

KANSAS WEDDINGS

*Three Brides Can Never Say
Never to Love Again*

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Chapter 1

Marin Brooks blinked twice and stared at her aunt. “Excuse me. What did you say?”

“I said”—Lenore’s stiff lips barely moved—“I hope you will finally do the sensible thing and have John put in some sort of home.”

Marin shook her head. Why would she bring this up now of all times? Marin’s parents were dead only four days, the funeral was barely over, and already Aunt Lenore was hollering to “put John away.”

This conversation had been played before, but it had always been Marin’s mother on the receiving end of Lenore’s opinionated comments. Her heart ached as the loss of her parents hit her again. In fact, she felt as if a boulder sat on her chest. Why couldn’t Lenore give her time to heal before beginning that tiresome tirade about John?

“Aunt Lenore, you know how Mother felt about—”

“My sister spent every day of that boy’s life taking care of him.” Her aunt cut her off abruptly. “She worked herself into an early grave trying to make him more than he had the ability to be. Now she’s gone—God rest her soul—and that responsibility falls to you.” Lenore clutched Marin’s arm, leaning in and whispering harshly. “Do the sensible thing, Marin. Put him in a home and get on with your life. Don’t waste your life as my dear sister did.”

Marin stared in amazement as Lenore released her arm and strode away, her chin held high, a fake smile plastered on her wrinkled face. The voices of visiting relatives and bereaved friends seemed to fade into the distance as Marin turned to focus her attention on John. He appeared so forlorn sitting in the middle of the sofa, his palms on his thighs, his face drooping as he watched the milling people who talked around him as if he weren’t there. The boulder pressed harder. John was her responsibility now.

How she loved him.

And pitied him.

Sometimes the two emotions were so intermingled it was hard to choose one over the other. Her earliest memories involved John. How could she do what Aunt Lenore suggested? And how could she not?

Marin shook her head again, trying to clear it. She would have time to think of that later. Time when the funeral was officially over, people had gone home, and she and John were alone. Then they could talk. Then she could think. There was

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too much noise, too much consoling, too much. . .sorrow. . .to add more to it now. There would be time. Because from now until her dying day, John would be her responsibility.



“Marin, where are Mom and Dad?”

Marin looked up from her morning newspaper and offered a sad smile. “Remember, John? We talked about this. Mom and Dad are in heaven. They had an accident, and they went to heaven with Jesus. Remember?”

John nodded, his thin blond hair falling over his high forehead. His hazel eyes, flecked with gold and green, caught Marin’s attention as they always did. John’s every thought could be read in his almond-shaped eyes. She read fear and uncertainty now, and pity rose in her chest.

“You don’t have to worry. Mom and Dad are happy and well with Jesus.”

John’s lower lip quivered. He poked at the toast on his plate with a stubby finger. “I miss them, Marin.” His clipped, concise way of speaking seemed more pronounced in his sorrow. As always, his pronunciation of *r* came out like a *w*, making him sound much younger than his thirty-one years. Marin felt maternal as she reached across the table and took his hand.

“I know. I miss them, too.”

“I will not see them again.”

Marin tugged his hand. “Yes you will. We’ll both see them again, when we get to heaven.”

John’s eyes lit up, the smile changing his countenance. “Can we go today, Marin? Can we go to heaven today?”

Marin felt tears prick her eyes. How she missed her mother! She had always known the best way to explain things to John. She could make him understand without hurting him. Marin was completely out of her league.

“No, I’m sorry, but we can’t. You see—”

John threw her hand away, anger pursing his face. “You are mean, Marin. You are mean not to let me see Mom and Dad. I do not like you when you are mean.” He rose and stood glowering at her.

Marin rose, too, reaching her hand to him. “John, it isn’t that I don’t want you to see Mom and Dad. I want to see them, too. But—”

John covered his ears and squinched his eyes. “No! I will not hear you, Marin. I will not listen!”

Marin sighed, and the tears that had threatened earlier now slipped free and rolled down her cheeks. *I can’t do this, God! I can’t take care of John. I don’t know how. . . .*

Her father’s voice slipped into her memory. “Marin, when your mother and I are gone, you will be all John has. We’re counting on you to care for him.” How many times had she heard those words? Countless times. But had she ever

believed it would happen? Never. Their parents had been so healthy, so vital. Marin had heard the statement, agreed to it, but never once had she believed she would be twenty-three years old and left to care for her brother. Resentment built, but responsibility squelched it. She wouldn't let her parents down. She wouldn't let John down.

"Marin?"

John's voice intruded into her thoughts. She lifted her face to find that he had dropped his hands. His eyes now glittered with tears.

"Marin, being in heaven means dead." John's chin quivered as he waited for her to respond.

Marin wished so much she could deny the truth of his statement. She fought the sobs that pressed against her chest as she slowly nodded, tears raining down her cheeks.

John's anger dissolved, and he reached for her. "Do not cry, Marin. I am sorry."

"Oh, John—" Marin rounded the table and enfolded her brother in a hug. He clung, in need of comfort.

The problem was, Marin needed comfort, too. But the hug was all one-sided. John took comfort, and Marin gave it. And that was how it would be.



Marin signed the last of the papers on the lawyer's desk and then leaned back with a sigh. "I assume you will handle the funeral expenses and all my parents' final bills, then send me a check for the balance of Dad's insurance?"

Mr. Whitehead nodded, his snow-white hair shining in the sunlight that poured through the large plate-glass window behind him. Had the situation been less somber, Marin might have giggled. *Whitehead* fit the man so well.

"That's correct, Miss Brooks. Your father was quite an astute businessman, and he left you very well provided for. Financial worries should be few." He linked his fingers and rested the heels of his hands on the edge of the highly polished cherry desk. "Would you like for me to arrange for the sale of Brooks Advertising?"

Marin set her chin. "No. I intend to run the advertising firm myself. I have my business and graphic arts degrees." A stab of pain struck as Marin remembered why her parents had been on the road the night of the accident. She shoved the memory aside—she didn't have time for that now. "I am qualified to step into Dad's shoes, and I intend to keep the business running. Of course"—she offered a shrug and a smile—"I'm counting on his employees to stick with me. If they bail, I might have a problem."

Mr. Whitehead returned her smile with one of his own. "In my estimation, your father's employees were loyal to him and would transfer that loyalty to you. They are not eager to search for another place of employment." Then his expression turned serious. "But I do have a small concern. You are quite young, Miss

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Brooks, and the two top men in your father's employ have much more experience. You might consider, for your sake, making them partners in the business and leaning on their expertise. It would lighten your load considerably, which would be to your advantage, considering. . .” His cheeks mottled with pink as his voice drifted off.

Marin understood. “Considering I have John to care for, as well?”

The man nodded, looking away. His cheeks blazed red now. Bringing back his gaze to meet Marin's, he continued in a gruff voice. “Miss Brooks, if I may be honest. . .?”

Marin held her hand outward, inviting him to share his thoughts.

“You are a young, attractive, intelligent woman. Your father often shared his pride in you. He also shared his concern about his son. I believe your father would understand if you chose to find a suitable placement for John. Between the insurance settlement and the business, you will have adequate financial support for both yourself and your brother. If you would like for me to make inquiries about facilities that cater to the disabled, I would be more than willing to assist you.”

Marin shook her head. “Mr. Whitehead, I appreciate what you're saying. Believe me, you aren't the only one who has expressed this thought.” Marin's ears still rang with Aunt Lenore's daily harangue. “But I promised my parents I would care for John, and I intend to do so at home, just as Mother did. There really is no other option. John would never understand why I was removing him from his home. He's lost Mom and Dad.” Her throat tightened. “I won't take away his home, too.”

Mr. Whitehead sighed. “I understand your position. But if you should change your mind. . .”

“I won't.” Marin stood on that firm announcement and held out her hand. “Please let me know if I need to sign any other papers. I've left John too long. I need to be going now.”

The lawyer rose and shook Marin's hand firmly. “I will be in touch. Good luck to you, Miss Brooks. And again, my condolences on your loss.”

Marin nodded and left the office. She moved through the echoing hallway to the elevator and, alone behind the sliding doors, allowed herself a couple of minutes of sorrow. Condolences on her loss, Mr. Whitehead had said. Did anyone really understand everything she had lost? Her parents, her best friends, her encouragers, her Christian examples. . .and her short-lived independence.

How Marin had enjoyed college! The freedom to stay out late, to giggle with friends, to flirt with the handsome boys on campus. . . Only the family picture on her desk had intimated that Marin was different from the other girls. She had finally found the freedom to be young and carefree during the years at college, away from home and away from the responsibility of being the protector and teacher of her older brother.

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“Young and carefree” had now abruptly ended before she was ready for it. *Why, oh, why did Dad have to pull out in front of that semi?* she wondered again. *Mom and Dad weren't old enough to die. . . .*

The elevator came to a halt, and the doors slid open. A glance at the numbers confirmed that Marin still had four floors to go. She stepped to the corner as a tall man entered and reached toward the buttons. Then he smiled in her direction. “Oh, both heading for the lobby. Good.” He leaned into the opposite corner, the warm smile still lighting his face. “You look familiar. Have we met?”

Sounded like a pickup line—one she wasn't in the mood to entertain, no matter how handsome this stranger. She didn't smile in return. “I don't believe so.”

The man shook his head slowly, his brown eyes narrowing below thick, arched brows. He stood a good ten inches taller than Marin, and she stifled the urge to shrink into the woodwork. “No, really. You look very familiar. I know I've seen you—” Then his eyebrows shot high in recognition. “Is your father Darin Brooks?”

Now it was Marin's turn to raise her brows. “Y—yes. How did you know?”

He chuckled—a low, throaty sound that seemed comforting for some odd reason. “I knew I'd seen you. The pictures on his desk—a regular portrait gallery. You're Marin, right?”

Marin nodded. She gave the man a quick perusal. He didn't seem the executive type usually seen wandering through the Branson Building. Worn Levis, a plaid shirt open at the collar—no tie—and brown hiking boots made up his attire. His brown hair was rather shaggy, longer at the collar and curling up around his shapely ears. He gave the rugged appearance of a lumberjack. What could he have been doing in Dad's office?

“I'm Philip Wilder. Your father helped me with some brochures for my business.” The elevator doors slid open to the lobby, and Philip gestured for Marin to precede him. He followed her out and flashed another white smile. “He did great work. Tell him thanks again for me, will you?”

Before Marin had a chance to explain that his request would be impossible, he turned and trotted toward the double doors leading outside and disappeared. She felt somehow deflated by his departure. It was the first normal conversation she'd had since her parents' deaths. The first exchange that hadn't included condolences or John. It had felt good.

Sighing, she walked slowly to the exit. Maybe her only normal conversations would now come from strangers. It was a depressing thought.



Philip Wilder paused at the curb, looked both ways, then dashed across the street to his waiting motorcycle. “Hello, sweetheart,” he greeted, running his hand along the sleek curve of the gas tank before popping open the small trunk and retrieving the cobalt blue helmet—the same shocking color as the cycle itself. He loved

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the bright blue balanced with the abundance of chrome that decorated the classic cycle. The bike was his pride and joy—and he treated it like the child he would likely never have.

Echoes from the meeting on the eighth floor of the Branson Building replayed in his mind. The lawyer's voice explaining, "The account is unavailable, Philip. No explanation from the bank. I'll keep trying. If something changes, I'll be in touch." In the meantime, how would Philip pay the bills and keep his business running? He had another month's expenses squirreled away, but after that. . . His heart beat erratically as he considered the number of people relying on him.

God, You have a plan. Hope You'll reveal it to me in time. So much is riding on it. Strapping on his helmet, he glanced toward the building in time to see his elevator mate exit. He watched her, observing how her head hung low, her shoulders slumped as if carrying a weight too heavy to bear. He wondered whom she had been visiting. Whoever it was must have given her some bad news. *The Bad News Branson Building*, he thought with a measure of disdain. Then he shook his head, determined to find a positive on which to focus.

Pretty girl, he acknowledged. But he'd thought that when he'd seen the arrangement of pictures on the corner of Darin Brooks's desk. Unpretentious, but attractive—wholesome. That appealed to him. He considered calling her name, giving her a wave, but then he wrapped the errant hand around the handlebar of the cycle to keep from giving in to that urge. What was he thinking, encouraging contact with Marin Brooks? Despite her despondent appearance right now, she'd no doubt be smiling and laughing soon—Darin Brooks would see to that. The man obviously idolized his daughter. A girl like that had the world by the tail—she surely wouldn't be interested in someone like him. He'd discovered long ago that his life calling didn't appeal to most folks. No, it was best to put aside his desire for a family. His family would be the workers at New Beginnings. They were about all the responsibility one man could handle.

His helmet secured, he swung his leg over the bike. The engine revved to life with a thrust of his foot against the kick start. As he backed out of his parking space, he sent a glance skyward and spoke aloud. "Okay, God, remember what I said. I need a plan—and quick. Start thinking, and when You've got it worked out, fill me in. Thanks."