



Arizona Brides

By Carol Cox

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Prescott, Arizona Territory

Richard Bartlett leaned into the biting wind as he walked along, hating the wind, hating the cold, and finding no beauty in the brilliant streaks of rose and gold that tinged the late afternoon sky. The letter tucked into his waistcoat pocket crackled with every step, reminding him of his dilemma.

Should he tell his wife that fool of a girl had written again, proposing a visit? And if he did, how should he break it to her? Letitia was hard enough to please in the best of times, but with her laid up now, and after their recent trouble, she was more sharp-tongued than ever. With his head turned down, chin tucked into the woolen scarf around his neck, he paid little heed to the rugged beauty around him.

A stocky figure stepped out of the shadows, planting its solid bulk directly in the preoccupied man's path, not flinching when the inevitable collision came.

"Why don't you watch where you're. . ." Richard broke off, realizing who he had run into. His face flushed, then cooled. "Timothy! I'm sorry. I didn't see you." He tried a weak laugh that didn't quite come off.

The shorter man adjusted the bowler hat the impact knocked askew and rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "No problem, my friend. No problem at all." He waved his hand in a magnanimous gesture. "You look like a man with a lot on his mind." Timothy's shrewd blue eyes noted Richard's involuntary start, and the ends of his handlebar mustache twitched upward in a satisfied smile. He hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his waistcoat in a comfortable, habitual gesture. "And probably with good reason." His eyes narrowed appraisingly. "Things haven't been going well for you lately, have they, Richard?"

Richard eyed Timothy's florid face suspiciously. Did a hidden meaning lie beyond the sympathetic words? He drew his handkerchief from his coat pocket and patted his forehead, despising the way his hands shook.

"You're speaking of my wife's accident, of course," he replied, willing his voice to remain steady. "It was a shock, naturally, but the doctor assures us she'll recover in time." He pressed his lips together. Did Timothy deliberately smoke those cigars to veil his face in the dense cloud of smoke? Richard wouldn't put it past him. Timothy seldom missed an opportunity to put others at a disadvantage.

"Ah, Richard, Richard." Timothy's sorrowful tone grated on Richard's nerves. "I can understand a man having to maintain his pride, even in a situation like this. But you should know you can confide in me." He patted Richard's shoulder solicitously. "Walk with me," he said, nodding across the street to the broad plaza. "It will do you good to unburden yourself."

"Really, Timothy, I must get home. My wife will worry."

The blue eyes took on a glint of steely gray. "Then let us say that it would be to your advantage to talk to me. . .and to your disadvantage not to." The voice sounded no less menacing for its gentle tone. "Come walk with me." For all Richard's advantage in height, it was his shorter companion who radiated confidence and power as they strolled across the open area.

Richard felt his stomach tighten, as though preparing to ward off a blow. How much did Timothy know? How much more could he guess?

"A lovely place, this." Timothy nodded approvingly at the square set aside by the territorial capital's founders to provide a community gathering place. "A natural spot for two friends to cross going home in the evening, but with no place for listening ears to hide." He slowed and turned to face Richard. "How long do you think it will be before people find out you're destitute?"

The directness of the question took Richard's breath away. "I don't know what you-"

"Come, come." Timothy's voice registered impatience now. "If you think you can bluster your way through with everyone else, you can try that and see how far it gets you. But you're talking to me now, Richard, and I know." He breathed the last word in an ominous whisper. "You invested everything you had in that mining stock Josh Wheeler was selling. Everything," he emphasized. "And the stock and the mine both turned out to be a sham. And instead of making a

fortune, you're left penniless." He smiled at the shock on Richard's face and breathed out another wreath of cigar smoke.

"Not a pretty picture, is it? You're a political appointee out here, the same as me. The government has entrusted the running of this territory to the likes of us. How do you think they'll feel about your ability to manage a role in territorial government when you can't manage your own money?"

"I'm not the only one Wheeler took in." Richard made an effort to rise to his own defense. "There were plenty of others."

Timothy nodded slowly, as though weighing the statement. "True. But none of the others invested everything he had in the world. And none of the others had already lost one fortune before ever coming west." He chuckled at Richard's gaping mouth. "Did you think no one would ever learn of that?" he asked gently, then shook his head. "Knowledge is power, Richard. Remember that. I've made it my business to be a very knowledgeable man."

"Just what do you intend to do with that knowledge?" Richard's voice came out in a hoarse rasp, forced through a throat gone dry. Timothy's love of power was legendary, his use of it notorious. If word of Richard's folly spread through the frontier community, he would never be able to look people in the eye again, much less hold on to public office. And how many more fresh beginnings could a man in his fifties expect to have?

"That's entirely up to you," Timothy responded. "Personally, I would hate to see you humiliated and sent off in disgrace. We've worked well together in the past; I think we can do so in the future. "Provided you're still here, of course," he added casually.

Richard fought to breathe, laboring against the tight band constricting his chest. "All right. What, exactly, do you want from me?"

"Ah, now we're getting down to business!" Timothy's face was wreathed in a genial smile, radiating goodwill. The sight turned Richard's stomach. "You've met my son, haven't you?" Timothy asked abruptly.

Richard nodded, wondering at the change of subject. "Several times. Why?"

"He's the pride of my life," Timothy answered. "A fitting heir for the legacy I'm building for him. Even if he doesn't care about it yet." He tossed the cigar stub down and round it out with a vicious dig of his heel. "He's a stubborn lad. At the moment, he tells me he doesn't have an interest in politics, but that will change. And when it does, all the groundwork I've laid will be

waiting for him. He'll be able to step right into a life of power, wealth, and influence." His voice trailed off, and he stood staring at the darkening sky as if watching his words become reality.

Richard shifted uncomfortably. "But what does that have to do with-"

"Up to now," Timothy continued as if Richard hadn't spoken, "he's shown no interest in marriage, but mark my word, it's only a matter of time until some woman realizes what a catch he is and sets her sights on him. When that happens, I don't want to see him as the target of one of these backwoods bumpkins. I won't have it!" Timothy's eyes glittered menacingly. "He needs a wife who will be an asset to him, who knows how to move in the right social circles, not one of the pathetic rubes you'll find around here."

"I still don't see-"

"I need a girl," Timothy stated. "And you're going to provide one for me."

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