

The Marshal's Rebellious Bride

By

Starla Kaye

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Starla Kaye

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Prologue

Wakefield Ranch, Kansas September 1876

Whiskey raced up the porch steps, her chest drumming in excitement. She sped into the large entry of her family's two-story Victorian house and wished it was smaller so she would be easily heard. Frustrated, she raised her voice and yelled, "Taos! Keno!"

She waited a second to see if anyone had heard her. Impatience had her tapping her right foot. Nothing.

Then a muffled sound came from the second floor. A footstep?

Eager to share her news, she lifted her long skirt and hurried up the staircase. Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. This was the best day of her life!

"Keno! Taos!" she called out when she reached the landing.

Again there was no response.

She stopped in the upstairs hallway between her older brothers' rooms to catch her breath and listen once more.

Silence. The house must have just been settling again. Disappointment weighed her down.

Dagnabit! She had the most wonderful announcement to make and nobody to listen to it!

Shoulders slumping, she started to turn back toward the stairway. All right, maybe she couldn't tell either of her brothers right this minute. But surely one of the ranch hands was around somewhere. By golly, *someone* was going to listen to her! She hadn't ridden her horse near to death from Dodge City to not find someone—anyone—on the ranch to tell her news to.

A thud came from Keno's room, followed by a man's deep voice grumbling, "Damn."

She dashed down the hallway to the closed door and rapped once. Too agitated to wait for a response, she yelled, "I'm getting married!"

Still no response.

Irritated beyond her nearly nonexistent patience, she pushed the door open without waiting for an invitation just as she'd done a thousand times in her nineteen years of life. "Didn't you hear me? I said I'm getting *married!*"

She was in mid-step into the room when she froze. Her eyes widened. "Who the hell are you?"

A mountain of a man sat on the side of the rumpled feather bed wearing only a pair of red long johns and rubbing a toe he'd apparently stubbed. Thick, unruly black hair dusted wide shoulders. At least a day's worth—probably more—of beard stubble covered carved cheeks and a strong jaw tight with annoyance. Dark blue eyes pinned her in place. His fierce expression would have intimidated a meeker female, but she'd grown up with two brothers who could get pretty testy at times.

She simply returned his scowl, putting her hands on her hips. "I repeat, who the hell are you? And what are you doing in my brother's bedroom?"

He stood. *Good Lord!* He was even taller than her brothers, who towered over most men in town. Taller than any man she'd ever met. And, oh my, he certainly filled out those long johns quite well. For the first time that she could remember, she felt a blush clear to the roots of her hair. She shouldn't be noticing another man's private parts—even as spectacular as they appeared to be, at least from what she could see. She was an engaged woman now.

She swallowed a lump in her throat. Her heart pounded harder than when she'd sped into the house. She felt a bit lightheaded and felt a tingling low in her belly. She blushed even more.

The remarkable mountain stepped toward her on long, muscled legs. His back was rigid and he ground his jaw, seemed to be struggling with his temper. She stiffened her knees to not back away and wished the heat would leave her face.

He raised one dark eyebrow as if he were surprised that she hadn't fled the room at his approach.

Then he looked down at her and growled—yes, his voice was as deep as a bear’s growl she’d once heard, “Morgan. Morgan Rydell.” He appeared to stand even taller, squared his impressive shoulders. “Get out. Now.”

She stood inflexibly in place although her insides roiled with nerves and she dropped her hands from her hips. This was her family’s house, her brother’s room. “No! *You* get out. Now.”

Shock flashed in his expression, apparently not used to being not instantly obeyed. “I’m not dressed.”

She rolled her eyes and then looked pointedly at him, sweeping her gaze over his less-than-properly clad body. “You think I haven’t noticed that?”

His jaw tightened and a vein pulsed in his thick neck. The man clearly had trouble controlling his temper, much like she did at times. Except she paid the price for losing her temper on a fairly regular basis by getting her backside warmed. She doubted few people ever took on this man or ever thought to tell him to calm down.

“Don’t you have any sense at all?” He looked ready to pick her up and toss her out of the room. Yet something more than irritation heated his eyes. His nostrils flared as he seemed to draw in a ragged breath. She’d seen her fiancé react like this after he’d dared to kiss her that one time.

Now she did take a step back. She should not be feeling a warmth building inside her. She should not have this tremendous urge to reach up and push that one intriguing dark curl off his forehead. She definitely should not want to feel his lips pressed against hers!

He moved forward again. *Huge. The man is huge.*

She held her ground, but her gaze shifted down his body for an instant. Her cheeks heated even more as she noted that “his man parts” appeared to be even bigger. She had seen her brothers in long johns—a time or two in even less, which she didn’t like to think about. But she couldn’t remember them looking like this. Maybe she hadn’t noticed because they were her brothers.

She tried to pull her gaze away from his “endowments,” but it was difficult. *Oh my, oh my!* She licked her lips.

Did he groan? No, it had sounded more like a curse, something a lady shouldn’t hear.

She closed her eyes to gather her wits. *Ace. Think about Ace.* His youthfully handsome face flashed into her mind. And, yes, he was still a young man in comparison to this steal-her-breath-away mature man standing all too close to her. Did Ace have such impressive...um...man parts? If not now, would he mature into...

She sucked in an annoyed breath. What was she doing? Admiring another man was wrong. It made her angry...with this stranger, with herself.

She inched back into the hallway. “Where is my brother? Why are you in his room?”

The door slammed in her face. “Both of your brothers are in town, I reckon. Go away,” he gritted out. Again, he seemed to have muttered something not suitable for a decent young woman such as herself to hear.

She curled her hands into fists at the sides of her riding skirt and stomped a foot. “I want you out of Keno’s room. Out of this house.” She reached for the doorknob, ready to battle him, as outrageously stupid as that was since it’d be like taking on an immovable mountain. “I’ll fetch my gun if I have to,” she added boldly.

“Go away, brat.” To her surprise, it sounded like he jammed the chair that had been sitting next to the door under the doorknob.

“*Brat?*” She kicked at the door, winced at the pain in her toes. Sure, her brothers called her that all the time. But this was a stranger! She would not put up with such rudeness. “You need to leave.”

She tried to shoulder the door open, only to end up wincing and rubbing her shoulder. The door hadn’t moved at all. He must be standing by it or the chair and holding it shut.

“Trust me, *Brat*, you don’t want to take me on. Now go away!”

He was right; she really didn’t want to take him on. She would lose and she hated losing. Besides, she’d come here for a reason: to tell her brothers about Ace proposing today, about her accepting.

Dang it! She hadn’t thought to check out their saloon before she left town. She’d been sure they

would be here since Taos was getting ready to leave for Texas again tomorrow. He would be reporting in for a new assignment as U.S. Marshal. They had argued last night about his leaving again. She worried every time he put on his badge, every time he rode away from the ranch. So wasn't it ironic that she'd agreed to marry Ace, a deputy in Dodge City.

She sighed, momentarily forgetting the man inside Keno's room. She smiled, thinking about Ace. He was so handsome, so absolutely wonderful. Love was so amazing.

With that marvelous thought lightening her spirit, she tried to put the confrontation with the irritating stranger aside. Her brothers could deal with him. She turned toward the stairs.

Wait! Rydell? She froze.

Now she remembered. He was the big, bad Texan who'd teamed up with Taos a couple of years back as U.S. Marshal. The man was legendary. Dangerous. She'd sensed that herself at first glance, yet she hadn't been frightened of him. At least his size and his just-dare-me attitude didn't have her shaking in her shoes. No, he frightened her in a more basic way. Morgan Rydell was a man who would love hard and be hard to love. Somehow she just knew that.

Ace loved her and she loved him. Their love was pure and simple, nothing hard about it.

She hurried down the stairs determined to get far away from Marshal Rydell, determined to ride all the way back to town and find her brothers. She had to share her wonderful news. Now. Right now.

Chapter One

Lincoln County, New Mexico Territory April 1878

Morgan shivered against the gust of early spring wind that circled around him. His partner turned up the collar on his jacket. It wasn't the coolness that bothered him. Something prophetic, something ominous rode within the breeze and whistled through the towering pines that lined the narrow path snaking between the mountains leading to Sierra Blanca. He couldn't explain why, but he somehow knew his life would change today.

Not liking that notion, he went back to studying the area. Gray shadows on one wall of the mountains seemed to darken as if evil hid in the dense green underbrush. He tensed and gripped the reins tighter with one hand. He reached down to undo the safety flap over his Colt with the other hand.

"You feel it, too, don't you?" Taos Wakefield asked, drawing Morgan's gaze. "I've been uneasy ever since we started into this valley."

Morgan nodded and looked away. "Trouble ahead. My gut tells me so." His instincts were seldom wrong. They were what had kept him alive this long.

They plodded on another few yards, silently waiting. When he nudged his horse into a trot, he wondered if it were a poor choice. Would that take him into danger even sooner? It also made him think about the poor choices he'd made in his twenty-eight years. Choosing to go on this particular assignment, as a Marshal was one. Deciding on this route was another. Yet the choices that most bothered him—ones that haunted him day and night—had been made years ago. They were choices that still tore at his soul and were part of what made him such a hard man today. *A stone-cold bastard sometimes*. At least that's what Taos told him from time to time.

Birds warbled cries of alarm from within the pines. Taos' horse whinnied and sidestepped.

Morgan scanned the area with narrowed eyes. His heart pounded in dread of what lurked in the darkness surrounding them. All he spotted was a squirrel scurrying into the underbrush. His senses remained on alert. Something was out there. Someone watched them. Again he thought about his gut feeling that his life was about to change for the worse.

"Let's get the hell out of here." He kicked at the sides of his powerful bay horse. Demon's massive muscles bunched and then he tore ahead down the valley floor.

"Right behind you," Taos called out, snapping his reins.

A bullet whizzed out of the thick forest before they'd gone more than a hundred yards.

"Damnation!" Taos hissed.

Morgan pulled up on the reins and hazarded a glance over his shoulder. Taos had slowed and now held a hand to his upper left chest. They shared a brief look of understanding, of anger and determination.

"Get out of here!" Taos ordered as he struggled to control his frightened mount.

"Like hell," Morgan bellowed back. He turned his horse as he fired into the brush where he thought the shot had come from.

Taos' buckskin reared on its back legs, toppling him to the ground. Before Morgan could catch the reins, the horse snorted in fear and took off at full-speed.

Grimacing against the pain, Taos growled, "Get out! Now!"

Morgan didn't even consider the idea. He leaned down to offer Taos a hand up as a second bullet whistled out of the brush. It planted itself in Morgan's gun arm just below the shoulder. His revolver slipped from his hand and his attempt to pull Taos up ended. "Well, shit."

"I told you to get out of here," Taos gritted out. "You don't listen worth a damn. Never have."

Morgan slid from the right side of the saddle and jerked his Winchester from the scabbard. He ignored the throbbing pain in his arm as he sought meager protection behind his trembling horse. "We're partners. We don't abandon each other." He would be pissed if whoever was taking pot shots at them hit

Demon.

The sound of a branch breaking echoed through the tension-filled air like the roar from a cannon. Demon pawed at the ground and finally jerked free of Morgan's tenuous hold on the reins. The horse took off in a blaze of fright leaving him exposed.

He glanced down and found Taos clutching his chest with one hand, blood oozing between his fingers. His other hand tenaciously gripped his Colt. Morgan knew his partner felt—could almost taste—the same outrage at being bushwhacked that he did. But he refused to accept their dying in this lonely valley as inevitable.

Hidden somewhere in the trees a horse snorted impatiently. Hooves stomped on the pine needle covered ground and the rustling sound carried through the area.

He whirled around to face the spot he determined the sound had come from and awkwardly aimed just as their attacker rode out of the bushes. *Rafe Marino!* The heat of hatred swelled within him.

Rafe sat boldly in a beam of sunlight and faced him. His thick mustache was curled up at one side in a sneer. Rafe snickered; the mocking sound evil and crazed. At the sight of the outlaw bounty hunter an acid-like bitterness churned in Morgan's stomach.

At his feet, Taos swore a blue streak and managed to fire his gun. The shot went wide, but jerked Morgan back to action. He raised his rifle higher and fired. But the shot came too late. Rafe had already wheeled his mount around and raced out of range.

"Damn idiot! I should have reacted faster." He lowered his rifle and focused on his groaning partner. He eased down beside Taos' long, lean form. Seeing the blood soaked shirt, he flinched. *Bad. Damn bad.*

"You couldn't have ducked better?" he grumbled, trying to distract them both. He would have a hell of a time getting the bullet out.

"I'll try to...duck better...next time." The words tumbled out grimly, painfully.

Morgan gritted his teeth and ripped open the front of Taos' shirt. He didn't want to think about there maybe *not* being a next time. He didn't want to consider that it would take a damn miracle to get them out of the mountains alive. What he did think about was how much he wanted another chance to correct some of the mistakes he'd made in his life. He refused to meet his Maker without righting some of his wrongs. And he refused to give up on Taos.

What sounded too much like a death rattle came from Taos' chest. Rage and concern made Morgan force aside thoughts of anything but what needed to be done. Ignoring the burning pain in his arm, he tugged off his coat and then his shirt. He barely noted the briskness in the air on his bare chest. Blood trickled down his arm. Damn bullet was still in the meat of his muscle. Couldn't have passed on through? Hell, no! No time for it now.

"Don't you die on me," he growled as he worked fast to rip the shirt up for bandaging.

His face as pale as a sheet, Taos gasped, "Always ordering people around."

"I demand obedience, too." Especially now. He did not—would not—lose his friend today.

As he pressed the makeshift bandage against his wound, Taos sucked in a breath and squeezed his eyes shut. He grabbed Morgan's arm with a blood-covered hand. "I'm not going to order you. I'm asking." He grimaced. "Whiskey. My sister. Promise me you'll marry her."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Morgan blinked away the moisture stinging his eyes from the thought of losing the only man who knew all of his secrets. A man who had never questioned what he had done, who had merely accepted him as a friend. He scowled. "Talking nonsense."

"Not nonsense." Taos coughed, the sound knotting Morgan's stomach. "It's time...time for you to settle down...like you've talked about."

Morgan shook his head. His comments over their many campfires together had been nothing but talk, nothing but spouting off a fool's dreams. He had tried settling once and he'd failed. Badly.

"She needs a strong man. You."

The thought of losing his partner was bad enough. The notion of getting married again was almost as bad. And to Whiskey? He frowned and snapped, "Hold that in place for a minute."

As Taos held the bloody rag to his chest, Morgan reached up and in an awkward motion tied a

strip of his shirt around his bleeding arm. He was getting dizzy from loss of blood. He needed to dig the bullet out. *No time for that.* He had to make a miracle happen here. He had to find the strength to go after his damn horse. Demon was well trained. Eventually he would stop running and then he would come back looking for him. He was counting on that. Both he and Taos were counting on that.

“Promise me,” Taos prodded, drawing Morgan’s attention once more.

“I’d sooner you just cut out my heart.” To this day he remembered that run-in he’d had with the pint-sized brat at the Wakefield ranch. He’d been damn lucky her brothers hadn’t caught them together in Keno’s room, with him not even properly dressed. Not that it was *his* fault. She’d barged into the room.

Taos coughed again and then drew in a ragged breath. “You’re wrong...about marriage.” He paled even more. “Even if I make it...promise me you will marry Whiskey.”

Morgan envisioned the spirited woman who had been outraged about him being in her brother’s room. Grass green eyes had sparked with fire. A braid of warm red hair had hung to her butt. A butt he’d been sorely tempted to spank. Brazen little minx.

“Not a good idea. She’s not my kind of... I’m not her kind of...” He sucked in a breath. He had only told Taos that he’d had some words with her that day, not *where* they’d had their brief conversation.

“She needs you,” Taos insisted. “I need you...to do this...for me.”

Morgan fought down the demons of his past. As much as he didn’t want to, he knew there was only one answer he could give. He owed Taos too much already. “All right. I’ll do it.”

His eyes squeezed shut and looking far too pale, Taos said on a sigh, “She’s a handful at times...heart as big as...” He opened one eye to focus on Morgan. “Take care of her. Let her love you. You need each other.” His chest rattled again.

Morgan remained silent. Everything in him had pulled in tight, pulled in protectively. He had loved once. He’d needed once. He doubted he had it in him to take a chance on either emotion again. But he could take care of her, would take care of her. Because his dying friend had begged him to do so.

If Taos didn’t die...

* * *

Little Rock, Arkansas ***May 1878***

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this!

Stomach tightening with knots, hands clenching, Whiskey turned to face the cheval mirror. Deep crimson stained the beautiful ivory and lemon yellow day gown her father had sent her all the way from England. *Ace’s blood.*

Oh, God!

Her legs gave out. She crumpled to the floor and buried her face in her hands. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t stop shaking. Cold, so cold. Sick.

She slowly raised her head and fought down nausea. She stared again into the mirror, this time the stain had spread on her gown. Blood streaked her face and covered her hands.

“No! Please, no! God, no!” the wail tore from her.

Footsteps, light yet steady, came from somewhere behind her. Then gentle hands touched her trembling shoulders. Her Aunt Mae’s familiar voice threaded through her tortured memories. “Whiskey. Sweetling.”

The gentleness soothed, drew her back, but she couldn’t speak just yet.

Her aunt carefully smoothed the top of her head. “Whiskey, what’s wrong?”

“Blood,” she whispered, squeezing her eyes closed. “My dress...”

Her aunt slid down beside her and wiped at the tears on her cheeks. “Oh, honey, there’s no blood. You look pretty as a picture in this new blue dress.”

Blue? Blue dress?

Her eyes flashed open and she stared at her reflection in the mirror again. She wore the dress her

aunt had given her yesterday for her twentieth birthday. Not her father's gift from last year. Not *that* dress! Her pulse pounded. She hadn't worn a dress in over a year, not since...

"I'm sorry," she said in a quivering voice she hardly recognized as her own. Her gaze locked in the mirror with Mae's. "But I can't... I just can't wear this to church today."

The sympathy in her aunt's eyes comforted her, even as disgust began replacing her misery.

That loving hand stroked her hair once more. "It is only a few yards of fabric. Not worth making you miserable."

Her aunt stood and leaned down to help her to her feet. "You take the dress off and I'll pack it away. You can wear those trousers you favor, just like you always wear. God doesn't care what you look like. Not at all."

She shook off the remains of the tortured memory. She was tired of acting weak, like a sniveling coward. She had to stop living in the past. The tragedy would not keep ruling her thoughts and actions.

She squared her shoulders, yet the words that slipped out were not what she'd intended to say. "Maybe next week." The emptiness of loss continued to hold her temporary captive. "I just need another week."

Mae nodded understanding. "We'll see." She turned toward the bedroom doorway, her tone one of no-nonsense, "Now you get changed. I don't want old lady Simpson trying to steal my place again."

Whiskey blinked. Then a smile tickled her lips. The elderly spinster and her aunt had been in a long-running battle over church pew preference. She would shed this treasured gift that her aunt had spent hours upon hours making for her and don the trousers and shirt that she'd gotten all too fond of wearing since coming here. She also needed to stop hiding out on her aunt's farm. She had known for a while now that it was time to make plans to go home.

She looked a final time in the mirror. The reflected image was not that of a young woman who had once been filled with dreams of marriage and all things romantic. She would never bear Ace Tanner's children. They would not grow old and crotchety together. Even though she had spent nearly a year acting like her life was over, it wasn't. Only those failed dreams. In truth, she wondered if she and Ace would have ever been as happy as she'd hoped they would be. But she didn't want to ponder that notion now. What did it matter anyway?

With a sigh of momentary defeat, she began unbuttoning the dress so lovingly made for her. She had a new dream now, one that her aunt had helped her discover. For as long as she could remember, she'd had a special way with animals—especially horses. They trusted her and she cared deeply for them. Her aunt had shared with her the unique gifts she herself had in working with animals and in doctoring to them. She wanted to use this skill she'd learned. And she wanted to start out using it on her family's ranch outside of Dodge City. When those in the community there accepted what she could do—and they would, she would doctor any and every animal entrusted to her care. She also didn't intend to ever consider marriage again. She would take care of herself, be happy all on her own, just like her beloved Aunt Mae.

Her brothers wouldn't like any of her decisions. They had been overprotective of her all her life, even more so than her father. Not that any of them had truly been able to keep her from doing what she wanted. They wouldn't this time either.

But she did miss them. Yes, it was almost time to go home.

* * *

Dodge City, Kansas ***June 1878***

Sweat trickled down between Morgan's shoulder blades. His shirt stuck to his back. His whisker-roughened face itched, as did most of his body. Trail dirt. He'd breathed it in and wore it for too damn many days. As the first buildings of Dodge City came into sight, he lifted his arm and used the back of his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead. It had been a long couple of months spent in Albuquerque

while Taos recovered. Now they were headed to the Wakefield Ranch, after they stopped in town.

“I’m looking forward to finding someplace to take a bath and get a shave.” He watched a dust devil spring to life. The wind picked up again. It helped some, but not all that much. He rolled his shoulders. The kink he’d gotten in his back last night sleeping on the hard ground didn’t want to come out. He sure led a hell of a life, had done so for a long time.

Next to him, Taos shifted in the saddle and kept his gaze ahead. “I’m planning on getting a good shot of Red Eye first. Then a bath. Then I’ll head over to the telegraph office.”

Morgan stiffened. “There’s no sense in rushing.” He knew exactly why his friend wanted to send a telegram and to who. He had been listening for what seemed like forever to Taos talking about this marriage plan. It had been a one-sided conversation for the most part. He’d hoped without his chiming in that Taos would get the idea that maybe this was a mistake. Wrong. The man was dead set on the idea.

“You’re not thinking about changing your mind, are you?” Taos glanced in his direction. Challenge carved a frown into his brow. He reached up to rub at his shoulder.

Morgan ground his teeth. “We both thought you might not make it out of that valley.” He blew out a belly-deep sigh. It greatly aggrieved him, but he said, “I made the promise and I’ll stand by it.”

Taos lowered his arm and grinned, apparently not concerned with his sour mood or with his testy tone. “Our Whiskey is a real prize, special. Both of my sisters are. But Whiskey is—”

“Gonna try my patience,” Morgan interrupted with a scowl.

When Taos looked in his direction, appearing annoyed, he didn’t back down. “You’ve gone on and on this last month about her *special* qualities. You would think she was a saint or something.” He knew different. A “saintly” woman wouldn’t have stood there in a bedroom with a barely dressed man. She sure as hell wouldn’t have looked far too intently at certain parts of him the way she had. She’d blushed at least; he’d felt like it, too. He’d also been tempted to tug her into his arms and kiss the devil out of her. But that would have been the biggest mistake of his life. Or at least another big mistake.

Taos focused on the Front Street wagon traffic just ahead of them. “Well, maybe I stretched the truth a little here and there. But she’s still special.”

She was *special* all right. Special trouble. Morgan had never met her twin sister, Brandy, but he wondered if she was as brazen as Whiskey. Brandy was off living in England with their Lord Something father. It sure would have made his life easier if Whiskey were there too. But she’d chosen to stay in Kansas with her brothers when her father had inherited some family holdings that he needed to handle and moved back to England not long before Morgan had run into Whiskey. And she’d sure tested her brothers’ patience since then. He had heard a lot of stories about her. Most of them about pranks she pulled or about some bit of trouble she caused. He’d heard plenty of mentions about her getting turned over her father’s knee—even her older brothers’ knees—for a sound spanking. He was damn sure he’d be warming her butt as well from time to time...if they actually got married.

“I haven’t forgotten those tales you shared over the campfires about your sisters,” he reminded Taos. Actually they haunted his thoughts, almost as much as his memories of how she’d looked that day. He’d been mad as hell about her coming into the room uninvited. But he hadn’t failed to take in the fact that she was a rare beauty.

He shoved those worrisome thoughts aside and concentrated on where they were going. They rode alongside the railroad tracks and he noted McCarty’s Drugstore. Across the road was the livery stable and Varieties Dance Hall. A half dozen horses were tied to the hitching rail out front and sounds of a piano, some hooting and hollering drifted out the swinging batwing doors.

Evidently Taos had decided not to continue with the subject of his sister for a moment. Instead he said, “I think you should take a good look at the ranch. It’s a nice spread along the Arkansas River and it would be a good place to buy.”

“Buy?” Morgan glanced over in surprise, but then thought maybe he shouldn’t be all that surprised. Taos, his brother, Keno, and his sisters owned the ranch now, and the Dusty Trails Saloon. Keno had never been interested in ranching. He ran the saloon and preferred that, as well as gambling. And Taos had been talking about finally using his legal training and starting his own law practice in Dodge City.

Taos guided his horse around a deep rut in the dirt road and then tipped his hat at one of the dancers smiling at him outside of the Lady Gay Dance Hall. "I know you don't want to go back to Texas when you decide to turn in your badge. You've talked about breeding horses. Our ranch would be a good place to do that."

Morgan's gut churned. *Turn in his badge. Settle down. Here.* "Talking big, that's all it was." Damn tempting offer, though.

"I think you could do it. Especially with Whiskey at your side." Taos spotted the telegraph office and headed for it. "Speaking of my sister. I need to go send that telegram."

Pulling on the reins, Morgan turned back toward the Lady Gay. "I need a drink, bad. That bath and a shave can wait a spell."

Taos looked back and said, "Do some thinking, too. About the ranch. I can always find someone else to sell it to if you're not..."

The words were out of Morgan's mouth before he could stop them. "I want it." He frowned in disgust with himself and headed for the saloon. "Damn." Evidently he really was thinking about giving up his badge, about settling down in one place, about planning to take another woman for his wife.

God help him. No, God help them both.

* * *

Little Rock, Arkansas

Whiskey stood with hands on hips staring at the basket of her aunt's balloon in the barn. It had been months since their last short ballooning adventure. She'd liked the feeling of freedom, liked how it seemed she had controlled her fate.

She thought of the crumpled telegram in her pocket. It had arrived the day before. Now she pondered murder. Make that murders, of both her interfering brothers.

"What are you doing, Sweetling?" her Aunt Mae asked, limping up next to her. Her bones were clearly aching again.

"Are you real fond of my brothers?" Whiskey asked. "I mean *real* fond? Because I'm contemplating their demise."

Mae chuckled, her double chin bobbing. "There have been a few times when I doubted they had a full head of sense between them." She shook her head knowingly. "Like now. But I would miss them, dear, should you decide to do them in."

Whiskey ran a hand over the side of the basket. "They would deserve it. Promising to sell *my* share of the ranch without even asking me." She pounded the basket edge with her balled up fist. "To that U.S. Marshal friend of theirs."

"Morgan Rydell." Mae looked thoughtful. "I met him once. A hard man, dangerous I hear. But he's been a loyal partner and friend to Taos for a long time."

Whiskey, too, remembered the big Texan she'd walked in on one day back home, walked in and found him in nothing but his long johns. Oh yes, she'd thought about that encounter more than once. He was a man of few words, even fewer smiles—or so Taos had once told her. And he had a deadly reputation with a gun, which meant there would always be someone looking to take him on, wanting to make a name for himself.

Ace had been fast, too, but not fast enough.

Her heart hurt.

She shoved the painful thoughts aside. "Those scoundrels also ordered me back home by the end of this month."

"You had been talking about—"

"*My* idea! *My* decision as to when and why." Tears burned her eyes. "I am *not* selling my share! But I am going back home. To stake Keno and Taos out on the prairie, to let the sun bake them, to let the rattlers do their worst."

When she glanced at her aunt, she found her smiling. “You have every right to be annoyed with them.”

Whiskey snorted as a breeze swept around them and smells of musky hay and dirt drifted up in the warm air. “I’m a damn lot more than ‘annoyed with them.’ Damn their worthless hides!”

Her aunt’s immediate raised eyebrow warned her to control her choice of words. She’d had her mouth washed out with soap more than once since she’d come to stay here. She’d even been spanked a time or two for one reason or another. She had the worst temper in the family and sometimes she paid the consequences for letting it loose in front of the wrong person.

“Sorry. They’ve just pushed me too far this time.” She tromped down her anger with them, or tried to. “I’ve worked hard here, with you, learning all these animal doctoring skills. I’ve been planning to use them on the ranch...*our* ranch. And then I hoped to convince the community to let me take care of their animals as well.”

“I thought you had been considering that. You’re wonderful with horses, dear, even cattle.” Mae looked out the doorway toward the corral and two of the battered animals they had adopted this last year: a one-eyed mule named Taos because of his stubbornness and a hat-munching camel named Keno. “With other animals, too.”

She followed her aunt’s gaze and knew she couldn’t leave these special two “pets” behind when she went back to Kansas. She would have to figure out a way to take them with her.

“You know I’ve had a difficult time getting my neighbors to trust me with doctoring...”

“But they do now.” Whiskey smiled. “I’m patient. I’ll eventually bring people around.”

Her aunt chortled. “Patient! Honey, you don’t have a *patient* bone in your body.”

Whiskey pursed her lips in annoyance, huffed, knowing that was pretty much true.

“You’ve got many other good qualities, though,” Mae soothed. “Everyone I know has come to love you, and they’re all going to miss having you here. Almost as much as I will.”

Whiskey didn’t want to get into the whole “missing” issue because she would miss her aunt a lot. But her life wasn’t really here. They both knew that.

She went back to the matter that frustrated her. “I love the ranch, always have. More than any of my family does. I’ve known for several years now that neither Keno nor Taos want to stay there much longer. I had hoped to convince them to sell *me* their shares. I know Brandy would.”

Mae started to respond but Whiskey barreled on with her thoughts. “They know how I feel about the ranch. And they must know that I’ll never agree to sell my share. Which means they’re going to force me to be partners with Morgan Rydell. Not damn likely! No damn way!”

Again her aunt frowned in disapproval. Again Whiskey reined in her temper. She detested the taste of her aunt’s soap.

“It appears I’ll have to go home and do battle with three idiot men. As sure as the sun shines in the east every morning, I’m going to convince that marshal to *not* buy into the ranch.”

She looked across the farmyard at the mule standing close to his good friend the camel. Morgan, the skunk—aptly named, she thought—without the ability to ward off enemies by spraying them with nose-wrinkling perfume, scurried under the corral fence. He waddled over to lie down in the patch of shade his bigger friends created. Such an odd trio, but she loved them dearly. She especially enjoyed the names she’d chosen for them, fitting names for each one.

“Since I’ll be traveling by train... Well, I can take them all with me. If you don’t care, that is.”

“You can’t travel that far in a boxcar.” Her aunt looked worried, intrigued at the same time.

“Sure I can.” Already she was thinking about what else she could take with her in that kind of space.

“Your brothers will have a conniption fit,” Mae said with a chuckle.

Whiskey beamed. They would and that made the plan even more appealing. She decided to go a step further. “About your balloon...”

Mae’s eyes widened and she turned toward the gas balloon that had served well during the War Between the States when it had been used to deliver messages. It had been a gift from one of her aunt’s beaux a number of years ago. She’d only flown it a half dozen times since then, twice with Whiskey.

“Your brothers—”

“They will absolutely hate it. Yes, I know.” She reached out to lovingly touch the basket. “You’ll never use it again, will you? And I’d really like to have it, at least borrow it.”

“No, no I doubt I’ll ever take it up again.” Mae looked thoughtful. “You’re already better at flying the balloon than I ever was. Still...” She drew in a breath and nodded. “You may take it.”

Whiskey did a little dance of excitement. “Wonder if I’ll be able to convince the train conductor to let me out with the balloon in Spearville, the town just north of Dodge City?” She knew she could be persuasive when she really wanted something...well, except sometimes with her brothers. “Oh, I’m sure I can convince him.”

Her mind spun with details as she studied the nearby folded up balloon envelope and stack of rigging. She needed to drag it all out and make sure the pieces and parts were still there. And she needed to make sure there was still some gas in the container, at least enough for a short ride.

“You’re not... you’re not thinking about flying into town?” Mae gaped at her, shocked, and then amused. “Your brothers will definitely have fits.” She laughed, grinning. “I almost wish I could see their reactions.”

Whiskey just smiled.