

# Her Bewitched Cowboy

By

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# Chapter One

“Marriage is outdated, overrated, and definitely *not* in my future.” Kiley shook her head at her older brother seated next to her at the head of the table. At times he was so old-fashioned. He just didn’t ‘get’ her. “Emphasis on *not for me*.”

The other two-thirds of her triplet sisters nodded. Neither Korey nor Katie was into the idea of settling down. The three of them were identical except for hair choices and shared many beliefs, but their interests in cars, careers, and men vastly differed. She’d expected their agreement. She didn’t expect to see them exchanging a glance before reacting. As if they had shared a silent message, a secret of some kind. It made her uncomfortable being left out. She’d grill them later.

“I still think—” Sam began, shifting his gaze from one sister to another.

“Don’t keep worrying your already over-taxed mind about us,” Korey cut him off. She nibbled on a green bean, tasting it experimentally. “We’ve got things under control.” Again, some kind of telling glance passed between them.

“Like she said,” Katie added, scooping up a forkful of mashed potatoes and studying them. She, too, shot him a look Kiley couldn’t interpret.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Kiley demanded.

Her sisters gave her *innocent* glances without otherwise responding. They returned to examining their food. She was definitely grilling them later. “Sam?”

Instead of answering, he drew in a breath, blew it out on a heavy sigh, and focused warily on his meatloaf. He cautiously took a bite and promptly grumbled, “What the hell?”

He grabbed his glass of water and drank half of it. When he frowned across the table at Kiley, his eyes were watering. “Just once can’t you make something normal?”

His rejoinder temporarily distracted her, but she would get back to whatever was making her uncomfortable later.

“It’s Tuesday. I always try out new recipes on Tuesdays.” Seeing his reaction to her newest recipe, Kiley decided against taking a bite herself. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Note to self: horseradish added to the ground beef mixture, bad. She’d scratch that from her new recipes for her next cookbook. Darn it all, she was in a time crunch before the mid-November deadline with her publisher. Fifty new recipes were due a month from today, of which she had thirty.

Ending the tension of the moment, her sisters giggled, always entertained by witnessing his disgruntlement with a new recipe. In unison, they shoved their servings of meatloaf to the sides of their plates.

“Most of the time your experiments work out fine,” Korey assured and waved her fork with a half-eaten green bean on it. “I wasn’t too sure about your adding ranch dressing to these, but they’re actually pretty good.”

“A man can’t live on green beans alone,” Sam muttered, taking another sip of water. “Meat and potatoes. Simple stuff like steak and baked potatoes are the way to a man’s heart.”

She’d heard the cliché about the way to a man’s heart being through his stomach. Blah, blah, blah. She didn’t cook or create recipes with only men in mind. Particularly not your every day, boring man who didn’t want to think outside the box. Still, she was undecided about the ranchy green beans. The garlic-mashed potatoes with chopped spinach were acceptable, though.

She met his aggravated gaze and returned to his original subject. “If you think marriage is such a wonderful idea, what about setting us an example? Find a woman who can tolerate you and marry her. That whole ‘show’ don’t ‘tell’ thing.”

His lips thinned. They all knew discussing his relationships was a sore subject, considering he’d already had two failed engagements. Again, he looked from one sister to the next. “All I’m saying is that it’s time *all* of you left the nest, so to speak.”

This time when her sisters glanced at him, pure annoyance etched their expressions. She felt better. Maybe she hadn’t really seen anything suspect. Maybe it was just her attitude toward this subject that had her seeing things.

“So, momma bird, you’re ready to shove each of us out of our comfortable nest. Have us test our wings by flying merrily away with some man of *your* approval. Or letting us fall to the ground when it doesn’t work out because we weren’t ready. Is that about right?” Kiley couldn’t believe he was so dense, so determined to ruin their lives. Clearly she and her sisters hadn’t raised their older brother right.

“You’re thirty-two.” He glanced slowly at them once more, concentrating on Kiley, probably because she was the sister who provoked him the most. “Surely your instinctive urge to build your own nest is starting to kick in. Your need to—”

She tossed a buttered biscuit at him, hitting him squarely in the chest. It fell to his lap and left behind a trail of crumbs and butter spots. She winced at his disgruntled growl. “Our need to go forth and multiply must be showing by now. Is that what you were implying?” She rolled her eyes and reached for another biscuit from the wicker basket in front of her.

His glower warned her to reconsider what she’d intended to do. “It’s time for you – each of you – to be some other poor man’s trial to bear.”

When Korey and Katie sucked in breaths and looked ready to lambast him for his idiocy, he scooted back his chair and stood. “Look, I love you all. I’m just worried about you. Ethan thinks—” He slammed his mouth shut, undoubtedly understanding he’d made another mistake.

Kiley bristled, loathing spiraling through her. Her brother knew how much she abhorred hearing yet another Ethanism. “You have got to stop listening to that overly critical, thinks his word is gospel, so not God’s gift to womanhood friend of yours.” Well, on the looks part, Ethan Talbot definitely could fire up desire in most women.

Not her, of course.

Sam’s nostrils flared. He never took criticism of Ethan well. For some reason he had huge blinders on where the powerful rancher, long-time buddy of his was concerned. According to Sam, Ethan could do no wrong.

“I’m not getting into another argument about him. Especially when I one hundred percent agree with him.” His gaze swept over all of them, again landing on Kiley last. “You need to find a man who can handle you, love you for your faults and your strengths. Someone you can torment, adore, and love with the same passion you give to your careers.” His determined gaze took them all in. “I’m talking about each of you.”

“Back at you, bro,” Katie countered, shaking her head sadly. Her mouth tightened.

“Times two,” Korey added, eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Make that times three,” Kiley confirmed. She was pleased to be back in agreement with her sisters. Whatever uneasy feeling she’d had earlier disappeared.

Heaving a sigh, he strode out of the dining room. A few seconds later, he came back to the doorway, now wearing his slightly worn looking Stetson. “Don’t wait up for me.”

“Do we ever?” Kiley and her sisters questioned in unison.

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“So which sister drove you to drink this time?” Ethan asked, somewhat amused. He nudged out the chair next to him with the toe of his boot. His friend had called him in irritation a short while ago, needing to talk, to vent, and wanted to meet at their favorite bar in town. Fortunately his date for the night had cancelled on him, not that he’d minded. He couldn’t even remember why he’d asked her out.

Sam sank onto the chair, stress pinching his brow and tightening his jaw. “All of them.” He lifted his hat to slide his hand through his hair, pure frustration in the habitual action. “Kiley specifically.”

“No surprise there,” Ethan said, trying to contain his amusement. That particular triplet was part of why Sam’s hair was starting to turn gray, at least according to his friend. He didn’t doubt it.

He waved across the semi-crowded room at the bartender for service and then nodded at a couple of area ranch hands he recognized. He didn’t have as much time these days for spending an evening catching up with his friend. His ranch had grown into being a big business instead of a simple ranch to run, like Sam’s Circle C. While he was proud of what he’d accomplished, there were days when he wished he wasn’t in the spotlight so much because of his reputation. He didn’t mind sharing what he’d learned or mentoring struggling young ranchers. But he’d been spreading himself so thin. He sat on too many ranch organization boards as well as being on the Grover City Council, although he still didn’t know how he’d gotten talked into that.

He put his complicated life aside and focused on Sam. “Exactly what have they done to upset you now? Kiley, specifically?”

Ethan’s parents had died sixteen years ago in the same small plane accident that had killed Sam’s folks. They’d each been left with a mid-sized ranch to run. Unlike Sam, the Talbot Ranch had grown to monstrous proportions since he’d not had anything else to worry about or take care of. He didn’t have siblings. But Sam had had to figure out ranch management and finish raising the “Triplet Terrors,” as Ethan referred to them. Sam had done a good job of being older brother/parent for the identical girls eight years younger than him.

“It’s difficult to explain. Korey and Katie came to me the other day, worried about Kiley.”

“Why?” Of the three sisters, she was the one who held his interest the most. Not in a romantic way. No, he couldn’t ever see himself getting involved with the far too independent, far too outspoken and sometimes-outrageous woman. She just... intrigued him. Maybe because she never hesitated to go nose-to-nose with him on anything they disagreed over. Few people did that.

“Has something happened to her?”

Sam glanced at the waitress who approached, smiling at him with a hint of flirtation, which he ignored. “Double shot of whiskey and a bowl of pretzels. And any other snacks you have tonight.”

Her eyes flickered in amusement. “Ah, Kiley is experimenting again, I take it.”

He shuddered. “Meat loaf shouldn’t be toyed around with like that.”

Ethan fought down a laugh. His friend suffered through a lot of Kiley’s attempts at mastering a new recipe for one of her popular cookbooks. A lot of those attempts were failures. Ethan had endured one such meal and had avoided invitations to eat there ever since. He was a fast learner.

He held up his empty bottle of beer and caught the waitress’s attention. She’d still been trying to entice Sam by thrusting out her chest more, but he continued to resist. “I’ll take another of these.”

After giving up on Sam, the young woman wove her way back through the crowded tables in Boots and Beers. “She wants you, you know,” Ethan said, hoping his comment would lighten his friend’s mood.

“Not happening.” Sam went back to his problem, not even glancing at the waitress. “Korey and Katie think Kiley needs to settle down. Personally, I think they *all* need to do that.” His expression tightened even more. “They’ve been worried about her going from one man to another these last couple of years. Only five or six, but still.”

Ethan frowned. He’d heard about that situation and hadn’t liked it, but he had no say in what she did. He wasn’t her older brother. He’d never been a boyfriend. She’d always been too young for him, his friend’s sister, and not his type. He also couldn’t visualize her living anywhere else but the Circle C. She was a ranch woman at heart and from birth, although she didn’t help around the ranch as much as she once had. Somewhere along the years she’d become fascinated with cooking. She’d had the old country kitchen remodeled into a kitchen of any master chef’s dream.

“I think she’s already settled, my friend.”

Sam grunted in displeasure. “It’s her family home, of course. But she needs to move on with her life, at least move out of the house. Build her own place. Buy one in town. Whatever.”

Ethan couldn’t see it happening. “Maybe if you hadn’t let her redo the old kitchen.”

“As if I had a chance of going against the Triplets. When the three of them set their mind on something...”

His friend always referred to his sisters as the “Triplets” when they annoyed him, which they did a lot. He loved them anyway. He would always support and protect them. Sam was a damn good brother.

“Of course when I tried to bring up the subject of marriage, she laid into me.” He blew out a breath, grinding his teeth. “Marriage, per Kiley, is ‘outdated, overrated, and not in her future.’”

“That sounds like something she’d say. Lord, I pity the man who loses his heart to her.” The man would have to have the patience of a saint and the ability to get her under control when she went off on a crazy spell, which she did at least a few times a year. If ever a woman needed her butt warmed now and then, it was Kiley Caruthers. And then that man could enjoy every second when she got outraged after being soundly spanked, when her passionate nature demanded payback.

He shifted on the chair, hoping Sam didn’t notice. She didn’t fit any of what he’d decided was his future wife criteria. She was socially acceptable, something important to his status as an influential rancher in the state. But she was far too outspoken at times, often in opposition to his views. He needed a woman at his side that supported him. He envisioned a wife who dressed appropriately, within the current styles, a ranch wife trendsetter. Kiley’s sense of style was all her own, eclectic and sometimes revealing more than was proper in certain situations. Also, it would be best if his wife didn’t have ambitions of her own, which she certainly did.

In spite of all the reasons not to consider her as future wife material – which he wasn’t – he couldn’t deny being drawn to her. More and more lately. He wasn’t sure when that had changed and he had to guard against acting on it. That didn’t stop him from dreaming about the brunette beauty releasing some of her passionate nature on him.

Their drinks arrived and Sam took a large swallow before easing back in his chair. “I was surprised you agreed to meet me tonight. I thought you had a date.”

Ethan shrugged. “Change of plans.” He grinned and tipped his bottle of beer at Sam. “Things have been hectic lately, so it was good to hear from you. I can always count on hearing some interesting story about your sisters to lighten my mood.”

“Hectic life or not, there are times when I envy you. You haven’t had the trio of brats to deal with all your life.” Sam chugged the rest of his whiskey and motioned for a refill.

There were times when he envied Sam’s life. “I’ve experienced their antics secondhand, though,” he pointed out. He supposed he was lucky not to have all of that responsibility. Still, Sam didn’t live in a big house that felt all too lonely most days.

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“Are you kidding me?” Kiley gaped at her sisters. The uneasiness she’d felt at dinner earlier was fully back. “What the hell are you thinking?”

Korey sat on one side of her on her big brass bed, Katie on the other. Together they gently patted her thighs and smiled in a soothing manner. “You know we love you,” Korey said calmly.



She brushed their hands away and stood to glare at them. “Don’t think you can make nice with me after what you suggested.” She paced across her bedroom floor, stopped to look out the second floor window through the thin curtain at the full-moon night. She wondered where Sam had gone, although it was probably the local favorite bar. She and her sisters might not wait up for him when he went out, but she did worry about him.

“You know we have your best interests at heart,” Korey said as Kiley turned around. Out of habit when she was uncertain, she toyed with the ends of her long, straight brunette hair.

“You love parties and we haven’t had one here in a long time.” Katie looked at her earnestly. The overhead light shining down on her brought out the recent red and blond highlights she’d added to her dark hair. “You love wearing costumes. Halloween was always your favorite day of the year. Trick or treating at the neighboring ranches, the party at the town’s community center. Candy, candy, and more candy. Costumes. This is perfect.”

Kiley rubbed at the headache forming between her eyes. She did love Halloween and she really enjoyed a good party. Unfortunately Sam had vetoed parties here after their last one two years ago on their birthday. Everything had gotten a bit out of hand, even she admitted that.

“Sam won’t allow it.” Which made the idea of having a Halloween party that much more appealing. She’d been feeling more rebellious every day lately, probably because of her looming deadline.

Korey’s blue eyes glowed with delight. “And that will stop us if we really want to do this?” she teased.

Kiley shook her head. “No.” Then she went back to frowning. “It’s not the party idea that upsets me and you both know that.”

She remembered each outlandish word Katie had said. “*We think you should find a potential husband from the men we’ve invited. They are the best of the best from the area.*”

She huffed. “Seriously? You’ve gone behind Sam’s back and *my* back to already plan this party? You’ve invited men *you* see as ‘the best of the best’ for *my* potential husband? Like in the old days of arranged marriages or familial matchmaking.”

They had the good sense to blush and avoid meeting her eyes.

“Wait! Sam is in sync with you on this crazy idea... about me finding a husband.” She growled under her breath, suddenly understanding the odd looks they had shared at the table earlier.

Korey shifted uneasily. “It’s not like you *have to* choose from one of them,” she said and looked to Katie for help.

“Of course not. We’re just offering you some good possibilities,” Katie explained, obviously attempting to sound reasonable. “A few of them you’ve gone out with before and seemed to have a good time with. But with your deadlines and all your experimenting, you never made time to go out with any of them again.”

True. A few of them had asked her out again, been turned down for one reason or another, and they’d given up on her. Still, she’d dated fairly regularly. Just seldom the same man twice or at most three or four times.

Pushing that admission aside in irritation, she stepped in front of them, narrowing her eyes. “Did you warn these men about *why* they were being specifically invited?” She was uncomfortable thinking about some of her previous dates possibly being at the party, together, invited because of her.

“Well, no,” Katie mumbled.

“Would any of them come if we had? No.” Katie’s chin thrust out. “There will be other single women there, too. Lots of food and drinks. None of them will suffer from being invited to our party.”

“But *I* will be the secret reason for the party. My overwhelming need to find a suitable husband at this point in my life,” Kiley grumbled. She pinned them with her disgusted gaze. What had happened to them understanding that she wasn’t interested in marriage?

Neither denied her assessment, but neither backed down. They were determined that she needed their help. In spite of the bizarre situation, she loved them. Slowly her irritation eased.

She could use a good party after working so hard on her upcoming cookbook and trying to find some interest in a cooking show on a TV network in Denver. What would it really hurt? As they’d admitted, she didn’t *have to* choose a husband. These men were coming as mere suggestions by her good-hearted sisters. She still wasn’t interested in marriage. But maybe it would be fun to play along with their strange matchmaking attempt. She could face the men she’d previously dated without feeling too awkward. They hadn’t parted ways with bad feelings, after all.

“I saw some great costumes online the other day,” she offered by way of a compromise agreement.