

Chapter One

Gentleness Linden opened her eyes to another beautiful spring morning in the holler, and stretched across the bed to find—nothing. The empty space beside her matched the hole in her heart, a crack begun with a hasty marriage and slowly deepened into a chasm by her rascal of a husband.

She swung her legs from under the cozy warmth of her hand-made quilt and began unwinding the plaits from her long mahogany hair. Empty marriage or not, there was a bright day ahead just waiting to be filled—same as there had been for the past three years since Clarence up and walked out of her life.

“Good mornin’,” Nessie whispered to her cat, a spotted calico with bright yellow-green eyes who rubbed his soft ears against her bare ankle. “Let’s see about startin’ breakfast. Pa will be up soon.”

Pushing aside the lingering sense of regret threatening to taint the bright promise of a new day, Nessie quickly dressed and hurried to the hearth. She set a smooth stone in the ashes so it would warm while she began a pot of porridge. While breakfast heated, she carefully wrapped the stone in a soft flannel blanket and crept toward her father’s bed, silently slipping it beside his bad leg. The heat helped ease his stiffness in the mornings.

“*Praise God from whom all blessin’s flow. . . .*” Nessie hummed the sweet melody under her breath, careful not to wake her father.

Lord, You have blessed me greatly this past year. After Clarence left, I done figgered my life was over, shore as shootin’. But You watched over me as I had to move back in with Pa. His sinful still kept a smile on his face and food on the table—but it left behind a stain no scrubbin’ could lift. The more days passed, the more Pa drank. The more he drank, the less he loved. When he lost control to the point where I’d sport bruises, I knowed thangs couldn’t keep on fer long.

And I was right. You sent Logan and Bryce Chance out to Saltlick Holler. Logan’s done a lot fer everyone hereabouts, arrangin’ fer folks to sell their handmade goods in a specialty store so’s they git paid well. But I’ll be forever grateful to those Chance boys fer takin’ an interest in Ted Trevor and his brother, Fred. Not only do they make a good livin’ now by sellin’ furs, Logan brought ‘em the selfsame trap that snapped shut on Pa’s leg and closed off the old way of life forever.

Now, I ain’t sayin’ as how I’m glad Pa got hurt. You know I’d never wish sufferin’ on a solitary soul. But on account of his leg, Hattie and the Chance brothers and the Trevor twins all banded together to take care of him. They tended to his body as he fought his demons. Now Pa does honest work and never touches so much as a drop of hard likker. That’s the miracle I’m grateful fer.

That’s just one more reason why I shouldn’t think about Clarence on a beautiful mornin’. He left—and I wouldn’t want him back, to tell the truth, though I do yearn fer a love like Hattie and Logan share—but Yore always by my side. Thank You, Sweet Jesus, fer all those blessin’s.

A loud knock sounded, a man blocking the sunlight that normally burst through the gap between the frame and the door.

“Yes?” Nessie pulled it open, her heart pounding as she took in the grave expression on the visitor’s face.

“Nessie,” Ted Trevor put his warm hands on her shoulders as though to brace her for what he was about to say. “I have some bad news.”