

## Chapter Three

“Hattie!” Nessie rose to embrace her dear friend. “I just got news...”

“I know.” Hattie shot Ted a reproving look. “The letter was just addressed to Salt Lick, so it got to Miz Willow. Ted had dropped by with some coney’s when we was openin’ it. I woulda come with him, but the Jenson boy gave his ankle a nasty turn...”

“It’s all right.” Nessie looked down at her hands. “Don’t make no difference to Clarence, leastaways.”

“But I’m here fer you, Nessie.” Hattie sat down on her other side and slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“We’s here fer you, Nessie.” Ted stood up and slapped his hat back on his head. “I reckon you womenfolk’ll want to jaw this over.” He gave them a strange look—almost wistful—before leaving.

“I didn’t mean fer him to up and leave like that,” Hattie worried.

“Don’t fret on it.” Nessie couldn’t take her eyes from the crumpled, stained sheet of paper in her friend’s hand. “Is that...is that there the letter?”

“Here.” Hattie passed it to her. “I done figgered you’d want to read it fer yoreself.”

“Seems like not long ago I wouldn’t have bin able to even try.” Nessie reached over and gave Hattie’s hand a grateful squeeze and unfolded the letter carefully, smoothing it on her knee before attempting to make out the faded, smudged script.

*Dere Miz Brody,*

*I’s sorry to haf to say yore husband, Claranse, is with us no mor. He waz shot at a poker game gone bad, but sayed as how he had him a wife out in these parts. I rekoned you should know ‘bout his passin’. This way yore better off, to my way of thinken.*

*Regritfully yores,*

Nessie squinted, trying to make out the mangled signature at the end of the brief, poorly spelled letter. She read the lines three times before looking back up. Blinking didn’t hold back the tears stinging the back of her eyes.

“Oh.” Hattie scooped closer and made comforting sounds but let her cry it out.

“I’m...alright now.” Nessie straightened her shoulders and tugged a handkerchief from her sleeve. “There are some folks as would say not to waste tears on Clarence, but...he was my husband,” she whispered.

“‘Iffen you was to ask me, I’d say the grief is long overdo. That there letter just closes the door on it, once and fer all.”

“I know. And there’s a part of me as is grateful fer it.” Nessie felt the tears come again. “Ain’t that an awful thing? What kind of woman would think somethin’ like that?”

“An honest one.” Hattie shifted so Nessie had to meet her gaze. “Ain’t no person in this Holler as will blame you fer seein’ that side of it. But I know you lament the passin’ of a life.”

“I do.” Nessie used the handkerchief to mop at her streaming eyes. “I was so hopin’ he’d found God—that he’d change with His grace and come back and make everythin’ right...” Her voice faded along with the foolish dream. Clarence wasn’t coming back now—he probably never would have.

“That’s beyond our reach,” Hattie consoled. “The thang is...” she hesitated for a minute, as though reluctant to add to Nessie’s burden.

“What?” Nessie prodded. “Are you wonderin’ about the last line of the letter?”

“‘*This way yore better off, to my way of thinkin.*’ And no return address.” Hattie traced the cryptic words. “What I want to know is, who wrote it in the first place?”