

Chapter Six

“Hello!” Bethilda Cleary’s over-cheerful voice stopped Ted in his tracks for a heartbeat.

Lord, give me patience. He stopped and waited for her to catch up to him.

“There you are!” She simpered, her heavy face reddened from her hurry. Bethilda grasped his arm with one hand and waved a finger in his face with the other. “I’ve bin trying to catch you fer a while now.”

Me and every other unmarried man hereabouts. Ted kept his expression neutral, though he knew Bethilda was wrangling to get him hitched to one of her girls. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask what he could do for her, but he bit it back. Such words weren’t polite chitchat when it came to Bethilda—they were an invitation for trouble.

“I’ve noticed you bin comin’ this way more often lately, Mr. Trevor.” Bethilda rocked back on her heels and rose on tiptoe, her voice lowered conspiratorially.

“This is just the path between Miz Willow’s and the Linden place,” Ted took care to sound casual, and threw in a shrug for good measure.

“I done seen you comin’ this way with an awful lot of things. Sacks of walnuts, braces of coney, haunches of venison. . .” Bethilda’s greedy eyes rested on the burlap bag he had slung over one shoulder. “An awful lot,” she repeated. “Iff’n you ain’t eatin’ decent at home, you don’t have to bother Nessie or Hattie to rustle you up some grub. My daughters would be happy to.” Her grasp tightened as she tried to lead him toward her place.

“That’s mighty kind, Mrs. Cleary.” Ted didn’t budge. “But everyone hereabouts knows it were Fred and my trap that ruined Rooster’s leg. We take a few things to the Linden place and keep an eye out fer ‘em, is all.”

“Oh, of course.” Bethilda began patting his arm as though in consolation. “Such a pity you and yore brother are tied to folks as have nuthin’ to offer you in return fer yore hard work.”

“That ain’t the case.” Ted gritted his teeth. The woman was outright disparaging Rooster and Nessie!

“Oh, there you go, bein’ too nice fer yore own good.” Bethilda’s pat seemed more a smack this time. “Tell the truth. What use has a strong lad like you with an old, crippled drunk and that sad creature he calls a daughter?”

“Mrs. Cleary.” Ted yanked his arm free, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “Rooster is neither drunk nor crippled, and Nessie is the best daughter any man could claim.”

“Now, that’s an untruth, Mr. Trevor.” A hint of steel lay beneath Bethilda’s words. “Lily and Lark are the apples of my eye. Why, neither one of ‘em has stood by while her father drank himself into a stupor, or run off her husband so’s he got hisself shot rather than come home to her.”

“Gentleness never hurt a soul in her life, was saddled with a do-nothing husband, and tended her father through grievous injury. And I ain’t never heard her speak poorly of another soul. There’s a lot you cain learn from that, Mrs. Cleary.” Ted strode away from the woman’s venomous glower but couldn’t miss her final, sour words.

“You made yore choice, Mr. Trevor,” she spat out. “But Nessie Linden ain’t gonna make you happy.”

“I think yore wrong, but it don’t matter,” Ted called out, refusing to let Bethilda get away with another insult. “So long as I cain make *her* happy.”