

Chapter Nine

“No she ain’t!” Ted snaked his arm around the woman he loved and pulled her to his side once more. “Yore a dead man!”

“Don’t you start threatenin’ me,” Brody snarled.

“He wasn’t threatenin’ you,” Nessie pulled away from Ted to stand between him and her husband. “We got word you’d bin killed.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but I’m as alive as I ever bin.” Brody yanked her away once again, staking his claim. “And that means yore still *my* wife.”

“Preacher!” Ted turned to the man of God in appeal. “This man up and left Nessie over three years ago. Ain’t there no way to free her from such a sham of a marriage?”

“Not unless. . .” the preacher turned to Nessie and Brody while Ted prayed with every fiber of his being that there was a way to save her. “Unless. . .the first marriage wasn’t consummated?”

“Consu-whatted?” Brody’s breath reeked of strong spirits as he bellowed.

“That is to say, have you known each other as man and wife?” the preacher tried again.

“What kind a man do you think I am?” Brody snorted. “Of course we have.”

“It’s true.” The color bled from Nessie’s face, the light in her eyes fading as Ted watched. She swayed a little, and Ted reached out to steady her, only to have Brody snatch her out of his reach.

“See there?” Brody chortled. “Now, my bride has some explainin’ to do, so we’re just gonna head on home and clear this up.” His tone turned sinister as he stroked Nessie’s hair. “Seems as though she’s forgotten who she belongs to.”

“She doesn’t belong to you!” Ted stepped forward. No matter what, he would not let Brody drag Nessie off.

“Yes, she shore ‘nough do!” Bethilda Cleary rose from her seat, ignoring the shocked gazes. “But this here’s a mighty fine weddin’, and it seems a shame it should go to waste.” She hauled Lark up to her feet, though the girl protested. “Since you want a wife, why not take a different one?”

“Yeah,” Brody taunted, “one wife’s as good as the next, once they’ve bin trained.”

“Stop!” Nessie struggled out of Brody’s grip, but didn’t step into Ted’s arms, either. “I’m sorry, Ted.” Tears gleamed in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.” She hung her head. “I cain’t marry you, after all.”

“But you ain’t goin’ home with him, neither.” Ted jerked a thumb toward her all-too-alive husband.

“It ain’t up to you,” Brody puffed his chest out.

“It’s up to me.” Rooster stepped forward and drew Nessie out from between the two men. “And she ain’t goin’ with you, Clarence.”

“She’s *my* wife.” Brody advanced, his hands curled into fists.

“But she’s *my* daughter.” Rooster didn’t bat an eye. “And you left her three years ago. I shouldn’t have married her off to you in the first place, and I’m shore as shootin’ not gonna let you take her now.”

“All right.” Brody backed off when he saw Ted, Fred, Logan Chance, Li'l Nate the blacksmith, and even old Otis Nye coming to stand alongside Rooster. “I won't take her *now*. But she's mine, and you cain't keep her from me forever.”