



Sagebrush Brides

By Carol Cox

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It was unseasonably warm, and a muggy stillness hung over St. Joseph. I sat in the big wicker rocking chair on Aunt Phoebe's front porch and fanned myself. Aunt Phoebe sat facing me, bolt upright in her chair. Her iron-gray hair, pulled into its customary bun, was drawn so tight that I wondered for the thousandth time how she was able even to blink. She pursed her thin lips in disapproval.

"You're a foolish, ungrateful child, Judith. How you can disregard the kindness and generosity I've shown you these past ten years, I cannot imagine. Your mother would never have considered doing such a thing. It is obviously the bad blood you inherited from your father."

I clamped my own lips together to keep silent. We had been over this same ground endlessly in the last two weeks. It would be pointless and perhaps fatal to my plans to open another argument and antagonize my aunt further.

Aunt Phoebe had taken my father and me into her home after my mother died in the influenza epidemic when I was ten. At the time it seemed like the most natural thing in the world, given her autocratic personality and the need to "keep a firm hand" on my father, as she put it.

Papa had been a point of contention between us for years. Gentle, fun loving, and idealistic, his was the complete opposite of Aunt Phoebe's pragmatic nature. Her determination to have us share her large house owed more, I believed, to duty than to affection-an attempt, perhaps, to atone for her lapse in allowing her younger sister to marry him.

"I don't mean to seem ungrateful," I said, choosing my words with infinite care. "But in his letter, Uncle Matthew sounded as though he really needed me to come." I didn't mention how much I longed to go.

"Matthew!" She sniffed in contempt. "Your father's brother, through and through. A complete reprobate if ever I saw one! Whatever possessed him to write after all these years of silence, I will never know."

I didn't know what had prompted his letter either, but I blessed him for sending it. We had never had the opportunity to know one another well. He had left for the gold fields in 1859. I remember seeing him off, holding my father's hand and waving frantically at his wagon, lettered on the side with "Pike's Peak or Bust." He had waved back jauntily, his merry voice booming out, "Come and join me when I get settled, Robert. We'll both make our fortunes!"

After that we received a few sporadic letters, each one from a different gold camp, until finally they stopped coming altogether. Then two weeks ago, another one arrived, a heaven-sent missive addressed to Miss Judith Alder. It read:

Dear Niece,

Word has reached me that my brother Robert has been dead these three years. I am now the proprietor of a trading post near Taos, New Mexico Territory. I can no longer share my good fortune with your father, but if you choose to join me, I can offer you a home and a share of my future profits. I could sure use your help, as I'm a poor hand at housekeeping and worse at dealing with figures. If you decide to come, anyone in Taos can tell you how to reach me.

Your loving uncle, Matthew

P. S. I cannot pay for your passage at present, but I am sure that in short order we can build a prosperous business.

My heart had soared as soon as I finished reading it. Here in my hands lay the possibility of escape from dependence on Aunt Phoebe. After opening her home to us, she had never allowed us to forget the debt we owed. I felt gratitude toward her for all she had done, but I yearned to shake off the status of poor relation.

I thought back to my father. He had rarely mentioned his brother in his later years, the time that stood out in my memory being during his final battle with the consumption that had claimed him.

"They tell me that a drier climate in the early stages might have helped," he said wistfully. "Perhaps I should have followed Matthew west, after all."

In that moment my mind was made up. I would follow my uncle in my father's stead. All that remained was to convince Aunt Phoebe.

I broached the subject as delicately as I could, but my caution didn't soften Aunt Phoebe's reaction one whit. She alternated between stony stares of disapproval and long tirades in which she took me to task for my ingratitude. I was tempted to answer her sharply, but I held my tongue. I had been left without a cent of my own, and if she refused to help me with the cost of my passage, my adventure would be over before it had begun.

"As I've told you," I said, trying not to let desperation show in my voice, "I promise I'll repay the money for my fare west just as soon as I've earned it in Uncle Matthew's trading post."

Her sharp eyes studied me for a long moment before she spoke. "I have made inquiries and have been in-formed that it is possible to make a comfortable income from such an enterprise. I am certain, though, that wastrel uncle of yours will squander every dime before you ever lay eyes on it."

I swallowed hard.

"However," she continued, "I can see that you are determined to go." Her eyes misted over. "Just like your mother, you are bent on following the Alder will-o'-the-wisp, probably to your ruin. But, foolish or not, I will not stand in your way."

"Oh, Aunt Phoebe!" I cried joyously.

"Just a moment," she snapped, and her eyes were once again hard and bright. "You may delude yourself if you choose, but I will not. You say you will repay the cost of your fare. Very well. I accept your intent, although I do not foresee that you will be able to earn enough in your uncle's care to have more than you need just to keep body and soul together. Nevertheless, I am prepared to finance this venture of yours."

She raised her hand warningly before I could interrupt. "But I refuse to throw away any more money than necessary on a fool's errand. I have looked into the various means of transportation to Taos. The railroad and stagecoach would be the fastest methods, but the fare is over two hundred dollars, far more than I am willing to spend."

I looked at her, puzzled. What on earth did she have in mind?

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