she was blue. "I won't."

"Reow."

Once again, she glanced down. Angel sat and cocked her head to one side, as if questioning her mistress. A laugh rose in Felicity's throat. So this was what she'd come to. Talking to her cat while puttering around the kitchen. There was no doubt about it.

She *was* an old maid.

* * *

Prescott Jones rode his buckskin gelding along the wide, dusty main street of Appleton. It was an ordinary Western town—two churches, a mercantile, red-brick bank, one saloon, dress shop, a doctor, small schoolhouse. Just about everything the citizens of a town might need. Even its own newspaper.

But one thing was missing, especially for a place surrounded by acre upon acre of fruit orchards. A cannery.

Prescott was there to rectify that omission.

He pulled on the reins when he saw the small shingle announcing his destination: Walter L. Johnson, Attorney-at-Law. He swung down from the saddle, wrapped the reins around the hitching post, then stepped onto the boardwalk.

Once more he glanced down the length of the town. He liked what he saw. There was potential for growth here, potential for a good life if a person was willing to work for it. It was a place where a man could put down roots, take a wife, start a family. To Prescott, nothing sounded better. He'd been alone too long. He wanted to belong—to some place and to someone.

Without further hesitation, he opened the door to the office and stepped inside.

His boyhood friend stared down at his desk, squinting through thick glasses at a sheet of white paper filled with small print. The past twenty-five years hadn't changed Walt much. He was still slight and wiry, just as he'd been as a boy at the orphanage. Even the familiar smattering of freckles over the bridge of his nose was the same. The only sign of his real age of thirty-five was the touch of gray at his temples.

"I'll be with you in a moment," Walt said, still studying the papers before him.

"No hurry. I'm here to stay."

Walt glanced up, and at the moment of recognition, his mouth curved into a welcoming smile. "Prescott! I wasn't expecting you for another week." He rose from his chair and stepped around the desk.

They clasped upper arms as they stared at one another, finding the boys they remembered behind the faces of the men they'd become. The years melted away, and memories of Prescott's childhood flickered through his head.

"It's good to see you, Pres. Been a long time."

"Too long."

"I'm glad you decided to come."

"So am I." He released his grip on Walt's arms, then removed his dusty Stetson and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Raking his fingers through his hair, he asked, "Have you bought the property?"

"Most of it."

Prescott raised an eyebrow in question.

His friend motioned to another chair. "Sit down. I'll tell you all about it." Walt moved around his desk. When they were both seated, he continued, "I've heard from the railroad. They're close to making a decision. I think they'll bring the spur this way regardless, but a

cannery will clinch the deal. They won't have to worry about all that fruit spoiling if anything slows down delivery to markets."

Walt wasn't saying anything Prescott didn't already know. "And the property?"

"I found the perfect location on the far end of town, like I told you in my last letter." Walt motioned with his hand toward the west. "I've been able to buy all the lots we'll need ... except one. There's a house on it, and the woman who lives there refuses to sell." He frowned. "Problem is, it's smack in the middle of the other lots. I'm afraid I made a mistake in buying the other property before getting Miss Blessing's agreement, but I was afraid word would get out about the railroad and prices would go up beyond what we could afford. If that happened, we'd be in worse shape than we are now."

Prescott closed his eyes for a moment. Had he come all this way to fail? He set his jaw. No. He *wasn't* going to fail.

He met Walt's gaze. "What's the woman's reason for not selling?"

"I don't know. I made her a good offer. The best one of all because there's a house and a deep well on the land. Of course, we'll tear down the house, but having that well would save us plenty before we're through. But she won't even talk about selling." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Prescott. I'd hoped to have the matter cleared up before you got here."

"Maybe she's holding out, thinking we'll pay her more than the land's worth."

"I don't think so. She doesn't seem the type. Keeps to herself most of the time. Except for Sundays when she goes to church or when she delivers her sewing to the dress shop, I've hardly seen her leave that house of hers. I heard she was born there, and she must intend to die there, too."

Prescott rose to his feet, then turned and reached for his hat. "I think I'd better have a talk with this Miss—" He looked over his shoulder. "What did you say her name is?"

"Blessing. Felicity Blessing."

"Miss Felicity Blessing." He envisioned her—petite, white-haired, probably a little hard of hearing. Surely he could reason with her, help her see that selling her home and land would benefit her. He set his hat on his head. "I'll convince her to sell." He turned and walked toward the door.

"Good luck," Walt called after him, but the tone of his voice said he didn't hold out much hope for Prescott's success.

* * *

Angel Emeline sat on the window ledge and stared out at the town. Why hadn't she obtained more information from Archie? Like who it was Felicity Blessing needed to find. She was convinced Archie had a particular human in mind. If she hadn't been in such a hurry to get here...

No doubt, Archie had noted her failure to do proper advance preparation, too. Nothing got by him. Nothing.

She glanced toward Felicity who sat in her straight-backed chair near the other window, sewing a blue dress. The color would have been splendid on Felicity, much better than the tan

blouse and dull brown skirt she wore now. But, of course, the blue dress was for some other woman.

How was Angel Emeline to answer Felicity's prayers when the woman tried to convince herself she was content with her life as it was? It didn't take an angel to see she was lonely.

And that was why Angel Emeline was here. To help answer a secret prayer, a silent prayer that was heartfelt and true, even though not acknowledged.

Angel Emeline returned her gaze to the window, wondering again how best to help. Felicity made no efforts to change her life. She spent her days cleaning her little house and sewing dresses for other women. If she didn't want to be alone—if she wanted love, marriage and children—shouldn't she go where she might meet eligible men? Surely Felicity realized a man wasn't going to walk right up to her door and knock.

And that was the precise moment Angel Emeline saw the answer to Felicity's prayer stride into view.

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