



CHAPTER 1

NEBRASKA

SEPTEMBER 1875

For a moment that dawn, everything seemed completely perfect. The temperature was just right, chilly but not cold. The routine aroma of coffee suggested that all was well in the world—that Pa was up and preparing to face the day.

Angellyn snuggled down in her quilt and tried to go back to sleep, but then the awful truth seeped into her thoughts. She tried to push the memories aside, but they surged through her mind too fast, like water spilling over a flooded dam.

Yesterday was to have been her wedding day. She was to be Mrs. Cameron Johnson. At twenty-eight, Angel thought Cam was probably her last chance at romance since the war had killed off so many of the men she'd grown up with. And while she hadn't been all that much in love with him, Cam had been someone with whom she thought she could make a future and eventually love.

But Cam had other ideas. While Angel was dressed in bridal white, waiting for her cue to join her father at the back of the church, Cam was already miles away with another woman. A much younger woman. He'd left a note that his best man had

been instructed to bring two minutes before the ceremony. He didn't want to give anyone time enough to come after him. Granny Duran was the one to bring it to Angel. The look on her face left Angel no doubt the news wasn't good.

Without any real explanation, Cam penned his farewell, letting Angel know that he'd found someone else and hadn't the courage to tell Angel face-to-face that he was breaking off their engagement.

The embarrassment of having her father go out and let everyone know that the wedding had been canceled was almost more than Angel could bear. It had been hard enough being the one and only spinster of their small Nebraska town, but now this. She pulled the covers over her head with no plan to ever leave her bed again.

Angel hadn't thought going back to sleep even possible, but soon enough found herself dreaming of an open field of new spring grass. She stretched out on the ground as she often loved to do and stared up at the skies. Large white clouds drifted across the expanse, and Angel found it impossible to keep her eyes open. As she lay there, everything seemed so lovely. She was at peace, and it felt so wonderful.

Then she heard someone call her name. Not her full name, but one reserved for family.

"Angel, fear not. You will have a husband by Christmas."

The words caused Angel to come awake immediately. She sat straight up in bed and glanced around the room for the source of the voice. She was alone, and the sun was now streaming in through her window where what seemed only moments ago had barely been light.

She threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. For a moment, she continued to glance around the room as if she might see the person who had spoken, but there was no one there.

The words echoed in her head. *“Angel, fear not. You will have a husband by Christmas.”*

Angel shook her head. “It’s the twentieth of September. How can I possibly have a husband by Christmas? I mean I know God can do anything He wants, but . . .” She sighed. It was a dream and nothing more. “Wait until I tell Granny.”

Granny Duran was their closest neighbor, and while not at all related, she had taken on the role of grandmother to Angel and her brother. She lived on the small farm next to the Lewises’ sheep farm with her husband, John Quincy Duran, who still did his best to keep his land planted in wheat despite his rheumatism and lumbago.

These days, Angel spent more time at Granny’s than at home. She did what she could to help the older couple with some of the physical chores that were starting to be a problem. Both were over seventy, and there was great concern about them living through another winter unharmed by the cold and snows. But of course they wouldn’t admit this to anyone. John Quincy was much too proud to admit he needed help.

Given the situation Cam had put her in, Angel figured her winter would be best spent helping the older couple. After all, there was no one else who really needed her like they did. Her father and oldest brother, Mark, shared ownership of the farm. Mark and his family lived at the house, and Mark’s wife, Ruth, was more than capable of keeping her home and children in order. Recently they had purchased some land next door, and their plans were to double the size of their flock of merino sheep.

Angel’s nephews Jacob and Jason were quickly coming of age and were already great help to their father and grandfather. Mark and Ruth’s two daughters, Sarah and Sharon, ages thirteen and twelve, were their mother’s constant shadows. And while Angel had once been quite useful to Ruth in helping with

the children, Ruth had very little need of Angel now. In fact, at times Angel felt very much in the way. It was one of the reasons she had agreed to marry Cam. Her heart's desire was to start a family of her own. Unfortunately, that hadn't worked out.

Making her way to Granny and John Quincy's small two-story farmhouse, Angel gave considerable thought to suggesting she move in with the couple for the winter. She could help with housework and laundry, as well as cooking and animal chores. No one would even miss her at home. When she and Cam had talked about the future, they had plans to live in town, where Cam would be close enough to walk to his railroad job. But of course, none of that mattered now. Cam was long gone.

The arrangement with Granny and John Quincy was that their home was Angel's too. She didn't bother to knock as she made her way into the house through the back door. This opened into the kitchen, and there she found Granny already bent over the stove, loading wood.

"Let me do that for you," Angel said, grabbing some of the slender split pieces of cottonwood.

Granny Duran straightened with a hand to her back. "It's gonna come a rain. I feel it in my bones."

Angel continued to put wood in the fire. "Are you about to do some baking?"

"Planned to. Got bread to make." She motioned to the counter, where a dish towel concealed the contents below.

"I'll help." Angel closed the door on the stove and turned to Granny. "Maybe I can make a pie for John Quincy." Even though the man was more than forty years her senior, she'd always called him John Quincy like most everyone else. It was just the way the older man preferred it.

"He'd like that for sure. Lots of apples. I was figuring to get some canned."

“I can help with that too. Fact is, I was thinking on a plan for winter. Maybe I could come and stay with you two. Things are pretty crowded at our place.”

“We’d sure have you here in a heartbeat, child. Goodness knows it’s getting hard for us to keep up with everything. I think this may be our last year here. John Quincy can’t be responsible for planting another year. We’ve talked of hiring someone to tend it for us and share the crop profits.”

“Why not ask Vincent to come back?” Angel’s reference to the grandson Granny and John Quincy had raised brought a look of disapproval.

“He’s got enough pain and misery. Doesn’t need to feel obligated to help us. Wyoming was a dream he shared with his wife, one that he hopes to pass on to his children.”

“Well, we should pray about it.” Angel pulled on an apron and went to where the bread was rising. She pulled the dish towel from atop four loaf pans. “Say, I have to tell you something funny.”

Granny gave her a sympathetic smile. “Are you gonna just avoid talking about what happened yesterday?”

Angel shook her head. “No, but I didn’t see any reason to dwell on it. Cam was a cad, and I’m sorry to have so thoroughly misjudged him. It was never a great love, as you know full well. Goodness, Granny, you warned me.”

“I just didn’t want you marrying someone you really didn’t know. I’m not against arranged marriages or even ones of convenience when folks know each other.”

“I agree. I’m sure it’s easier to fall in love with someone you know than with a stranger.”

“And someday you will fall in love and have a great time of it, Angellyn. That is my prayer for you.”

“Well, maybe it’ll still happen. Right now, I’m embarrassed

by the whole thing. If I were a wealthy woman, I think I'd get on board the train and go as far away from here as possible. Set up housekeeping miles from this place and settle myself on the notion that God has called me to be alone. That way I'd never have to explain what happened to anyone.

"But here's that funny thing I wanted to tell you, Granny. I was asleep in my bed one minute, and the next I heard this strange voice telling me, 'Angel, fear not. You will have a husband by Christmas.' Scared me to pieces. I jumped up out of bed thinking someone had snuck into my room. Maybe one of Mark's boys playing a trick on me. But it wasn't. What do you think of that?" Angel started carrying the pans of dough to the stove.

When Granny said nothing, Angel glanced up before opening the oven door. The look on Granny's face was one of utter surprise.

"What's wrong, Granny?" Angel turned her attention back to the bread and put the loaf pans into the oven, then returned for the last two. Still Granny said nothing.

When the bread was secured, Angel checked the time. It was exactly eight thirty. "These should be ready at the top of the hour. Now tell me why my comment has you so stumped."

"I'm not stumped, child. I'm thinking the Lord Himself has spoken."

"And said what?" Angel asked, laughing.

"That He plans to have a husband for you by Christmas. And I think I know exactly who it is that He has in mind."

Angel could see that Granny was serious. "What are you saying?"

Granny motioned Angel to follow her into the front room. Granny went to her writing desk and pulled out an envelope. She took a letter from inside and looked at Angel.

“Let me read you something.” She unfolded the pages and cleared her throat. “Granny, the truth is I need a wife. I need her by Christmas.”

It was Angel’s turn to be surprised. “Who wrote that?”

“Vincent.”

Angel took a seat and considered the words Granny had said. Vincent Duran was Granny’s only grandson. His folks had been killed when he was young, and Granny and John Quincy had raised him. Vincent was best friends with Angel’s brothers, Mark and Sam. Angel considered him a friend, as well.

Vincent had been a part of her entire life. He was ten years older than she was and had married some years earlier. The guys had another friend, Zed Martin, whose sister had caught Vincent’s attention. Elsa had been everything Angel wasn’t. Elsa was a dark-haired beauty with deep brown eyes, while Angel was blond and blue-eyed. Elsa had been tall and shapely where Angel was short and rather pudgy, at least in her teen years. Everyone had thought Elsa the most beautiful woman in the entire state, and even Mark had tried to court her. But it was Vincent who captured her heart.

“You know Elsa died last February. The children all took measles, and she caught them herself. She was expecting their fourth child in just a few months.” Granny looked up and shook her head. “The two oldest made it through, but little Paul and Elsa were too weak. They passed within days of each other.”

“I remember. It made me so sad. I’ve often prayed for Vincent and his children. That’s why I mentioned asking him to come here and help you.”

Granny didn’t seem to hear her. “Benjamin is nine and Ava seven. It’s a bad age to lose a mother . . . not that there is ever a good age.” Granny looked back at the letter. “Vincent asked me to help him find a wife . . . one who could relocate to the

Wyoming Territory immediately. One who loved children and preferably knew about—”

“Sheep,” Angel spoke before Granny could finish.

Vincent had learned all about sheep farming from her father and grandfather. He had trained with her brothers since he’d been about thirteen. That was why Vincent was such a constant part of her life. She had never really known a time when he wasn’t around.

“Oh, Granny . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“I think the Lord has spoken, Angel. I think you’re to marry Vincent. The two of you already know each other and share many common memories. You were close friends, and that’s so important in a marriage. Vincent already trusts you and knows that you’re capable and worthy of his children.”

Angel felt as though someone had taken the air from her lungs. She forced herself to focus on a deep breath, but it was slow coming. Was this indeed what God had planned? She had once fancied herself in love with Vincent. Of course, she’d been quite young . . . maybe fifteen or so. Elsa had been a couple of years older than Angel and was already looking to find a husband. Unfortunately, she chose the one Angel had been considering as well, and from that time on, Angel had pushed aside her fondness for Vincent Duran.

“Oh, Angellyn, I think your dream was a sign from God. It never came to mind yesterday when we learned what Cam had done, but now it seems certain to me.”

“What if Vincent doesn’t want to marry me? I mean, we are friends, that much is true. But maybe he would feel strange about marrying a friend.”

“Nonsense.” Granny folded the letter and stuffed it back in the envelope. “Angel, I truly believe this is the answer to Vincent’s needs and yours. You want to leave this area and the embarrass-

ment Cam caused you. You are looking for a man to marry and raise a family with. You were ready to wed Cam without love, and he was most undeserving. Why not consider Vincent, who is very deserving of love? You're both bearing burdens of hurt and loss. You could help each other to overcome this. And my goodness, those children need a mother. They are the sweetest children, and I have feared this loss would make them bitter. You are the very kind of mother they need—a woman strong in faith.”

“I know very little about children, Granny. I want to be a mother one day, but I don't know how to take on children already half raised. Besides, what will you do if I go away?”

“God will show you what to do. Just as He'll show us what we need to do. We've been doing fine. Look, let's pray about it.” Granny held out her hand to Angel. “Pray and consider it for three days. If you are not convinced by then, I won't mention it again.”

Angel came and knelt beside Granny. The very idea of leaving the area and going west was appealing. But the thought of helping a grieving man and his children was terrifying. She would always live in the shadow of Elsa Duran. She already felt unworthy of love and affection. How could she marry herself to a man who might never be able to love her?



Vincent Duran looked at the slightly burnt eggs and shrugged. “Breakfast is on,” he told his nine-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. “It's a little scorched, but we can make do.”

He dished up eggs for each of them, trying to give them the less burned portions. He dumped the rest onto his own plate, then put the cast-iron skillet aside and took a seat at the table. He handed them each a piece of toast that he'd managed to cook to a golden-brown perfection and then folded his hands.

“Let’s say grace.”

“Do we have to?” Benjamin asked.

Vincent knew the boy had struggled with God since losing his mother. It seemed no matter how much he had tried to talk to Benjamin, he still blamed God for taking his mother away.

“We do,” he murmured, then closed his eyes. “Father, for what You have provided, we are grateful. Even if we don’t always understand why You allow the things You do, we know that there are reasons. We ask a blessing on this food, this farm, and family. Amen.”

He looked up to find his children staring at him as if he’d said something appalling. He wished he could convince them that God was still a loving Father—a wonderful and generous God who would provide for them in every way. It was hard, however, to even say those words when Vincent felt just as cheated as they did.

For the last seven months, they had all struggled to go on living after Elsa, the baby, and little Paul’s deaths. At the last Christmas, they had all been so excited. The new baby would come in a few months, and they’d had a profitable year with the sheep. Christmas was a merry celebration.

By the end of January, everything had changed. Benjamin and Ava took sick at the same time. Measles spread like wildfire in Cheyenne. It was never completely clear as to how they’d caught them. Their attendance at church was sporadic given the distance into town, and Christmas services were the last they’d been there. Vincent and his family had gone into Cheyenne in the middle of January for supplies, and that’s when Elsa figured they’d been exposed. The doctor figured it that way too.

Elsa couldn’t remember if she’d had measles as a child, but Vincent knew he had and wasn’t concerned for his own health.

He remembered Elsa nursing Benjamin and Ava with tender care and did what he could to share the burden so that she, in her delicate condition, could rest. When Paul grew ill, he was much worse than the others. From the start, it was clear that things weren't going well. His fever ran higher, and his consciousness waned. Vincent had gone for the doctor after two days of watching his son deteriorate. By then, Elsa had come down sick as well. She was more than a little worried. Everyone knew measles could cause miscarriage, and she was terrified for their unborn child.

By the time Vincent returned with the doctor in tow, Elsa had collapsed, and Paul was near death. The doctor was there when the life went out of their three-year-old son. Elsa had been inconsolable, and Vincent delayed telling Ava and Benjamin. Within twenty-four hours, it wasn't only Paul's death he had to break to his children. Losing his wife, son, and unborn child had left Vincent in a stupor for weeks afterward. Had Elsa's aunt Mary not heard about the situation from Granny and come to help, they might have all perished from sorrow.

"I want you children to work on your reading primer like you did with Aunt Mary. I'll help you when I can check in. There's food to eat for your lunch, and it's warm enough you don't need to keep the stove going, Benjamin. Just work together, and I'll be back and forth. I have to see to the animals."

"I don't want to stay here," Benjamin protested. "Can't I come and help you?"

"I need you to watch over Ava. What if a snake gets in the house? You're the one who can keep her safe when I'm not around. Since Aunt Mary had to leave, we've only got each other to count on."

Ava looked up from her plate. "I don't like snakes."

"I know." Vincent gave her a smile. "I'm not real fond of

them myself. Do as I ask, and I'll be able to finish up quickly and come back to the house to be with you."

"Are we gonna get another aunt to come and stay with us?" Benjamin's tone wasn't one of hope, but more of resignation.

"No. That's something I need to talk to you children about. I've asked Granny Duran to help us. She's going to find someone who can come and live with us permanently."

"What's *permanently*?" Ava asked.

"It means forever," Benjamin told her. He looked at Vincent with a frown. "Do you mean another mother?"

Vincent knew the news would not be well received by his son. "Yes. I mean to take a new wife. Someone who can be a mother to you children. We'll be a family again."

Benjamin jumped up from the table, his food only half eaten. "I don't want another mother. I want my mama back!" He ran from the table and up the stairs to no doubt seek solace in his room.

Ava met her father's gaze. "What's our new mother's name?" Vincent shrugged. "I have no idea."



CHAPTER 2

By October it was quite evident to Vincent that he needed to make a trip into Cheyenne for winter supplies. If Elsa had been alive, she would have reminded him. She would have presented him with a list of all the things they needed to get through the winter, on the chance that the weather turned bad and stayed that way, preventing them from getting into town.

With Elsa gone, Vincent found the job of keeping track of things to be almost impossible. He only learned yesterday that Ava's shoes no longer fit. They definitely had to get her a sturdy pair of boots for winter. Benjamin also had needs. All of his pants were a size, maybe two sizes, too small. He probably needed new boots as well. Vincent had no idea if there would be enough money for everything. They'd have to start their trip with a visit to the bank.

And that was exactly where he went first when he pulled into Cheyenne's city limits. He was relieved to find that there was still a decent balance in his account. He'd forgotten about his decision to sell off those older wethers from the flock. The extra money would come in handy with the children having so many unexpected needs.

They left the wagon at the feed and hardware store, as well

as a list of what Vincent needed for the farm. They were to load up everything while Vincent shopped with his children and then took them to lunch. None of them had had a decent meal since Aunt Mary had left two months ago. He had tried to hire a cook and housekeeper, but no one seemed to want to live on a sheep farm nearly ten miles from town.

Vincent settled the children at a table in one of the restaurants near the train depot and motioned the waitress to the table.

“Yes, sir?” she asked, smiling.

“I’d like black coffee, and some milk for the children. I saw the sign you had out front advertising beef stew. Bring us each a bowl, please. We’re kind of in a hurry.”

“Of course. I’ll be right back.”

She hurried to the kitchen and returned almost immediately with their drinks. Vincent took a long draw on the steaming liquid. The children did likewise with their milk. It was a matter of minutes before the young woman returned with a tray carrying the stew and a plate with several biscuits. She placed a bowl before each child before setting one in front of Vincent.

“That’ll be six bits,” she said, holding out her hand.

Vincent reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, along with a letter he’d picked up at the post office earlier. He set the letter aside and handed the girl a dollar. “Bring me a piece of that peach pie as well.”

“Of course.” She tucked the dollar in her pocket and left them to wait on a newly arrived pair of cowboys.

Vincent returned his wallet to his pocket and noticed that the children were already eating. Rather than chide them for not waiting for grace to be said, he lowered his head and thanked God for the food. When he looked back up, both children had paused in respect. At least there was that much.

“Who sent the letter?” Benjamin asked with a nod toward the envelope.

“Granny Duran. She’s always good to write us.” Vincent sampled the stew and then reached for the missive. “Maybe I should see what she has to say. You go on and eat. We have to leave town right after lunch, or we’ll be driving in the dark by the time we get home.”

He opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper. The letter was short and to the point. Granny had found a woman to be his wife. She’d arrive on the thirteenth. Good grief, that was the day after tomorrow. He scanned the rest of the information to see who it was Granny was sending. Then he saw Angellyn’s name.

“What’s she say, Pa?” Benjamin put his spoon aside and reached for a biscuit.

Vincent knew his son wasn’t going to take well to the news that their search for a new mother had been resolved.

“Granny found someone to come and be your new ma.”

“I don’t want a new ma.” Benjamin looked him in the eye. “It won’t be the same.”

“No, it won’t be the same. That’s for certain.” Vincent re-folded the letter. “But I know Angel, and she’s a good woman.”

“She’s an angel?” Ava asked.

“No, but . . . well, she’s a really kind person.” He easily remembered the little girl who used to follow her brothers around the sheep farm. “Her name is Angellyn, but everybody calls her Angel.”

“We don’t need her.”

“We do.” Vincent looked at his boy. “You have no idea how much. Your ma used to keep track of all the supplies we needed. I made a list, but I’m sure I didn’t remember half the stuff that a woman would know to include. I grew up with Angel, and

we were friends. She's a kind-hearted gal. You'll like her if you give her half a chance." He said this as much for himself as for them. "Her father taught me all about caring for sheep."

"Is she the one who fell in the pond and nearly drowned, but you saved her?"

Vincent smiled. "Yes. That was her." He'd used the story to illustrate to his children the importance of being helpful to those in need, no matter their age. He'd been a few years older than Benjamin when Angel had fallen in the pond. She'd been four years old.

"Did she ever learn how to swim?" Ava questioned.

Vincent chuckled. "She did. Her brothers taught her how. Like I taught the two of you."

Ava paused with the spoon midway to her mouth. "When will she come be our ma?"

"Day after tomorrow."

Benjamin slammed his hand down on the table. "I don't want a new ma."

Vincent noted several of the customers glance their way. "Son, lower your voice. We don't need all of Cheyenne weighing in on the matter. The truth is, I can't take care of you children and run the farm at the same time. If I don't marry and give you a new ma, you may have to go away and live with strangers. Is that what you want?"

Benjamin fixed him with an angry glare. "No, but I don't want another ma either. Why can't we just go live with your granny and granddad?"

"Because Wyoming was my dream. Your ma's too. I'm not ready to let that go. I could, I suppose, send you both back to live with Granny and Granddad."

"I don't want to go away, Papa," Ava said and began to cry.

Vincent reached out to smooth back her hair. "I don't want

anyone to go away. That's why I'm getting someone who can take care of us."

"Why can't she just come and help like Aunt Mary?"

Vincent heaved a sigh. "Because it wouldn't be proper for a single woman to come and stay with us. The only reason it worked with Aunt Mary is because she's an older widow and your mama's aunt. Being family makes it acceptable.

"Look, I don't want any trouble about this. I know it's hard for you, Benjamin, but we don't have a choice. I'm not asking you to call her *mother* or *ma*, but you will at least show her kindness and respect."

"Yes, sir," the boy replied. His expression betrayed his conflicted emotions.

Vincent felt bad for them. They were scared, and the one person who might have offered them the most comfort was the very soul they feared he was trying to replace.

"I promise you, it won't be a bad thing. Angel is fun to be around. You'll see."

Vincent could only hope she hadn't changed too much. Granny's letter said Angellyn had been jilted . . . left at the altar. She might very well be changed because of that. Not only that, but he hadn't seen her or heard much of anything about her in ten years. Granny occasionally wrote about ways that Angel had helped her, but otherwise he'd paid little attention to any news about her. For now, the important thing was to arrange for the justice of the peace to marry them and to get the house in some sort of order for her arrival.

He hurried to finish his food and was drinking the last of his coffee when the waitress brought their piece of pie. Vincent shared it with the children and then hurried them out the door and down the street to claim their wagon. Hopefully all of the stores would have deposited his purchases by now.

It was only when they were on their way home and the children had fallen asleep that the news really hit him. He was going to remarry. Not for love or consolation for his loneliness, but for the purpose of having someone to take care of the children. He'd done all that he could to hold his family together and would have given up the farm altogether before sending the children to someone else. Of course, they didn't know that. He felt guilty for having said otherwise to convince Benjamin of the necessity of accepting that his father would marry again.

Angel had been like a sister to him in so many ways. She'd always been around, helping out or occasionally pestering him and her brothers. As she grew older, Vincent had even considered her as a possible mate, but then Zed Martin's sister had returned from finishing school back east and caught the attention of every male in and out of town.

Vincent had been honored when she'd made her choice known and picked him. She was beautiful and kind, even-tempered and knowledgeable about a number of topics. She even shared his desires to go west. Both of them felt it was their calling to civilize the frontier. They would speak of it almost every night until they finally made the move. Elsa had been about the most perfect woman he'd ever known, and their marriage had been a good one.

Angel would have a lot to live up to.



Angel stepped onto the train platform in Cheyenne and looked around for any sign of Vincent and his two children. She was still apprehensive about this arrangement, but after Granny's suggested three days of prayer, Angel had been unable to come up with any reason to turn Vincent down.

When he first stepped from inside the depot, Angel couldn't help sizing him up. He looked the same as always. Handsome in that casual, country sort of way. There was no pretense to Vincent. He had on a well-worn coat and trousers, black hat, and blue shirt and tie. It wasn't exactly Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes, but neither was it the expected shepherd's attire. The two children at his side were precious, and immediately her smile broadened. The boy was the spitting image of his father, and the little girl with her braided pigtails appeared younger than her seven years.

It dawned on Angel all over again that she was about to take on the role of mother and wife. Her first words and actions would set the stage for all that was yet to come. She put down her valise and smiled.

"Angel, it's good to see you again." Vincent drew the children forward. "This is my son, Benjamin, and my daughter, Ava."

Angel gave a nod toward each one. "I'm very happy to meet you both."

The children said nothing.

"They're kind of shy, and of course still grieving their ma."

"Of course." Angel sobered and knelt. "That loss will be felt for a long, long time. I know." She looked first at Benjamin and then Ava. "I lost my mama when I was eight years old. It wasn't easy to bear."

"I'd forgotten about that," Vincent murmured.

Angel straightened and stood. "It's a loss you understand better than most."

He looked away as if uncomfortable. "Do you have more luggage than that?" He nodded at the small valise beside her.

"I have a large trunk." She fished into her purse and produced a ticket. "Here's the claim for it."

Vincent took the stub. "Let's get it picked up, then. I have the justice of the peace waiting for us."

Angel hadn't known how things would be arranged. She only knew that Granny had written to Vincent to tell him she was sending Angel for him to marry. Angel had thought maybe there would be a time to get to know each other once again, but instead Vincent declared they were to be married immediately. She swallowed the lump in her throat and followed after him and his children. Could she really do this? The man she knew him to be had been practical and considerate. There was no reason to believe he had changed. Granny would have said as much if he had. Of course, maybe Granny didn't know.

A half hour later, she sealed her fate and replied "I do" as the justice of the peace officiated over their wedding. She wasn't wearing anything at all ceremonial. In fact, her plum-colored traveling suit was stained with soot and Angel was pretty sure she'd worn a hole in her left stocking. She remembered the beautiful white satin wedding dress she'd worn for Cam. She had sewn it herself and later sold it to a local dress shop. She couldn't imagine anyone wanting to buy a dress with such a sad history, but the owner assured her there would come a customer who didn't care in the least and would give the gown a new, brighter history.

"Do you have a ring?" the justice asked.

"I didn't think of one," Vincent said, looking momentarily panicked.

"I have my mother's wedding ring. We can use it." She pulled the gold band off her right hand and handed it to Vincent. "Pa gave it to me to remember her by. Doesn't matter which hand I wear it on. I'll always remember her."

He gave her a sheepish, apologetic smile. "Sorry that I forgot to buy one."

"It's quite all right."

He placed the ring on her left hand and looked to the justice. “Is that all?”

“Just about.” The man closed his little black book. “You may kiss your bride.”

Vincent looked at Angel for a moment, then bent and gave her a very quick kiss on the lips.

“I pronounce you husband and wife. Sign here.” The justice of the peace pushed a piece of paper toward them.

And that was all there was to Angellyn’s wedding. No flowers and no music. No church full of friends and family. In all actuality, it reminded her of the time her father had bought a horse from the livery man in town. They met, discussed the horse and the price, signed a paper, and headed home . . . with the horse.

Only this time, she was the horse.

Vincent stopped by the mercantile on the way out of town. He showed her a list of things he’d purchased for winter on the farm.

“We don’t get to town very often, so let’s go in and get anything else you think we might need that’s not on the list. I have two milk cows and a dozen chickens. I’m due a bunch of pork, including hams, in trade for a ram. It’ll be delivered in about two weeks. I didn’t get the garden planted this year, and there’s not much left in the way of canned goods. Elsa always put up vegetables and meats for the winter months, but we’ll have to buy what we need this year.”

Angel looked over his list. He’d already purchased a great deal of flour, lard, sugar, salt, and coffee. There was also an ample amount of oats and molasses. Seemed he was still practical.

“I should get some baking soda and powder, yeast and vinegar—oh, and a variety of spices.” She looked at Vincent to ascertain his reaction to this. “Canned goods too.”

“You might find other things once you’re inside.”

And she did. They shopped for nearly an hour with Vincent commenting on the children’s likes and dislikes, and the lack of fruits and vegetables in his pantry. By the time they finished, Angel was satisfied they had a strong start on surviving any lengthy period away from civilization.

However, as they journeyed away from the town and quickly met up with vast prairies of nothingness, Angel couldn’t help but wonder at what she’d just gotten herself into. She was now Mrs. Vincent Duran. A married woman with two children to care for.

God had given her a husband by Christmas. Two months early, in fact.

Merry Christmas to me.