



*Silhouette*

SPECIAL EDITION

# THE COWBOY'S CONVENIENT BRIDE

WENDY WARREN





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Available September 28, 2010

SPECIAL EDITION

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***“Who looks out for you?” he asked.***

She looked surprised by the question, one she clearly had not asked herself.

Lightning struck Fletcher then, an electric shock that rearranged a lifetime of isolation. His noble intentions to leave her alone burned up and blew away.

Closing the last bit of distance between them, he raised an arm and his fingertips brushed her cheek; it was so soft a snowflake would have slid right off.

Fletcher moved slowly, giving her time to stop him. And praying that she wouldn't. In his entire life he couldn't remember a moment when he'd wanted so badly to give rather than take.

Dear Reader,

I have a hidden talent: I can whistle the theme songs to *The Andy Griffith Show*, *I Love Lucy*, *Here Come the Brides*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *My Three Sons*. I would gladly move to Mayberry (if it existed, and I could convince my family to live without a mall). Remember how those great old shows depicted community? Neighbors were friends, friends were family and people's foibles made them more lovable.

Working on a new series, I wanted to create a world in which men and women fall in love with help from their friends and neighbors, where people laugh a lot and cry a little, and where you, the reader, can feel like one of the family.

It's my hope that your time in Honeyford will give you that delicious life-is-good feeling.

Welcome to Honeyford. Welcome home!

*Wendy Warren*

# THE COWBOY'S CONVENIENT BRIDE

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***WENDY WARREN***



**SPECIAL EDITION**

Published by Silhouette Books

**America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance**

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."



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**THE COWBOY'S CONVENIENT BRIDE**

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## WENDY WARREN

lives with her husband, Tim, a dog, a cat and their daughter, Elisabeth, near the Pacific Northwest's beautiful Willamette River. Their house was previously owned by a woman named Cinderella, who bequeathed them a gardenful of flowers they try desperately (and occasionally successfully) not to kill, and a pink General Electric oven, circa 1958, that makes the kitchen look like an *I Love Lucy* rerun.

A two-time recipient of Romance Writers of America's RITA® Award for Best Traditional Romance, Wendy loves to read and write the kind of books that remind her of the old movies she grew up watching with her mom—stories about decent people looking for the love that can make an ordinary life heroic. Wendy was an *Affaire de Coeur* finalist for Best Up and Coming Romance Author of 1997. When not writing, she likes to take long walks, settle in for cozy chats with good friends and sneak tofu into her husband's dinner. She always enjoys hearing from readers and may be reached at P.O. Box 1208, Ashland, OR 97520.

For Carolyn Pizzuti, aka Carolyn Zane,  
a fabulous author who is an even better friend.  
Thanks for the gut-busting laughs, for making me  
cry occasionally and for giving my daughter  
awesome cousins (and someone on whom to practice  
her burgeoning kissing skills. You bring the shotgun;  
I'll order the wedding cake.) I'll be Ethel to your Lucy  
anytime. <http://toohotmamas.wordpress.com>

And for Tim and Libbi. Always.



## *Chapter One*

Pajama-clad and sock-footed seven-year-old Will Dobbs raced across a scarred pine hallway, skidded a sharp left into his room and took a flying leap onto the mattress. He sat cross-legged with his arms wrapped around his chest, his teeth chattering like castanets. "I'm f-f-f-freezing!"

As urgently as an outlaw with a posse at his heels, five-year-old Orlando dove into bed beside his big brother, shaking his legs with enough force to make the headboard rap against the wall. "M-m-me t-t-t-too! I got goose bumps all over me."

"My lips are frozen."

"My tongue is. Listen—I ca' har'ly talk."

Refusing to be outdone by his younger sibling, Will rose to his knees. "I'm so cold, I'm pissin' ice cubes."

"William Romeo Dobbs!" At the sound of their mother's voice, both boys made bug eyes at each other and scrambled beneath the sheets.

Claire hustled to her sons' bed, a tattered but thick blanket folded in her arms. She stared down at them. "Where on earth did you learn that expression?"

Will mumbled from under the sheet. "Sorry, Mom."

"Well, I should say." After an admonishing glare for good measure, she shook out the cover, spreading the thick wool across the bumps and angles of their small bodies. "Besides, it's hardly a contest. Y'all are both human Popsicles. I better warm you up quick or I'll find two icicles in bed tomorrow instead of little boys." She began to tuck them in with exaggerated urgency, making them giggle.

Will offered another exaggerated shiver, mostly, his mother hoped, for effect. "Is Oregon always cold?"

"Nope. By summer it'll be so hot we'll wish for a frost."

"Mom?" Pulling the covers up to his chin, Will frowned. "Are we staying here forever?" He watched carefully for her response.

Gazing down at him, Claire felt a rush of love and regret that made her heart feel like a sponge with the water squeezed out. Sitting on the bed, she let their hazel gazes settle into each other. Will was the one of her offspring that most resembled her, particularly in his tendency to fret about the future. Smoothing his wheat-colored bangs, she tried to sound like a woman with a great plan. "I expect to live here for years and years, Will. I figure you and your brother and sister will live here until you go off to college. Then I hope you'll come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas." She went nose to nose with him. "At least you better, or I'll bake your favorite pies and eat them all myself."

Orlando popped up in bed as if his spine were a spring. "I'm gonna stay with you, Mom. Me and my wife are gonna live here and drive you around in our car."

"You gotta get a job before you buy a wife and car." Will rolled his eyes and tugged at the blanket his brother had

pulled off. "That's how come I'm going to college." He nodded importantly at Claire, who nodded importantly back. She'd done a thorough job of impressing upon her eldest that he would be the first Dobbs to go to college, not to mention the first to graduate from high school.

Orlando ignored them both, his unleashed enthusiasm making him bounce on the bed. "I'm gonna work in a mine like Daddy. I'm gonna wear a hard hat with a light on it and big boots for my feet."

The sweetness of the evening drained abruptly for Claire, replaced by a nausea she had grown used to over the past year. Before moving lock, stock and barrel to Oregon, she, her boys and their father had lived in eastern Kentucky, in a town where any man worth his salt worked as a mountaintop miner. Arlo Dobbs had definitely been worth his salt. He'd lied about his age and gone to work for the mining company when he was only sixteen. By eighteen, he'd saved enough money to rent a home and buy a wedding band, and the day he'd asked Claire to marry him, he'd looked as proud and notable as a millionaire.

Glancing out the rectangle of window above her sons' bed, Claire wished she could see a star through the thick cloud cover. She needed a reminder that heaven could sometimes be seen right here on earth. She'd become Arlo's wife before she'd been able to vote and had never regretted it. He had been a man easy to love and easy to honor, but she didn't want any of their babies following his footsteps.

*Or mine, either.* Her jaw tensed. Somewhere under that great big sky was a kinder, better life. She intended for her children to have their fair share of it.

"You don't look happy."

Will's worried voice jerked Claire to her present. She smiled to ease her boy's fears. "I'm always happy when I'm

with you and Orlando and Rozzy. I was just thinking about how I've got to sew the curtains for your window."

"And you don't like to sew?" Orlando guessed, up and jumping on his knees now, making the tired mattress sag.

"It's not what I'm best at." Gently but insistently, Claire pushed him down to his pillow.

"What are you best at?"

She pretended to have to think about it. "Good-night tickles." She dove for their ribs, eliciting easy laughter from Orlando. When Will chortled, too, Claire counted herself a success and left her sons to what she hoped would be a good night's sleep.

Trudging across the short hallway to the room she shared with her baby girl, Rosalind, Claire felt too stiff and tired to be twenty-five, too young to be a widow—but life hardly ever asked permission before it changed on a person.

There were plenty of risks associated with working in a mine, but Arlo hadn't succumbed to those. He'd died in a single-car accident along a winding road on the way home from work. At the time, Claire had had two children under six and a baby ready to be born. There hadn't been any family or education to fall back on, and she'd begun to think God might be teaching her a lesson when life had shifted again and suddenly she'd been back in His good graces.

Her great-aunt Faylene on her mother's side had passed on at the comfortable age of ninety-two, bequeathing Claire this two-bedroom, one-bath, totally paid-off house about sixty miles east of Oregon's central corridor. Except for Arlo's 1980 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme with cruise control, it was the first time Claire had owned anything bigger than a suitcase. Such a windfall—a house that was all hers with no questions asked and roomfuls of furniture to go with it—had sent her straight to her knees in gratitude and relief.

Walking softly to the crib where her eleven-month-old

slept, Claire gazed at the fair, Ivory-soap skin Rosalind had inherited from her father. Rozzy would never know Arlo, and the boys were still so young. . . . The details they remembered now would blur until the time came when their daddy was a memory and no longer a feeling. It killed Claire to think of it.

Putting two fingers to her lips, she pressed a kiss softly against Rosalind's cheek then headed downstairs, flipping off lights on her way to the living room. There, she checked the thermostat: fifty-one degrees if she squinted, and it was only early November; winter in eastern Oregon had not even begun.

Belligerently overriding the financial fears that never left her now, she shoved the thermostat up a good ten degrees. Letting her babies turn blue in their beds was not part of her plan.

She needed a job, and she needed it yesterday. She'd barely driven across the Oregon border before she'd started looking for employment, but her search had left her bone dry. Until today. This afternoon, she had spied her first golden ray of hope—an employment notice in the local paper.

*Two years' guaranteed employment for an honest, hard-working woman. Can you cook, muck a stall, bake a pecan pie? Integrity and loyalty a must to join the team at Pine Road Ranch. Apply in person. 120056 Old Pine Road. Benefits.*

Heart skipping with excitement, Claire had clipped the ad and stuck it to the refrigerator using one of her aunt's "Faith, Hope and Love" magnets for good luck. Every chance she'd gotten tonight, she'd reread it.

*Pine Road Ranch.* It sounded like the kind of operation that had been around for years, would be around for years to come. This could be the job that saved her.

Claire didn't hold with being disrespectful to her elders,

but before Arlo there hadn't been a Dobbs in all of Willow Hills, Kentucky, who'd worked an honest day in his life. Her family hadn't been much better. The one thing she had made Arlo swear to before she'd agreed to marry was that their kids would feel secure and protected. Never, ever would their own parents give them cause to lower their eyes in shame.

She intended to have that job. Since cooking was a skill she'd perfected in grade school, Claire decided to give the folks at Pine Road Ranch samples to make their mouths water for more.

In her kitchen, the cow-shaped clock Aunt Faylene had hung between the tile counter and the nicked, cream-painted cabinets read seven thirty-five. Time to get to work. There were cinnamon rolls to ice, homemade-jam cookies and a butter-soft egg bread to bake, plus a chicken she planned to roast with carrots, pearl onions and parsnips. It didn't matter if morning rose before the bread did or if she fell asleep standing up; she wouldn't go to bed until every last thing was perfect.

Taming her fatigue with determination, Claire headed to the pantry and filled her arms with ingredients.

If she had to clean from dusk till dawn to keep a roof over her children's heads, food in their bellies and self-respect in their hearts, then by God she'd do it. She would muck out any stall, cook a million meals. Whatever it took. No matter what, she was going to wipe the fear and concern from Will's eyes—and keep the innocence in Orlando's and Rosalind's.

Hungry ranchers? Messy house? Filthy barn? Bring it on.

*I'm your woman, Pine Road Ranch.*

Bat dung and cobwebs. Those were the first things Fletcher Kingsley saw when he opened his eyes on...

What day was it? Thursday? Friday?

Struggling until he sat upright with his palms braced against a rough wood floor, his aching head lowered, he settled on Friday, though it didn't make much difference. The days bled together when you had nothing better to do than get drunk in your own attic.

A thin line of sweat broke out above his lip as he tried to straighten his left leg. Huge mistake. Under the best circumstances, the leg ached like a sonovabitch. Last night he'd slept with it bent against one of the several dozen dust-crusted boxes filling the low-ceilinged attic of his family home in Honeyford, Oregon. He'd climbed up here to locate a frying pan and stayed to rummage through the boxes for other homey conveniences. Except for a thirty-year-old bottle of Scotch whisky, he hadn't unearthed anything interesting, so having spent every damn day and night for the past four months in pain of one kind or another, he'd decided a shot or two of whisky couldn't hurt. Between the boredom, the boxes and the Scotch, he must have passed out. Now the pain shooting through his hip, thigh and knee was so excruciating, he almost reached for the bottle he'd set between a box labeled "Junk" and another labeled "More Junk."

"Eeeeeerrrrrrrrrohhhhh." A huge black-and-white cat with fur like an anemic gopher and a meow that sounded like Darth Vader hopped off the "Junk" box, slid down the cardboard side and strolled across Fletcher's crotch en route to his stomach. Yawning, the creature emitted a stream of breath that smelled like a fishing boat.

"Aw, God have mercy." Grimacing, Fletcher turned his face. The mangy feline had appeared two weeks ago, one day after his own arrival. The cat had taken one look at Fletcher, sensed a kindred spirit and stayed. Now he inched higher up on his new master's chest and forced Fletcher to deflect a lick with his hand. "You've eaten your last sardine, pal." The stubborn feline instituted a head-butting maneuver, so

Fletcher gave in and scratched a spot between the ragged ears. Immediately, a guttural purr erupted. "I *might* buy tuna."

Conversing with something live this early in the day proved exhausting. Unfortunately, just as Fletcher thought he might join his cat for another nap, the unmistakable sound of the doorbell—rigged for the past forty years to chime the Oregon state song—rang through the main level of the house. His grandfather, who had designed the bell, had possessed a good sense of humor. Fletcher did not.

Moreover, he had learned long ago that, for the good of all, some people needed to limit their contact with other living beings. He had no intention of answering the door.

Since he was in the privacy of his own empty home, he allowed himself the luxury of a deep groan. Thanks to the alcohol, his head throbbed nauseatingly to a different beat from the pain in his hip and leg. He tried breathing it down to a workable level, and the pulsing began to recede until the first bar of "Oregon, My Oregon" pealed through the house again. The idiotic thing could be heard from every cranny in the old place, like a church bell on steroids.

Employing concentrated effort, Fletcher levered himself to a stand. His head spun. As he searched for the walking stick he was certain...sort of certain...he had brought upstairs last night, the bell rang *again*, which aggravated him so much he yelled without considering the consequences, "Knock it off!" Pain seared his temples.

And the bell chimed once more.

With a grim, malevolent smile, Fletcher snatched up the bottle of whiskey and made his way toward the attic door. For two decades he'd nursed anger and resentment until the emotions had become an enduring part of him, like functioning organs, as vital as his heart and lungs. In the past he'd worked off excess steam in the rodeo ring, riding bulls and broncs with tempers as voracious as his. Four months ago



he'd been injured, his rodeo days over, his restlessness and rebelliousness still intact. He'd been stewing in his own juices ever since. Damned if it wouldn't feel good to vent all over somebody else.

Limping down the steep attic stairs, his hip, leg and head pulsing with every step, he felt sorry...almost...for the chump ringing his bell.

"Orlando Dobbs, don't you dare ring that bell again!"

"It plays a song, Mommy. Listen."

"No!" Claire attempted to race up the porch steps to where her sons were standing, but she was slowed by the large, heavy basket she carried and didn't make it in time. Orlando pressed the white button for the third time, and the crazy doorbell pealed through the ranch house again. Only this time it didn't stop.

"I think it's stuck, Mom." Will looked at her solemnly.

"Oh, no." Claire set the basket of food on the weathered porch and jabbed at the white button, a vain attempt to dislodge it from where it did, indeed, seem to be stuck.

*Please let the people inside be old and deaf.*

It was possible. Pine Road Ranch looked nothing like she had originally envisioned.

The fertile land and stately home of her imagining were in fact acres of sagebrush and a house that looked as if it had been ridden hard and put away wet. Paint peeled in long strips from the wood siding, its shade an indistinct gray that might once have been blue or might once have been white. The structure of the long ranch house suggested it had long ago been graceful and welcoming, but today it sagged like a forgotten relative, weary and broken by neglect.

After a hard thud of disappointment, Claire made herself look on the bright side: help was clearly needed here.