

Chapter Eleven

“Ted, I have to fess up to somethin’,” Fred mumbled as the brothers picked their way through the underbrush, careful not to set off their own traps.

“What?” Ted’s voice sounded hollow even to his own ears. It didn’t matter. Precious little did, these days. At least since Rooster threatened him with his shotgun, Clarence Brody hadn’t come back to bother Nessie.

“Er. . .I, um. . .” Fred rubbed the back of his neck and shuffled his feet.

“Spit it out, Fred.” Ted stopped walking and looked back at his brother.

“Whatever it is cain’t be that bad.” *Nuthin’ could be as bad as losin’ Nessie.*

“Yes, it cain. Ted, I done wrote that letter about Clarence bein’ dead.” Fred’s words came in a rush, almost as though it wouldn’t be so bad if he said it all in one breath.

“What?” Ted stared intently at his brother.

“I wrote it. I knowed how you felt ‘bout Nessie—me bein’ yore twin and all, you know you cain’t keep nuthin’ from me—and, since Clarence bin gone fer three years, I got to thinkin’ that he was probably dead. We’d never hear ‘bout it iff’n he was, and a no-account like that man probably ended up on the wrong side of someone tougher than him. So. . .I wrote the letter so you and Nessie could git hitched.” Fred’s eyes pleaded for understanding. “I thought it was best fer you. No one would ever know the difference, save me, and I wouldn’t have said a word.”

“You—you—” Ted saw crimson and closed his eyes as though the simple act would ward off the betrayal of his brother.

“You gotta forgive me, Ted.”

“I—” Ted’s jaw worked, but no words came out. He turned and crashed through the brush, blindly making his way toward the river. Maybe a splash of cold water would clear his thoughts. He could hear Fred following him but didn’t say anything. If he spoke, it would be something he’d regret later.

Finally, Ted got to the creek and splashed himself with the icy water. It did no good. His fury was still at the boiling point when Fred burst into view.

“Go away, Fred.” Ted gave him fair warning.

“No.” Fred planted himself in front of his brother. “Hit me. Go on, take a swing. I deserve it. It’ll help you feel better.” He tapped the chin so like Ted’s own. “Right here. Don’t bottle it all up.”

“No.” Ted took a deep breath. “Hittin’ you won’t make me feel any better.”

“Oh.” Dejected, Fred looked down. “It might make me feel better,” he mumbled.

He wants me to make him feel better? That does it. Without another word, Ted shoved his twin into the cold water, only to have Fred grab his coat and drag him in, too. The two furiously tried to best the other, shoving each other’s heads underwater as the creek carried them downstream. Finally, Ted broke it off.

“Yore right,” he allowed. “I do feel a little better. Cold, though.” He stomped his feet on dry ground, rubbing his hands together.

“Looks like someone left a blanket out.” Fred pointed to a piece of brown fabric alongside the stream and headed toward it, only to gasp.

“What is it?” Ted followed his brother’s gaze to see what shocked him. There, washed up on the edge of the creek, was the body of Clarence Brody.

