

## Chapter Twelve

“I don’t believe it.” Nessie shook her head. “It’s not him you buried.”

“Believe it.” Ted came up behind her to put his hands on her shoulders. “Looks like he drank himself into a stupor and fell in the crick. Bin gone fer a while when Fred and I found him. Logan Chance and Li’l Nate bore witness. He’s gone.”

“No. It cain’t be. I wished he was gone, but I didn’t mean I wanted him killed.” Nessie leaned into Ted’s strong support. “I cain’t believe he’s dead—agin.”

“Not agin.” Fred looked down at his boots. “I done wrote that letter, Nessie. I thought he were never comin’ back, so you and Ted should be together. I shouldn’t have done it, and I’m sorry fer it.”

“Did you know?” Nessie whirled on Ted, pinning him with her gaze. If he’d known the letter was a fake, she didn’t know if she could ever forgive him.

“Not until Fred told me this mornin’.” He took a deep breath. “He did it fer us, though he knows it was wrong. I forgive him, but I won’t blame you if it takes more time fer you.”

“I see why he did it,” she said softly. “It was wrong, but I’m wrong, too, because I wished that it had worked in the first place.”

“Nessie, I know it ain’t proper to ask you to marry me now, but I hope you’ll think on it.” He gazed into her eyes. “I bin miserable since I lost you.”

“Oh, Ted.” Nessie put her hand over the hard line of his jaw. “You never lost me. And, proper or not, I think we should be married as soon as possible. I’m tired of waitin’.”

“So am I.” He took her in his arms and cuddled her close, resting his chin on the top of her silky hair. “This time, no one will take you away from me.”

\*

This time, they didn’t announce the wedding. Remembering Bethilda Cleary’s desperate bid for the used wedding last time, Ted didn’t blame his bride for wanting to keep the ceremony small.

He looked out to see his own parents and brother, Logan and Hattie Chance, Miz Willow, Otis Nye, and the blacksmith and his wife, Abigail. Rooster would show up any minute, walking Nessie down the aisle—and toward a new life as Ted’s wife.

Sure enough, Rooster showed up a scant second later, the most lovely woman in the world on his arm as they made their way toward the groom. Ted couldn’t take his eyes off his Nessie. In fact, he’d be hard-put to recall any of the ceremony save the joy on her face. Somehow, he managed to say “I do” at the right moment, and finally he heard the phrase he’d been denied not long ago. He took his bride into his arms, sharing the first kiss of their married life as the preacher said the precious words Ted had longed for.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Ted grinned and swept Nessie into his arms. “I love you. I’m so glad we got this last chance.”

“This isn’t a last chance,” she laughed up at him. “In fact, there are no last Chances—Daisy married the very last one.”

“I hope,” Ted whispered in her ear, “they’re as happy as we’re gonna be.”

No Last Chance

Kelly Eileen Hake

The End