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HATCHER



# Autumn's Angel

*A Bride for All Seasons*

## Prologue

*September 10, 1870*

Beyond the window of the passenger car, the plains of western Nebraska lay flat, lifeless, empty. Dawn had begun to lighten the sky from black to pewter. The night was nearly over, but Luvena hadn't slept a wink, even though exhaustion permeated every fiber of her body. And after seemingly endless days of travel, she was certain she looked as terrible as she felt—wrinkled, gritty, and bedraggled.

Elsie, her eight-year-old niece, shifted from left side to right, her head resting in Luvena's lap. Luvena smiled as she brushed unruly hair back from the child's face. She envied the girl. Luvena had been like that as a child, able to sleep anytime, anywhere. But no more. Not with so many responsibilities weighing on her shoulders.

Her gaze shifted to the seat opposite her where Elsie's older brother and sister also slumbered. Lying lengthwise, Ethan, age ten, took up most of the seat, his feet hanging off the edge into the aisle. Merry, the eldest of the siblings at fourteen, was squeezed up against the wall of the coach, her head and shoulder pressed against the sooty window in the little space left for her by her brother.

Looking at the children, her heart broke once again over all they'd lost, over the end of their dreams—and over the end of her own, too. Once upon a time, she'd dreamed of becoming an opera singer. A girlish, unrealistic dream, most likely, but one she'd relished. Her vocal teacher had declared Luvena possessed the voice of an angel and promised that she would be a sensation if ever she performed on the stage in New York City or the capitals of Europe. Luvena had chosen to believe her—for a time. That was before her family was plunged into disgrace. These

days, she rarely sang where anyone might hear and compliment her. Not even in church. It hurt too much.

Drawing a deep breath, she pushed such thoughts away. She had no time for them. In another twenty-four hours, she and her little brood of orphans would disembark in Promontory, Utah. From there they had three or four grueling days of travel by stagecoach to Boise City, the capital of Idaho Territory. And there, at last, she would meet the man she was to marry. The man who would provide a home and security for the children of her sister.

*Please, God, let it be a good home. A happy home.*

She glanced down at the letter in her hand. How often had she read it since leaving Massachusetts? Ten times. Twenty. Perhaps more. She could almost recite it from memory. As for the photograph he'd sent—she looked at it again—it was small and grainy, but Mr. Birch appeared clean and respectable. No beard or mustache. He wasn't too old, either. Thirty-one to her twenty-three years. And although he didn't smile in the photograph, neither did he look disagreeable.

*As long as he is good to me and kind to the children, as long as he is a Christian and has integrity, it doesn't matter who he is or where he lives or what he looks like. I'm not marrying for love. I'm marrying because it's the practical thing to do. The same reason hundreds of other women choose to travel west and marry complete strangers. People have been arranging marriages since almost the beginning of time. It will be all right. It will.*

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the back of the seat, and began to hum a favorite hymn, hoping the inspiring lyrics would help drive away her doubts.

*Please let it be all right.*

## Chapter 1

Clay Birch took the last bite of his lunch and pushed the empty plate away from the edge of the table. A quick glance at his pocket watch confirmed the stage was running late.

He shouldn't have come down to Boise to meet Miss Abbott. There was so much work to be done back in Grand Coeur. He should have sent her more money and let her come all the way to him by coach. But this had seemed a little more courteous to his future bride. More civilized. He needed to make a good first impression *before* she saw her new home. Grand Coeur would be somewhat of a shock to a woman from Boston. The town wasn't yet a decade old, and it still bore all the markings of its gold camp beginnings.

He looked at the photograph he'd received from his intended and wondered again why a young woman as beautiful as Luvena Abbott needed to find a husband through the *Hitching Post*

*Mail-Order Bride Catalogue*. It seemed to him that men in the East should have been lining up to propose to her. Even if the photograph had been kind to her, she would still be comely enough for any man he knew.

But her appearance wasn't her most important asset. He'd wanted a wife who was young and strong, someone willing to work hard, someone with a keen mind and good business sense. He'd made it clear in his application that he had no interest in widows with children. Since the end of the war, the country was crawling with widows and their fatherless children, and he didn't want or need another man's offspring complicating his life. He wasn't cut out to be a stepfather. Besides, Grand Coeur wasn't an ideal place for kids. Not yet. There wasn't even a schoolhouse. No, what he needed was a woman who would be as focused as Clay himself on making the Grand Coeur Opera House the best venue of culture and entertainment west of the Rocky Mountains. And since Miss Luvena Abbott had experience in the management of an opera house, she had been the logical choice among the few responses he'd received to his advertisement.

Of course—he grinned at the thought—he didn't *object* that she was easy on the eyes. He supposed it didn't hurt for a man to enjoy looking at his wife.

Clay heard the thunder of horses' hooves and the creak and rattle of the coach moments before the stage rolled past the restaurant's window. He rose, left payment for his lunch on the table, and hurried outside. With long strides, he crossed the street, thankful it had been warm and dry for weeks. Better the excessive dust than ankle-deep mud. He reached the boardwalk outside the Wells Fargo office before the driver hopped down from his perch and opened the door for the passengers.

He drew a deep breath, feeling his gut churn with nervous anticipation. This was it. For better or worse, he was about to meet his bride.

First out the door of the coach was a boy with sandy-colored hair and a scowl for anyone who met his gaze. He looked like he wanted to punch somebody. Anybody. Next came a girl with the same color hair; she was perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age. Wrong coloring and wrong age for Miss Abbott. The girl turned and helped an even younger girl to the ground. They were without a doubt sisters to the boy. The younger girl, who clutched a doll to her chest, had a face streaked with tears.

"Ethan," the older girl said, "get out of the street. Hurry up." She held her little sister's hand and stepped onto the boardwalk a short distance away from Clay.

He felt sorry for her. He understood what it was like to be the oldest sibling in charge of younger ones. Seven years had separated him from Jacob, the first of his four half-brothers. When his brothers were little, Clay had often been called upon by his mother to help feed or bathe or tuck one boy or another into bed. He'd loved them, but that didn't mean he'd loved acting as their nursemaid. Sometimes they'd made him so mad he'd—

Movement in the coach doorway drew his attention. A woman leaned forward so that all he saw at first was the crown of a gray bonnet adorned with a long, white feather. But when she straightened, he knew this was Luvena Abbott. The photograph hadn't lied.

Her hair was blue-black, like the wings of a raven, her complexion pale and flawless. Her eyes were deep pools of brown. She was more petite than he'd expected. From where he stood, he guessed the top of her head would barely be as high as his shoulders, even with shoes on. His hands could encircle her waist, he was sure.

Before moving away from the coach, she looked at the three children now standing on the boardwalk. Her expression revealed exasperation, and seeing it made him grin. After traveling for hours or days with those kids in the close confines of the coach, she might just be thankful for a quiet wagon ride with just the two of them. He was looking forward to that himself.

Her gaze shifted, and he saw that she recognized him from his photograph as well.

Pulling off his hat, he stepped forward. "Miss Abbott?" He made it a question, even though he knew the answer.

"Yes. And you are Mr. Birch, I see."

"I am, indeed. Welcome to Idaho Territory. I hope the journey wasn't too difficult."

"Difficult enough. I'm grateful to be here at last." She stepped onto the boardwalk, her gloved fingers brushing at her skirt. As if that would help rid it of the accumulated dust.

He'd been right about her height. The top of her head, not counting the hat, didn't quite reach his shoulders. He wondered if she would tip the scales at a hundred pounds. Possibly, but only just. "I take it you arranged for your larger trunks and furniture to be shipped to Grand Coeur, as we discussed."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then, let's get whatever you brought with you and put it in my wagon." He indicated the borrowed farm vehicle across the street. "We want to get to Grand Coeur before it's too late in the day. I'd like you to see the town at its best." That was a careful way of saying he wanted to get there before the saloons got too full and their customers got too rowdy.

Luvena turned toward the stagecoach and pointed toward the luggage that the Wells Fargo driver and station agent were unloading. "Those two smaller trunks there and those two carpetbags are ours."

*Ours.* He liked that she said it that way, even if she hadn't traveled light. Good thing he'd borrowed a wagon instead of a buggy. Still, she'd said *ours* instead of *mine*, and he knew they were going to get along. It was a good start for their union.

He stepped off the boardwalk, ready to claim the identified luggage.

Then he heard Luvena Abbott say, "Children, we're going in that wagon over there. Ethan, take Elsie's other hand and you all get settled in the back of it. Mr. Birch wants to be on our way

without delay. We'll be to our new home soon. This is the final part of the trip."

Despite the warmth of the day, Clay went cold all over.

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Luvena waited until she was certain the children were headed to the right vehicle before she returned her attention to Clay Birch. She found him looking at her with what she could only call a stupefied expression. "Is something amiss, Mr. Birch?"

His gaze flicked to the opposite side of the street and back to her. "Are those children with *you*?"

Oh, for goodness' sake. She was so exhausted she'd completely forgotten her manners. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me, Mr. Birch. I should have introduced them." She glanced across the street again. "Of course, you can tell which one is Ethan since he's the only boy. Esmeralda is the oldest girl. We call her Merry. Elspeth is the youngest, and she is called Elsie. But I'm sure I told you that already."

"Told me what?"

"What everyone calls the girls."

He shook his head slowly.

Was he, perhaps, not very bright?

"Miss Abbott?"

"Yes."

"Not Mrs.? You've never been married. Right?"

"Of course not." She rubbed the crease between her eyebrows, wishing he would simply get their luggage so they could be on their way. She was tired, and her exhaustion worsened by the moment.

He frowned at her, looking more like the unsmiling photograph he'd sent her than he had moments before. "Then who do those children belong to?"

"Mr. Birch, I don't understand you. These are the children of Oliver and Loretta Browne, my sister and her husband. And they belong with me, of course. Where else would they go?"

"To their parents might be a good idea."

She sucked in a breath. Was he beyond dense? Was he cruel too? Oh, she hadn't expected this. "You know very well they have no parents or grandparents still living. I am their family now. Their only family." She became aware that others had stopped what they were doing to stare at them. Heat rose in her cheeks. "Please, sir. May we go?"

Anger flashed in his blue eyes as he managed to stuff a carpetbag under each arm and grab a trunk handle with each hand. Then he marched across the street and delivered them into the

back of the wagon where the children were now seated. She hurried after him, thinking he would assist her up to the wagon seat. Instead, he turned on her, his temper checked but obvious.

“What sort of game are you playing, Miss Abbott?”

She motioned with her head, then led him away from the children, stopping near the team of horses. “I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Yes, you do. I made it clear in my first letter that I was not interested in marrying a widow with children. Surely you must have understood that I meant any woman with children, even those who aren’t her own. Why else would you fail to mention that you were the guardian of three orphans.”

She drew back from him. “That is untrue.”

“Untrue?” He whipped off his hat and raked his fingers through his hair, a gesture of frustration if ever she’d seen one. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m simply confused. If you didn’t know about the children, why did you send the money for their passage on the train and stagecoach in addition to mine?”

“I can assure you, I did not pay for them to come with you.”

“But you did! I couldn’t have managed the expense without the funds you sent.” She opened her handbag and withdrew the letter that had been folded and unfolded countless times. “Here is your last letter. Here is where you told me when and how to travel.” She pointed at the paragraph. “Right there. As plain as day.”

He set his hat on his head again before taking the stationery from her and perusing the words on the page. When he looked up, the anger was still in his eyes, but it didn’t feel as personal. She saw him draw a long, deep breath. “Miss Abbott, it seems you and I have been the object of some sort of hoax. This letter isn’t in my hand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t write it.”

“But ... we exchanged photographs. You asked me to marry you.”

“Yes.” He shook his head. “I wrote several letters to you. I sent you my photograph. I did offer marriage, and I did send money for your fare. But I didn’t say I wanted you to bring children with you. That wasn’t part of my offer.”

Luvana felt her knees go weak and her head go light, and before she could will either sensation to go away, she crumpled forward.