

Chapter Five

“Ted!” Nessie smiled to see him coming down the path toward her home. “How nice of you to bring these by.” She gratefully accepted the brace of skinned rabbits. “And just in time fer me to stew ‘em fer supper!”

“That’s why I left Fred checkin’ the rest of the traps to bring ‘em to you. They’s always best fresh.” Ted took off his hat when he spoke to her, his sun-bronzed fingers strong against the worn brim. “And it looks to be a right nice evenin’, too.”

“Shore does.” Nessie gave him a measuring glance. “Would you like to stay fer supper, Ted? We’d be pleased as punch to have you.”

“I might just take you up on that, Nessie.” He shoved his hat back atop his thick hair. “What say I chop some wood while you start that?”

“You don’t need to chop wood or weed gardens or bring rabbits every time you stop by, Ted.” Nessie laid her hand on his sleeve, feeling the heat of his forearm before pulling away. “We’re happy just to see you.”

“All the same...” Ted’s smile had grown with her words, “I’ll be glad to holp out a mite. Fred and me, we figure it’s the least we cain do.” With a nod, he set off toward where the old axe lodged in the cuttin’ stump.

Nessie watched him walk away. Funny how much could change in a year. Ted had always stood taller than her, but now the rest of him had grown, too. His broad shoulders, thick chest, and strong arms had filled out as the seasons changed. It was hard to remember now that she was a whole year older than the man who’d done so much for her and Pa. He said he and Fred felt like lending a hand was the least they could do, but Nessie couldn’t help but notice it was Ted doing most of the work.

She stepped inside and began work on the stew. Soon, the meat was heated in the boiling water and she was chopping vegetables from the very garden Ted had helped her put in last spring. Now, the leaves were turning color, and it seemed as though everything was changing. With the news of Clarence’s death blunted by the two weeks since she’d learned of it, Nessie was infused with a sense of freedom and hope. She cast a glance out the glassless window to see Ted chopping wood with an ease born of practice. With Pa out trying to catch some fish, it was just the two of them. A more fanciful girl might even be tempted to pretend Ted belonged here, chopping wood, eating supper, and providing for their family.

Lord, holp me catch my wayward thoughts before they grab hold of me. I don’t have no business thinkin’ of another man when I just got word about Clarence. But all the same, I cain’t holp but compare the way Ted has an easy smile, kind words, and a servant’s heart to the way Clarence used to yell and knock thangs over. Ted comes out the better man every time—but it ain’t right to think ill of the dead. And it ain’t right fer me to git caught up in my own dreams when I know You’ll lay a path afore me. Holp me to follow it, Jesus, and take this longin’ from my heart iff’n it ain’t Yore will.