

# The Cowboy Takes a Bride: A Sexy Western Contemporary Romance (The Bridal Bid)

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“I Am Choosing This Of My Free Will, Father,”

Caitlyn told the priest.

“As am I,” Grant said so convincingly that Caitlyn found herself wishing he really meant it. That her husband truly wanted her to be his wife in every respect, and not just the “bonus” her father had promised his foreman.

Her husband!

As much as she would have liked to indulge such fantasies, Caitlyn refused to delude herself. Love played no part in this travesty of a vow. Why, her father might just as well have sold her off to the highest bidder!

Father O'Reilly beamed at Grant. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Grant placed a light kiss upon her lips. Considering the circumstances, his tenderness was so unexpected, it made her knees buckle. Her heart gave a hopeful leap. Perhaps this marriage would continue to surprise her happily....

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Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan

Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire  
The Cowboy Takes a Bride CATHLEEN GALITZ

To my loving father, Cecil Connors,  
whose livelihood depended on the oil field for  
many years. Thank you for acting as my trusted  
adviser on this book—and in my life.  
Books by Cathleen Galitz

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CATHLEEN GALITZ,

a Wyoming native, teaches English to seventh to twelfth graders in a rural school that houses kindergartners and seniors in the same building. She lives in a small Wyoming town with her husband and two children. When she's not busy writing, teaching or working with her Cub Scout den, she can most often be found hiking or snowmobiling in the Wind River Mountains.

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One

“Now what?” Grant asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Behind him, Copper Mountain rose from the plains like a great dark whale breaching against a cerulean sky. Before him, the sage-covered desert stretched into the distance where a trail of dust heralded the arrival of an unannounced visitor to the oil rig. It was not a welcome sight.

The day was ungodly hot, he was already tired and out of sorts, and the last thing he needed right about now was another interruption. Earlier in the day he'd discovered the drilling line was as frayed and worn as the shoestring on which they were operating, and he'd had to re-spool a new one. On an already tight schedule, the process cost time he could ill afford. To top it all off, an hour ago the driller had stumbled out of the bunkhouse reeking of alcohol. The owner offered to take over the key position himself, but at fifty-eight Paddy Flynn was no longer a young man, and both the rigors of the oil field and the unreasonable demands he'd made upon his body left him in no shape to perform such strenuous duties.

Unwilling to put his employees' lives and limbs in the irresponsible hands of a drunken driller, Grant had no other choice but to fire the man on the spot and assume the job himself. A troubleshooter, he rotated between all of L.L. Drilling's operations. Mentally Grant corrected himself. What was left of L.L. Drilling's operations.

Everyone knew that this rig was the company's last hope for staying solvent. To put it in Paddy's own words, if they didn't hit a deep pocket soon, they'd all be plumb bust.

The 1990s hadn't been kind to the oil industry. Just to keep afloat, they'd been forced to sell off all

but two of their big rigs and had kept only a handful of work-overs for service jobs. With each sale, Grant saw his dream of someday buying a ranch slipping away. He already had the place picked out. It was a prime piece of unspoiled Wyoming wilderness, tucked away on the side of a mountain. If he closed his eyes he could almost see it, could almost hear the trill of the river that threaded its way snakelike through a meadow big enough to hold and capture a man's heart.

At the sound of the vehicle coming to a stop below, Grant forced his eyes open. Trouble never bothered sneaking up on him. He groaned at the sight of the passenger who climbed out from behind the steering wheel in the dirt parking lot below. The absolute last thing he needed right about now was for some hot little number in tight jeans and a T-shirt to step out of her brand-new four-wheel drive and distract an already unruly crew. From their reaction to the news that good old Harry had just been run off, Grant knew they were disappointed to hear that their drinking buddy had just been replaced by the company hard-ass. Even under the best of circumstances it was bound to take a couple of shifts with no complications just to get his men in synch.

"Hey babe—y!" someone hollered down as the woman opened the door and took her first step into the blinding sunlight.

The vehicle shook slightly as she slammed the door shut behind her. A fine layer of dust sifted to the ground like a sprinkling of brown sugar. The hint of shiny, fire-engine red paint peeking out from beneath the remaining layers of grime indicated to Grant that the woman must be a greenhorn. It was unlikely a Wyoming native would take a new vehicle on the kind of back roads that led to this rig. The driver had to either be lost, crazy, or so filthy rich that she didn't have to worry about scraping together money for costly repairs. None of the possibilities endeared her any to Grant.

Even from a distance he could see that she was striking. The sun glinted off a mass of glossy, dark mahogany hair that hung below her shoulders. Always a sucker for a pretty brunette, Grant felt something inside him stir at the sight of her squinting up in the general vicinity from which a low wolfish whistle emanated.

Jamming his hard hat back on his head, he swore softly. Though he didn't condone such chauvinistic behavior, he hoped the men's catcalls might just scare the lost little lamb off before she stepped into the midst of this pack of wolves. What with the overtime they'd been putting in, most of the crew hadn't even seen a woman for better than a month, let alone one who looked like she'd stepped out of the pages of some slick movie magazine. Maybe that actually was where he'd seen her before. For some reason she looked familiar.

Grant knew that coming between a crew of horny men and the sexiest thing they were likely to see in another month of long Sundays wasn't going to improve his popularity any. It was just lucky for her that popularity wasn't a prerequisite for being a decent man.

Over the years Grant had earned more than his fair share of battle scars protecting a lady's honor. To be honest some were no more than pathetic barflies, but at least he usually had the privilege of getting to know them prior to scuffling over their questionable virtue.

Unfortunately rather than doing the smart thing and hightailing it back to the safety of her vehicle, the woman started toward the stairs leading to the drilling floor with all the self-assurance of some royal personage whose arrival is expected. Her walk was as classy as the way she tipped her chin elegantly up in the air and ignored the men's whistles and jibes. Grant figured she was either very brave or very stupid.

He was betting on the latter.

Dropping what he was doing, he started toward the stairs with every intention of heading her off.

"Show's over," he called out to the men who had stopped laboring to ogle their visitor. "Get back to work!"

Caitlin's daddy always said they grew 'em big in Wyoming. Big and hearty. If the man blocking her way was typical, she'd have to get used to craning her neck just to look them in the eye. This particular one appeared none too friendly as he met her halfway up the stairs and positioned himself directly in her way. Clearly there was no going around this giant.

"You lost?"

It sounded more like a statement of fact than a question.

"Not at all. I know exactly where I am."

It was disturbing to hear the soft Southern drawl which attached itself to her words. Her professors had worked hard to school the "hick" out of her, but that accent still crept into her voice whenever Caitlin was feeling particularly nervous. She made a conscious effort to eradicate it as she offered the man further explanation.

"I'm the new geologist."

How wonderful it felt to say the words aloud since they not only validated her presence here but also affirmed the dream she had set her heart upon since childhood. Everyone from her mother to her high school advisor had discouraged her from pursuing such a "manly" degree. Laura Leigh had wanted her daughter to attend the same small, private institution from which she had been graduated. Caitlin had flatly refused. A college founded on the principle that young ladies needed to be culturally "finished" was definitely not for her. Only recently had her mother's alma mater allowed men on campus for anything more than uneventful mixers. Not that dating had been uppermost in Caitlin's mind. Unlike so many of the girls she had grown up around, the degree she was looking for was not her MRS.

"I said I'm the new geologist," she repeated, hoping it would lessen the tension that settled into the pit of her stomach like a bad meal.

Nothing in her college classes had prepared her for feeling so hopelessly out of place. So utterly vulnerable.

A smile played around the edges of the man's mouth as he scratched his chin thoughtfully. Caitlin could almost hear the soft rasping sound the whiskers of his five o'clock shadow made against his fingertips. A telltale tremor rippled through her body. Though she didn't expect all rig workers to be as clean-shaven as the preppy college boys she had left behind, neither was she prepared to be screened on-site by a man who looked like he would be just as at home piloting a Viking ship as driving heavy equipment. What a Hollywood producer could do with a hunk like that!

The subordinate position she held on the steps placed Caitlin at a decided disadvantage. She hoped he would attribute the flush of color in her cheeks to the summer heat—not to her discomfort at being eye level with the snap of his jeans. Her old roommate took perverse pleasure in kidding her about her sexual inexperience. Roxy said those furious blushes may as well have

been a scarlet sign marking Caitlin as the oldest collegiate virgin in America.

Forcing her eyes away from the worn fly on the man's stonewashed jeans, she scanned the tight white T-shirt that emphasized both the broad plane of his chest and the breadth of his muscled forearms. Sweat stains left no doubt that these muscles had been earned the old-fashioned way, not in some posh gym with tanning beds and a personal trainer.

Taking a deep breath, she attempted to insert a note of authority into her voice. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to get to work."

The man refused to budge. Leaning insolently against the metal railing, he leveled a pair of electric blue eyes at her and asked, "And just who exactly hired you, Miss Scarlett?"

The smile that curled his lips made Caitlin as defensive as the derisive Southern moniker he'd tossed at her. Just because she wasn't a local didn't automatically mean she was stupid, any more than being carded at bars by doormen who claimed she looked younger than her age didn't mean she hadn't earned the college degree that gave her every right to be here. After enduring four years in traditionally male-dominated classes and having to fight for every ounce of respect owed her, Caitlin wasn't easily intimidated.

"I was hired by the owner, Rhett, and I'm certainly not going to show you my diploma to get by," she snapped impatiently.

Caitlin's ire only deepened the dimples on either side of the man's arrogant smile. Hoisting a huge steel-toed boot on the top of the railing, the Viking positioned his leg across the stairs like a gate. Had he actually snorted in mirth at her reference to her college diploma? She wasn't sure which bothered her more—the sense of danger that the leering men had instilled in her with their sexist hootings or the feeling that this virile bouncer was laughing at her.

There was no hint of patience in his voice when he spoke again. "Sorry, lady. Whoever led you to believe that you had a job here has played a real mean practical joke on you. We're not hiring at the moment so the best advice I can offer you, besides dropping the snotty college attitude, is to turn that fancy rig of yours around and head back the same way you came. You'll find a public phone and directions at Lysite. You can't miss it. It's the nearest town in any direction."

Town? Surely he wasn't referring to that wide spot in the road she'd passed where a handful of buildings, most notably a couple of bars, sprouted up like loosely rooted tumbleweeds. Why, with a huff and a puff a good wind could blow the place away.

Setting her jaw in determination, Caitlin forced the words through clenched teeth. "If you don't move out of the way, mister, I'll be forced to go over your head. I'd hate to have you fired," she lied. In fact nothing would give her more pleasure than to terminate this sexist clod's position.

At that, the man threw his head back and howled with laughter. "If only you could, honey, you'd probably be doing me the biggest favor of my life. But since that's not the case, I'm going to do you a favor. I'll personally escort you back to your Jeep and point you in the opposite direction of trouble. Someday maybe you'll appreciate the fact that somebody was concerned enough to send you on your way with your virtue intact."

It was Caitlin's turn to snort. Drawing herself up to her full five foot six, she braced her shoulders as if preparing to run the man over like a tackling dummy. Good breeding was all that kept her from uttering the oath bubbling on the tip of her tongue.

“With a head as thick as yours,” she said, spitting her words out like slick watermelon seeds, “that hard hat you’re wearing must be strictly for decoration.”

All pretense of gallantry vanished from the man’s eyes with the swiftness of a summer storm. Jerking himself into a rigid upright position, he swept the hat in question from his head and glared at her. The fact that his thick dark hair was tousled and wet with sweat made him look no less sexy, no less imposing than a bodyguard. He typified the expression “glowering good looks.”

“I don’t give a damn if you’re a geologist or the Pope’s own emissary, a drilling rig is no place for a lady—even if I do use the term loosely,” he barked, crowding down onto the step beside her.

Caitlin had to turn sideways to avoid backing down. The step was so narrow that she was sure the man could feel her heart thumping wildly inside of her chest as it brushed against his. At the contact, she felt a jolt of pure sexual energy race through her, short-circuiting the electrodes that connected her brain to her body. Frozen in place, she gaped at him as if seeing Frankenstein’s monster come to life.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” he said. “If you don’t turn around right now and clear out on your own, I’ll be forced to bodily remove you from the premises.”

It took every bit of Caitlin’s self-restraint to keep from slapping the smirk right off that handsome face. She didn’t doubt for a moment that he meant what he said. An image of herself slung over this barbarian’s shoulder like so much chattel to the crew’s gleeful delight made her shudder. She had worked too hard and come too far to be dismissed in such a comic, brutal manner.

This wasn’t at all how she had envisioned her first day on the job.

One of the men gathered about the drilling floor hollered out, “Betcha Harry wouldn’t be so quick to run off such a fine-looking geologist.”

“Don’t mind him, sweetheart. Come on up,” entreated another. “You can check out my rocks anytime!”

Grant whipped his head around like a rattlesnake ready to strike. Just what he didn’t need—an audience to observe some saucy college girl bent on undermining his authority. The fact that the crew was enjoying the show only served to strengthen his resolve to get her out of here before all hell broke loose. That and the fact that she was trying to blink back the moisture in her eyes.

Damn it all to hell! The one thing in the world Grant couldn’t handle was a woman’s tears. A moment ago he was contemplating whether to hoist her over his shoulder. Now suddenly he found himself wanting to enfold the poor little thing in his arms and protect her from the crudity of men who saw but one thing in a woman. Looking at the youthful hope, the unquenchable resolve burning in this girl’s eyes, he realized such chivalry would be as useless as trying to stop a moth from immolating itself on a bare lightbulb.

“I thought I told you to get back to work!” Grant called out over his shoulder.

If he were ever able to pinpoint who’d uttered that crude piece of innuendo that had this pretty little thing blushing six unbecoming shades of red, he intended to personally throttle him.

Pace yourself, he reminded himself. After all, he could only be expected to deal with one emergency at a time.

“Last chance, lady,” Grant growled, putting his hands on her shoulders. “You can do this with or without dignity, but one thing’s for certain—you’re not staying here. It’s not safe or smart.”

Caitlin flinched as if she had been branded by his touch. Ignited by womanly indignation, fire snapped in eyes the color of precious emeralds.

“Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?” She punctuated the question by thumping a finger against the middle of his chest.

Dark clouds turned his blue eyes as gray as gunmetal. Caitlin suspected that had she been a man, he would have snapped her index finger off at the joint.

“Do you?” he snarled in reply.

“What’s all the trouble about up there?” bellowed a familiar voice.

Grant looked down to see Paddy stumbling out of the trailer below. Looking as grumpy as a grizzly awakened from a sound sleep, the older man provided a welcome diversion from the trouble at hand.

His voice heavy with irony, Grant hollered to his partner over the side of the rig. “You’re just in time. Maybe you can use some of that famous Irish charm to explain to this doll that an oil rig is no place for a woman.”

Much to Grant’s surprise, Paddy’s mere presence was able to accomplish what all of his stern directives had not. It got the woman moving. In fact she took off down the stairs two at a time, her speed giving her the uncanny appearance of actually flying.

Her voice rose over the hum of the machinery as she cried out in unrestrained joy, “Daddy!” \*

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When her beloved father fell ill, Caitlyn Flynn agreed to be the 'bonus' he'd promised his hardworking right-hand man. But the ruggedly Western Grant Davis was a far cry from the preppy schoolboys Caitlyn had known. For this broad-shouldered hunk was a real man--and she was now his wife!

Grant was sure a Wyoming oil rig was no place for a debutante. Nor was his bed any place for the fresh-faced, pure Caitlyn. Grant figured just one kiss on his blue-blood bride's prim lips would set her straight--only, he didn't stop to think that his 'bonus' of a wife would spin his own blood hot!

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