

MILLS & BOON



## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **What a Woman Wants**

**TORI CARRINGTON**

# **Tori Carrington**

## **What a Woman Wants**

### **Аннотация**

**SHE'S HAVING A BABY!**Darby Parker Conrad was the town widow—a sweet, single mother of twin girls. John Sparks was the town sheriff—a former bad boy and her late husband's best friend. And now, three months after one secret night of passion, they were the talk of the town. John was going to be a father! And a husband, too, if only Darby would say yes. But the headstrong beauty was convinced he was only asking because she was carrying their baby. And though that might have been true at first, the confirmed bachelor soon realized he was falling for his best friend's widow....

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## He wants to marry me.

Despite her initial shock at his bumbled proposal, Darby found that John's words warmed her, touched her in a way she was helpless to explore just then. He was so earnest, so determined that she couldn't help but be drawn to him, long to kiss him.

"John...I think you and I need some time to adjust before either of us says anything we don't mean."

"I don't need time, Darby. I know how I feel. I know what I need to do. And nothing you say is going to stop me."

"We're not teenagers, John. When something like this happens, you don't have to get married."

"Time," he said pensively. "If it's time you want, Darby, then it's time I'm going to give you. But I promise you, no matter how long it takes, you are going to marry me."

Dear Reader,

A rewarding part of any woman's life is talking with friends about important issues. Because of this, we've developed the Readers' Ring, a book club that facilitates discussions of love, life and family. Of course, you'll find all of these topics wrapped up in each Silhouette Special Edition novel! Our featured author for this month's Readers' Ring is newcomer Elissa Ambrose. *Journey of the Heart* (#1506) is a poignant story of true love and survival when the odds are against you. This is a five-tissue story you won't be able to put down!

Susan Mallery delights us with another tale from her **HOMETOWN HEARTBREAKERS** series. *Good Husband Material* (#1501) begins with two star-crossed lovers and an ill-fated wedding. Years later, they realize their love is as strong as ever! Don't wait to pick up *Cattleman's Honor* (#1502), the second book in Pamela Toth's **WINCHESTER BRIDES** series. In this book, a divorced single mom comes to Colorado to start a new life—and winds up falling into the arms of a rugged rancher. What a way to go!

Victoria Pade begins her new series, **BABY TIMES THREE**, with a heartfelt look at unexpected romance, in *Her Baby Secret* (#1503)—in which an independent woman wants to have a child, and after a night of wicked passion with a handsome businessman, her wish comes true! You'll see that there's more than one way to start a family in Christine Flynn's *Suddenly Family* (#1504), in which two single parents who are wary of love find it—with each other! And you'll want to learn the facts in *What a Woman Wants* (#1505), by Tori Carrington. In this tantalizing tale, a beautiful widow discovers she's pregnant with her late husband's best friend's baby!

As you can see, we have nights of passion, reunion romances, babies and heart-thumping emotion packed into each of these special stories from *Silhouette Special Edition*.

Happy reading!

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

# What a Woman Wants

## Tori Carrington



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This book is for the real-life heroes who put their lives on the line every day so that we may live ours.

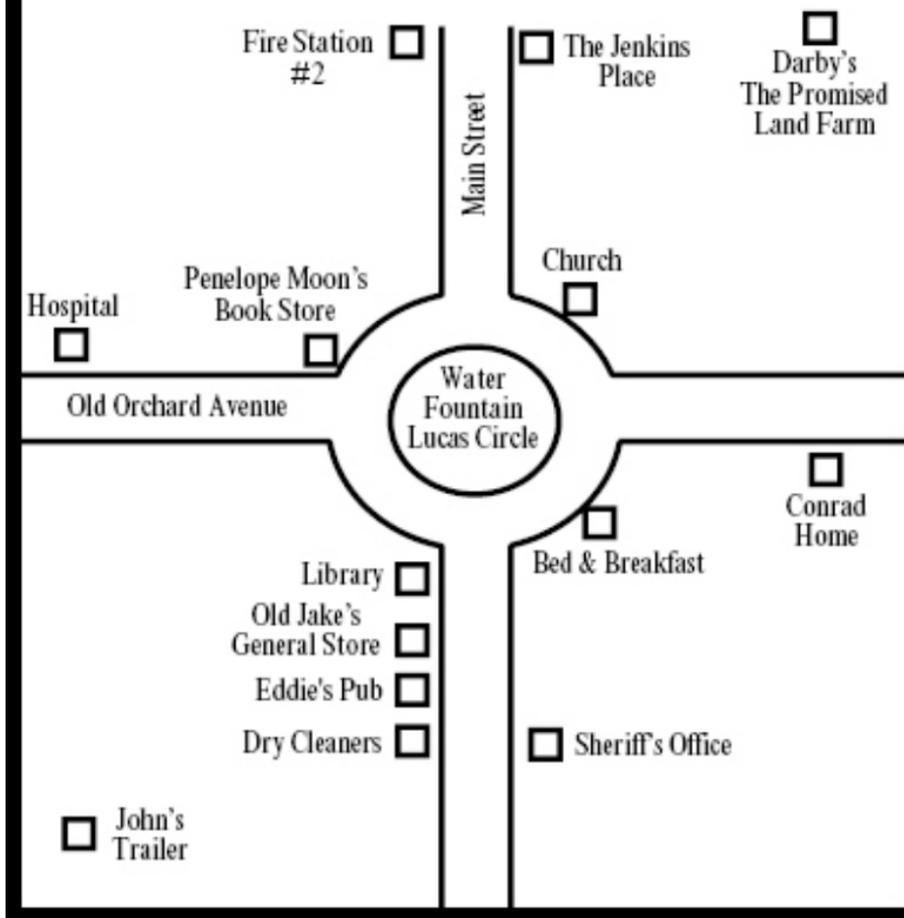
And for our boys, Tony, Jr. and Tim, our personal heroes.

# TORI CARRINGTON

is the pseudonym of award-winning husband-and-wife writing team Lori and Tony Karayianni. Twisting the old adage “life is stranger than fiction,” they describe their lives as being “better than fiction.” Since romance plays such a large role in their personal lives, it’s only natural that romance fiction is what they would choose to write in their professional lives. Along with their four cats, they call Toledo, Ohio, home, but travel “home” to Greece as often as possible.

This prolific writing duo also writes for the Harlequin Temptation and Harlequin Blaze lines under the Tori Carrington pseudonym. Lori and Tony love to hear from readers. Write to them at P.O. Box 12271, Toledo, OH 43612 for an autographed bookplate, or visit them on the Web at [www.toricarrington.com](http://www.toricarrington.com), [www.specialauthors.com](http://www.specialauthors.com) or [www.eHarlequin.com](http://www.eHarlequin.com).

# Old Orchard, Ohio



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# Chapter One

Is this as good as it gets?

Sheriff John Sparks eyed the holding cells, then closed the outer door with a dull clank. Now there was a question. Is this as good as it gets? Sure, there were times when he examined his dedication as Old Orchard County Sheriff. Especially recently, with his term up in seven months, reelection around the corner. It was the times when the phone rang at three in the morning that often got to him, summoning him out of bed to see to a domestic dispute over someone's spouse snoring too loud. But there had never really been a reason to apply any major thought to his life and the way he led it. He just lived it. And had been pretty damn happy about it...until recently.

Well, at least he wouldn't have to worry about arguing with anyone over whether or not he snored. Simply because there was no one around with whom to argue. He was single and lived alone, and planned to keep it that way. As the youngest in a Roman Catholic family of eight, he'd learned the hard way that large families weren't all they were cracked up to be. Especially when your father considered you a burdensome mistake and your rowdy older brothers and sisters garnered a lot of attention that you might have needed. He felt no need to follow in the footsteps of four married brothers and three sisters, who were all interested in procreating. The thought of a mini-him was

more than frightening, it was downright terrifying. But it was the silence more than anything that sold him on the idea of limitless bachelorhood. He liked being able to hear the bathroom faucet drip. To roll over and not have someone's elbow in his nose. To open the refrigerator door and find the bologna right where he'd left it.

It was mornings like now, though, that he knew exactly why he'd taken on the role of sheriff.

John made his way back from the holding cells to the front of the Old Orchard sheriff's office, a one-story brick structure that had been around for nearly a century and had been one of the few buildings spared in the massive downtown fire nearly six months ago.

"Are you sure these are the guys?" George Johnson, the desk sergeant, asked as John handed him the paperwork.

Deputy Cole Parker pushed off from where he'd been leaning against the other side of the counter. "Of course he's sure they're the guys. He wouldn't have brought them in if he wasn't."

John eyed both men. They couldn't be more different from each other in law enforcement experience. George Johnson had been with the office for more than twenty-five years, some of them good, most of them bad, if you believed what he said. He was used to the laid-back attitude of the former sheriff, who'd retired to a life of fishing and hunting in Montana three years ago, and classified nearly every call that came in as low priority.

On the other hand, Cole Parker—first cousin to one very sexy

Darby Parker Conrad—had been hired on to the force in the past three years and was John’s right-hand man. He always came into the office earlier than he had to, champing at the bit for more responsibility, more excitement.

“Fingerprints are pretty hard to fake, George,” John affirmed as he helped himself to the sludge in the office coffeepot. It tasted as bad as it looked. But seeing as he was just coming off a long night spent out at the abandoned farm on the edge of town, outside corporation limits and in his official jurisdiction, then bringing in the two out-of-state escaped convicts, he’d have knocked back battery acid if it even remotely resembled coffee.

George looked over the paperwork, made a notation, then put the papers aside. “So they were camped out at the old Jenkins place, were they?” He shook his head of thick, disheveled graying hair. “Old Violet Jenkins kicked the bucket what, six months ago? And still nothing’s been done with her house.”

Something like that, John thought. And the reason it was still vacant was that there were no heirs around to do anything with it. He downed half the coffee. And farms like hers weren’t exactly hot properties right now. At least not here. Maybe outside a larger town, within commuting distance. But Old Orchard wasn’t exactly a bustling metropolis. Which was just fine with him.

“You suppose it’s true what they say?” George asked. “That she had all that money from her husband’s life insurance tucked away somewhere in that old place?”

John sighed. Gossip like that had kept them all plenty busy

after Violet's passing. The paper had carried a speculative piece headlined "Hidden Treasures?" and the next day every teen within fifty miles was combing through Violet's underwear drawer. Along with a couple of local adults he preferred not to think about right now.

"There was never any proof that there was an insurance policy," he said. "Another one for the urban-myth books. Or suburban. Whichever. Whoever ran that piece in the paper should have been fired."

Cole crossed his arms over his too-buff chest, his gaze almost accusatory. "You know, you should have called me when you found out those two were out there. Going in there without backup wasn't very smart."

"They were asleep. No risk at all." John grinned at the younger man. He knew his welfare wasn't behind Cole's rebuke; it was having been left out that ticked him off. Not much happened in Old Orchard, and the capture of the two felons would probably be on the front page of the town's only paper, the Old Orchard Chronicle, for months.

Cole took the FBI poster detailing the two fugitives down from the wall of shame. "Well, this ought to make Bully Wentworth think twice about going up against you in the election."

If anything was capable of knocking the wind out of John's sails, it was mention of Blakely "Bully" Wentworth. They were alike in so many ways. Attended the same schools. Shared the same friends. Yet they couldn't have been more different.

“Wentworth isn’t interested in being sheriff,” George said. “He just wants to use it as a jumping-off point for bigger and better things down the road.” He swore under his breath and said something about opportunists and born politicians. “At least your arresting those two will get him out of the paper for a while.”

The arrest of the two felons might even be enough to knock over the pieces cropping up lately about his late best friend, Erick Conrad.

John found it impossible to believe that they were approaching the one-year anniversary of Erick’s death, even though the paper had begun running pieces to herald the event ten days ago. The last article had gone into detail about Erick’s widow and how Erick had planned to leave Old Orchard until he won the affection of one town native, Darby Parker.

John frowned into his coffee cup, finding the writer’s use of the verb “won” curious. Yes, John had at one time been attracted to Darby Parker, but that fact had never been known to anyone but him. Not after he’d found out his best friend had set his sights on her. Then Darby Parker had become Darby Conrad, and she and Erick had had twin girls who were now six. And John hadn’t thought of her in romantic terms since.

And Erick? Ultimately he had left Old Orchard. Nearly a year ago he’d died fighting a four-alarm blaze, and they’d buried him in the cemetery just outside town limits.

John’s throat tightened in mid-swallow, nearly causing him to cough up the scalding liquid.

Okay, so it wasn't that hard to understand why he'd been attracted to Darby Parker Conrad. She'd always been a looker, plain and simple, what with all that curly brown hair, brilliant smile and curvy body. But John had been so used to her being Erick's wife he had never stopped to think about the possibility of her ever being free. He absently rubbed the back of his neck. Given what had happened between the two of them three months ago, he should have stopped and thought about just that.

"Anyway, you going to call the feds and let them know about their two wayward friends back there?" George jerked a thumb toward the holding cells, "or do you want one of us to do it?"

"I'll take care of it."

"I'll get it," Cole said at the same time.

John sighed and ran his hand over the stubble sprouting across his jaw. "Yeah, why don't you do it, Cole."

Cole grinned and headed toward one of the back offices. "I'll get right on it."

George watched him go. "Makes no never mind to me who does it, just so long as it's not me. Less paperwork on this end." George looked at his watch and sighed. "My relief is late. Again." He glanced up as the early-spring-morning sun bounced off a reflective source and through the front window. "Maybe this is him."

John tossed his half-full coffee cup into the garbage, then watched as an old truck pulled up to the curb outside the front window. He knew immediately it wasn't Ed Hanover. Not

because of his visual confirmation. More as a result of his instant physical reaction to the woman climbing out of the cab. He felt as if someone had just dumped a handful of Mexican jumping beans into his stomach.

Which was pretty much the way he reacted every time he saw Darby Parker Conrad nowadays.

George's exasperated sigh cracked the silence. "Nope. Not Ed." He squinted, apparently trying to make out who was walking toward the door. His bushy brows budged upward as he did. "I'll be. It's the Widow Conrad."

The Widow Conrad. John winced. The words seemed more appropriate for an aging, portly woman who had lived the better part of her life with her mate, not a walking bombshell like Darby, who still had her whole life ahead of her. Yet the unlikely juxtaposition didn't change the fact that she was a bombshell. And that she was a widow. More specifically, his best friend's widow. And even if he couldn't seem to keep that detail in mind whenever he saw Darby, the town did.

George's gaze slid to John. For some inexplicable reason, John had to fight an urge to fidget. "What do you suppose she wants?" George asked.

John couldn't have said anything if he'd tried, but he thought he was doing pretty well at keeping his secret physical reactions...well, a secret. Fact was, he hadn't seen Darby for at least a week, and his body was letting him know that was much too long. Where he'd once gone out of his way to go out to her

place to offer his aid and company in the wake of Erick's death, following their spontaneous moments together in her barn three months ago, he'd decided it was best to keep his contact with her to a minimum. And during those times when he did drive the half hour out to her place, he always made sure the twin girls, Erin and Lindy, were around to act as chaperons. Not that it made much difference. He could be up to his armpits in watercolors, the girls chattering a million miles a minute, and he'd get caught up in the way Darby made dinner or fed the myriad animals she took care of, or put together her special mail-order black-and-white photos in handmade frames, or saw to a thousand other mundane chores that left him free to appreciate her with his hungry eyes.

This morning she wore a simple denim jumper over a white T-shirt, a red jacket over both. But there was nothing simple about the way she looked. She looked...well, like a beautiful woman with something on her mind.

Darby Conrad hesitated outside the county sheriff's office, headed back for the truck where Erin and Lindy sat peering out at her, then stepped back onto the sidewalk again. She should have waited until after she'd taken the twins to school. She should have worn jeans, instead of a dress. While she was at it, she might consider that it wasn't a brilliant idea to come downtown at all.

Straightening a strap on her jumper that needed no straightening, she glanced at her watch. Was it really only 8:00 a.m.? She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"You're stalling, Darby. Just go right in, tell John you want..."

no, need, to talk to him. Tell him the news. Then...”

Her words stopped there. Which wasn't surprising. She hadn't actually gotten beyond the “then” part of the whole situation yet. And there would be a “then.” There had to be. Things like this didn't happen without a “then” coming up quickly from behind. But somehow she couldn't seem to come up with one right now. She needed to get this out of the way before she could move onto the “then.” She sighed. Erick had always told her she had a one-track mind. She twisted the plain wedding band on her finger, her faint smile all but disappearing. She wondered what Erick would say now....

A horn blew, nearly startling her straight out of her leather clogs. She stared at the truck cab and the two giggling six-year-olds inside. She wagged her finger at them, made sure she had the truck keys in her pocket, then called, “No breakfast at Jeremy's for you two if you keep it up.”

Darby shook her own head and made a beeline for the front door of the sheriff's office. No one could ever accuse her of being a coward. She'd made it a point to embrace life head-on. That, of course, was before she'd found out how unpredictable, how mystifying, life could be.

She nearly tripped over her own feet. Grimacing, she looked down to find it wasn't her feet she'd tripped over. Rather, a cat, which had zipped inside the door in front of her. A black-and-white scrap of fur she recognized from her countless visits to the fire station.

What was Spot doing over here? She rolled her eyes and allowed the glass door to whoosh shut behind her. She knew John was here. Had seen his SUV parked out front. But that didn't stop her pulse from kicking up when she saw him. Whether it was her growing anxiety or the attraction that seemed to sizzle between them, she couldn't be sure. She suspected both would make her feel jittery, dry-mouthed and self-conscious.

Whether as town bad boy or county sheriff, John Sparks had always had the type of looks that made her knees go weak. But in his jet-black pants and the gray short-sleeved shirt of his uniform, he made her forget what she was thinking about. Aside from his mile-wide grin and his neatly trimmed dark hair, authority and strength seemed to emanate from him. And she knew it was more than just the uniform. He had the same effect on her in jeans and a T-shirt.

"Morning, Darby," George called from behind the counter.

Darby tried for a smile, but failed. "Morning, George." Then to John, "I need to talk to you."

How was that for subtle?

John's grin vanished. Darby curled her fingers into her palms. But oddly it wasn't her hands that dampened but her feet. So much so, she nearly slid out of her shoes.

"Oh." John's simple response might have been meant as a question, but came out as a statement.

Darby nodded. "Can I, um, borrow you for a minute?"

The expression on his face was curious, panicked and all too

wary. He gestured toward the counter. "George and I are taking care of some important business. Can it wait?"

Darby looked at the bare counter, considered the relaxed stance both men were in when she'd entered and decided she was being put off.

Oh, indeed.

She raised her brows, surprised and stung. John had never put her off before. The possibility that he might hadn't even remotely crossed her mind during the drive into town. She caught herself absently tugging on her dress strap and stopped.

"It's important."

John opened his mouth, but it was George's words that sounded. "Looks like the lady means business. You should hear what she's gotta say, Sparky."

John's grimace didn't detract from his handsomeness, Darby would've thought if she hadn't been so nervous. He gestured to the glass-enclosed office behind him. "You want to go in there?"

Darby glanced toward the truck parked on the street. "The girls are outside. I'd really like to stay where I can keep an eye on them."

John's gaze strayed from hers to the truck. He gave a halfhearted wave, and she guessed the twins waved back, judging by John's smile.

"You want to go outside, then?"

She nodded. "Outside. Outside's good."

He got that curious/panicked/wary look again. She turned and

led the way out onto the sidewalk.

It was nearly April, but the ground had yet to catch up with the new warmth of the air, leaving the mornings chilly. Darby pulled her jacket a little more tightly around her midsection and looked around the relatively quiet street. Shops were opening, the church bell began to chime off the hour, and a couple of blocks up kids were heading off to school. She waited for John to follow her out. The closing of the door told her he had.

Along with the commotion from the direction of the truck.

“Uncle Sparky!” the twins shouted in unison.

Darby briefly closed her eyes, then opened them to watch two small bodies catapult toward John’s legs, clutching him as if they hadn’t seen him in months, instead of a week.

John looked startled, then grinned and bent down to talk to the two animated girls.

Darby stood tensely through a hectic version of “The Life and Times of Erin and Lindy Conrad,” then before John could ask a follow-up question, she gripped two skinny shoulders and turned the twins toward where the door to the truck gaped open from their joint escape. “Back to the truck, you guys.”

“Aw, Mom,” Erin objected, digging her heels in. “Uncle Sparky is our friend, too.”

“He’s also working,” she reminded them.

“Yeah,” Lindy supported her mother.

Erin elbowed her sister, then shrugged Darby off when she attempted to hoist her into the truck cab. Instead, after much

scrambling and inventive positioning, the six-year-old made it inside and claimed the portion of the seat nearer the passenger window. Darby looked down at Lindy, who raised her arms up as if on cue. She sighed and lifted her inside, then secured their safety belts. “Not a peep, you hear? Or else I take you straight to school with no breakfast.”

Lindy made a zipping motion with her hand while Erin grimaced at the unconvincing threat.

Darby closed the door and stood for a brief moment to gather her wits. Judging herself ready, she turned to face John. Then found she wasn't ready at all. He looked so handsome with his hair tousled from where the twins had given him one of their full-head hugs, his grin tugging at something deep inside her.

She finally found her voice.

“Look, John—”

“Darby, I thought—”

They spoke at the same time. Darby smiled and glanced away. Had it really only been a week since she'd last seen him? It felt like several weeks. Months, even. The revelation in and of itself surprised her. When she'd lost Erick... well, she'd never expected to feel attracted to anyone again, ever. Much less such a short time after his death. But what she felt for John transcended mere attraction.

Of course, standing there on Main Street, facing John Sparks, sparked some memories she'd long since buried. Only, back then he'd been a rebellious teen, riding his dirt bike up and down the

road, his tight jeans and plain white T-shirt drawing the attention of every female, no matter what her age. He'd been James Dean reincarnated. Well, with dark hair, anyway. And she, along with half the girls her age, had comically sighed after him.

Only there was nothing comical about right now.

"You go first," John finally said.

"No, really, that's okay. I think you should say what you have to say first." Because what I have to say is going to prevent any further conversation.

"Okay." He slid his hands into his pants pockets. "What I was going to say is that I thought we decided to, um, let things cool off a bit. You know, after..."

After... Darby was well aware of what he was referring to. But like the "then" quotient, three months ago, neither one of them had seen this particular "after" coming.

She nodded. "We did. Agree, I mean."

"So do you think it's a good idea, then, for you to be coming into town like this and asking to talk to me in front of a motormouth like George?"

Darby glanced into the station to see that George's mouth was indeed running like a well-oiled motor as he spoke on the phone. She looked skyward. "Oh, no."

John's eyes narrowed, but rather than the suspicion such an action would imply, concern warmed the mercurial depths. His eyes seemed to be ever changing. One time green, another time blue. But it was the depth that made her feel she might fall right

into them and disappear as she caught him gazing at her when he thought she wasn't looking. Just as he was looking at her now. Or with the flame of passion that had gotten them both into so much trouble and completely threatened a good, no, great friendship.

“Darby? Are you all right?”

He appeared about to touch her. For a moment she wished he would. She'd spent countless nights longing for his touch. Wishing they could go back to that day in the barn and start over again.

In the beginning she'd convinced herself that it was Erick's touch she missed. Erick's grin. Erick's amusing wisecracks. It was only when she gave herself over to her dreams that she realized that somewhere over the past eleven and a half months she had stopped mourning her late husband...and begun lusting after his best friend.

“Darby?”

She looked at him, then said, “John, brace yourself. I'm pregnant with your baby.”

## Chapter Two

John had faced many events in his life. As a firefighter, he'd willingly stood in harm's way to put out dangerous fires. As sheriff for the past four years, he'd faced countless criminals and had even been shot in the thigh—although, he wasn't certain the shooting counted, because it had been an accident. All the same, he had been shot. And he had found himself in numerous precarious situations that set his heart to hammering.

But all of those events combined didn't hold a candle to the shock he felt at Darby's quick, quiet words.

She gazed at him expectantly as the sun rose over the brick two-story buildings across the street and illuminated her in a warm glow, setting her auburn-kissed brown hair afire.

This couldn't be happening.... It wasn't possible.... There was no way....

Darby was Erick's girl. She'd always been Erick's girl. Then his wife. The mother of his twin girls. Now Erick's widow.

There was no way he'd gotten her pregnant.

Darby held her hand up between them, as if to ward off his words, though he hadn't spoken a single one aloud. He noticed that her slender fingers shook, even as he seemed to be looking at her from some faraway place.

“Don't say anything. I don't want you to. I just... well, I thought you should know.”

She began to turn toward her truck.

John squinted after her. That's it? She drives into town, makes him forget every last reason he shouldn't lust after her, tells him she's pregnant, then leaves?

He watched his hand reach out and grasp her arm, halting her, though he had no knowledge of sending the command. "That's not possible."

Darby slowly turned her head to look at him, her large green eyes filled with disappointment. "Trust me, John. It is."

His grip tightened. "I didn't mean...well, you know, that it's not possible. What I meant to say is..." What had he meant to say? That it wasn't possible because he didn't want it to be? That she was Erick's girl, always had been? That now she was Erick's widow and it wasn't possible that he had gotten her pregnant? Or maybe he should tell her that fatherhood was down so low on his priority list it was almost nonexistent?

Given the expression on her face, he suspected it would have been better if he hadn't said anything at all. And he certainly wasn't about to voice the rest of the thought fragments trailing through his mind.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Darby blinked at him, as if his question was the last she expected to hear. The disappointment eased from her face, although he wasn't certain he was happier with its replacement. She looked...well, as confused as he felt. "I'm fine. Or as well as can be expected, I guess."

Good. That was good. Right? “How?” he asked.

Her brow furrowed.

He swallowed hard. “I don’t mean how did it happen. I mean how do you know? Have you been to a doctor?”

She shook her head. “No. I did a couple of those home pregnancy tests. Both came up positive.” She glanced down to where his hand still lay against her jacket. “I guess I should have warned you that I have a tendency to get pregnant at the mere mention of sex.”

John’s gaze moved beyond her to the twins, who sat in the truck cab watching them curiously. He remembered when Darby had been pregnant with them. Her condition had been the reason her and Erick’s wedding had been moved up six months. Rumor even had it that it was the reason the twosome had married at all.

“I was on birth control, you know, until...”

Until Erick died. She didn’t need to complete the sentence. They both knew all too well why when there was no reason for her to be on birth control. Or should have been no reason. And he... well, he hadn’t exactly thought, hey, I’m going out to Darby’s, I’d better take some protection. Somehow he’d always thought that if it came down to it, he’d have enough self-control to protect them both.

“Are they reliable? The tests?” he asked, his voice sounding unfamiliar to his own ears.

“As reliable as can be expected, I guess.” Darby cleared her throat. “But they only confirmed what I already suspected.” She

offered up a small smile. "I've been pregnant before. I know the signs."

John's hand slid from her sleeve, almost as if on its own accord, as the news slowly seeped through his shock.

"Look, John," Darby said quietly. "I didn't come here asking for anything. When I verified the results this morning, I just thought you should be the first to know. I really...um, haven't thought things out beyond that. Not yet."

He scanned her face, trying to make sense out of her words.

"Do the twins know?"

"Oh, dear God, no," she whispered.

The blare of the truck horn made her jump. John swung his gaze to the giggling girls.

Darby blew out a long breath, obviously as anxious about her news as he was. She tucked her hair behind her ear and gestured toward the truck. "The only thing I told the twins was that I'd take them to breakfast this morning." Hope backlit her eyes. "Would you like to join us?"

John took an automatic step backward. The idea of sitting with Darby and her girls for any amount of time knowing she was pregnant with his baby...well, scared him absolutely spitless. "I, um, don't think that's a good idea right now. I..." He glanced over his shoulder, almost surprised to find they were standing outside his office. He supposed he expected to be in some parallel, other reality. A place he was unfamiliar with that would take as much getting used to as the situation he was trying to absorb.

“Okay,” Darby said. “I understand.”

John squinted at her. Could she really be that understanding? Her expression was anxious but soft, no hint of accusation in her eyes, no expectation in her shaky smile. Which made him hate himself all the more.

He laughed humorlessly. “This doesn’t seem real somehow, you know? I keep feeling like someone should jump from the shadows and cry, ‘Candid Camera!’”

She nodded. “I know.”

Only, if anyone leaped from the shadows right now, John was convinced he’d draw his gun and shoot him.

He winced, his thoughts only dancing along the edge of what would happen when the town found out what he’d done.

He glanced first one way, then the other, down the street. Everything moved along much as it should on a weekday in Old Orchard. The shops and buildings that had been destroyed by the Devil’s Night fires last October had been rebuilt to their former, old-style glory and warmly reflected the morning sun. People went about their business as much as they normally did, a wave here, a greeting there. No one had a clue that Darby had just ripped the rug of John’s life out from under him.

The veracity of his position slammed home when he spotted old Mrs. Noonan slowly crossing the two-lane avenue, heading their way. And if she wasn’t bad enough, next to her walked the new pastor, Jonas Noble.

“Good morning, Sheriff Sparks. Morning, Darby,” Mrs.

Noonan said, drawing to a stop beside them, a gnarled hand tucked into Jonas's arm.

"Hello, Mrs. Noonan. Pastor," John said, reaching up to tip a hat that he'd left inside. He eyed the other man, thinking of the gossip swirling around town about Old Orchard's newest addition. As sheriff, he'd had no fewer than three requests that he check into Noble's background, and he'd refused all of them. As far as he was concerned, keeping to oneself was no crime. Even if there was a somber, almost dangerous look to the pastor, a demeanor his pure black garb and longish dark hair only added to.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Jonas said now, his voice low and even.

Darby smiled but didn't answer. Mrs. Noonan homed in on her. "Is everything all right, Darby?"

Darby blinked. "Pardon me?"

"The girls? The farm? I trust all is well?"

If Darby's nod seemed a little too emphatic, John prayed he was the only one who noticed. "Oh, yes. Everything's fine. Thanks for asking."

Mrs. Noonan smiled. "That's reassuring. Seeing as you're in town so early and standing in front of the sheriff's office talking to our young sheriff...well, I was afraid something might be amiss."

Amiss. Now there was a word, John thought. Something was amiss. But if he had his way, Mrs. Noonan, Pastor Noble and

George Johnson would be the last three to know about it.

Darby started backing up toward her truck. "Well, I'd better be going. You know, before the twins decide to leave without me."

John lifted a stiff hand in a wave. "I'll talk to you later, Darby."

She avoided his gaze, concentrating, instead, on Mrs. Noonan and the pastor. "It was good to see you both. Give my best to the women's club, Mrs. Noonan."

"I will, dear."

"Good. Good." Darby backed straight into the truck bed, then turned around and virtually ran to the driver's door. Within moments, the truck was rolling away, a short beep signaling a farewell.

Mrs. Noonan sighed and pulled on the ends of her crocheted sweater. "Pretty girl, our Widow Conrad. Wouldn't you say, Sheriff Sparks?"

John tugged his gaze from the truck's disappearing taillights. "Huh?"

The old woman smiled at him, then bid him a nice day and continued on down the sidewalk, Pastor Jonas Noble at her side.

Darby didn't even have to close her eyes to envision John's reaction to her news. His face seemed to be etched into her corneas, coloring everything she looked at. The sizzling heat his eyes held whenever he looked at her. The way he tilted his head just so in a teasing, cautious way. His full-on grin when he forgot what they were supposed to be and, instead, enjoyed what they were.

Given the sharp turn their lives had taken, what were they?

Over the past three months she'd been trying to come to terms with her ability to feel attracted to another man so soon after she'd lost Erick, much less wanting one as much as she had John that day in the barn. She'd scrambled for every possible excuse to explain her aberrant behavior. There was the fact that she craved human contact with someone, anyone, capable of carrying on adult conversation. That she missed her husband's touch and yearned for a man to touch her as he once had. Then throw temporary insanity into the mix, and she figured she had all the bases covered.

The only problem was that her explanations didn't stop her from wanting John. Worse, she yearned to feel his hot mouth on hers, his hands branding her breasts, even more now than before.

And now she was pregnant.

Darby crossed her arms and took a long, calming breath that did nothing to calm her. Absently she found herself wishing John was there with her, was voluntarily facing what she was alone. She caught herself and briefly clamped her eyes shut.

She looked around the cozy, lived-in waiting area of Dr. Grant Kemper's old Victorian home on the outskirts of town. He ran his practice here, in an airy room off the foyer. Although he'd officially closed up shop and retired a few years ago, Darby could think of no one else to go to. Her regular ob-gyn was out. To be seen even in the vicinity of the central Old Orchard medical complex would set phone lines on fire within a minute of her

appearance. She didn't kid herself into thinking she could keep her secret for long. She absently splayed her fingers across the flat expanse of her stomach. Oh, no, her little secret would make itself known in her or his own sweet time. But she needed this quiet time to herself for as long as she could hold on to it, if just for the simple fact that her condition was so unexpected. So life-altering.

She rubbed her brow and glanced toward the still-closed door to her right. To the town she was the poor Widow Conrad, whose firefighter husband died a heroic death nearly twelve months ago, leaving her with two young girls to raise all by her lonesome. But while the well-meaning townsfolk saw her that way, she saw her situation completely differently. She wasn't poor. Not by way of finances, not psychologically. She'd known that every time Erick walked out the door to go to work she might never see him again. She'd accepted it when she'd married him. And while his being ripped from her life had left a gaping hole she had feared would never be refilled, she never once thought her own life was over. Things would just be...different from there on out. She and the twins and the farm and her photographic art. That was how it would be. If sometimes the loneliness she felt deep into the night seemed to reverberate straight through her, if every now and again she felt overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of her responsibilities...well, all single parents felt that way from time to time, didn't they? She saw herself as neither unique nor worthy of pity.

Besides, she had two beautiful girls as a result of her brief time with Erick.

Her fingers stilled against her stomach. And soon she'd have another child to add to the mix. John's child.

“Darby?”

So immersed in her thoughts she hadn't noticed the examining-room door had opened and that Doc Kemp stood there watching her expectantly. She smiled and scrambled to her feet. “Sorry about that. Got lost in thought.”

Doc motioned her into the room. With his portly build, bushy gray hair and full beard and mustache, there was a decidedly Santa Claus-esque look to him she found appealing. Darby entered the room and he left the door open. She darted to it, looked out into the empty waiting area, then softly closed it.

“Ah. I remember you doing something similar a while back,” Doc said. “Approximately seven years ago.”

Darby realized he was right. She had done exactly the same thing when she'd feared she was pregnant with the twins.

“Same reason?” he asked.

Darby blinked, looking over the gleaming, precisely placed instruments on a snow-white towel on a countertop that ran the length of one wall. The neatness of the sheet that covered the black leather examining table. The room smelled of disinfectant and somehow made Darby feel safe. She released a long breath, unaware she'd been holding it until that very moment. She laughed quietly. “Yes, I'm afraid so.”

If the doctor's eyes widened ever so slightly, if he looked momentarily puzzled, he didn't let on. He merely turned toward a cabinet, took out a kit similar to the over-the-counter ones she'd used herself at home that morning, then motioned toward the connecting bathroom.

Half an hour later, following a pelvic exam and the urine test he'd given her, Darby sat fully clothed on the examining table, feeling an odd mixture of relief and anxiety. Calmed that she'd come to the only person in Old Orchard who wouldn't judge her. And about ready to jump out of her skin at the thought of her suspicions being confirmed. For once they were, there was no going back. No hoping that she'd been way off base, that the two tests she'd done that morning could be wrong, that she wasn't pregnant, even though everything she felt flew directly in the face of those hopes.

Doc came back into the room from where he'd left her alone to get dressed and rolled his stool over toward the table. He smiled at her. "Three months along is about my guess."

Darby didn't have to guess. She knew exactly the moment the baby within her was conceived. And not only because it was the only time since she'd lost her husband that she'd been intimate with anyone, but because being intimate with John had shaken her to the core, awakened myriad emotions, longings that no self-respecting widow with two young daughters should be feeling.

Even so, Doc's word gave birth to yet another unfamiliar emotion. Joy. Simple joy that her special yet brief time with

John had resulted in a baby that would forever be a part of her life. Even though she feared John wouldn't. A completely selfish feeling she couldn't help herself from embracing.

"There, there now," Doc said softly, urging a tissue into her hands. Only then did Darby realize her eyes had welled over with tears. "If I recall, you had the exact same reaction when you found out the twins were on the way. And look at where you and they are now. It wasn't the end of the world, was it?"

She managed little more than a shake of her head. She couldn't even attempt to tell him that her tears were as much out of joy as sorrow.

Doc Kemp reached out and rested a liver-spotted hand on her knee. "You've been through a lot in the past year, Darby. I won't lie to you, I'm a little surprised to see you here, sitting on my examining table again after so long, facing the same problem, but I'm the last person to judge anyone on their actions." His expression grew solemn. "But you don't have to do this alone, you know. We're all here for you."

Darby put her hand over his. "Thanks, Doc. Unfortunately not everyone's as understanding as you are."

"Maybe not. But they're not all that bad, either."

"Maybe."

She wished she could be as convinced as Doc. She'd learned long ago that people liked to fit you into a certain, predictable mold. Should you break free of that mold, step outside that neat little box, judgment could be swift and unkind. The same

townsfolk who continued to help her around the farm, showing up on her doorstep with tools in hand determined to assist her through her loss, might all turn in the other direction, leaving her alone. Where now they whispered, “That’s the poor Conrad widow. Awful, the way she lost her husband and those poor kids their father,” when they found out she was pregnant they might say, “Not even a year since her husband died. The world’s going to hell in a handbasket and that one is hurrying it along.”

She wouldn’t even consider what they would say when they found out her late husband’s best friend was the baby’s father....

“A baby,” she whispered.

Doc patted her knee again, then removed his hand.

“I can’t quite bring myself to believe it.” She ran her damp palms over the denim of her dress.

Doc nodded. “Babies are known to have that impact on people.”

He rolled his stool over to the counter, swiftly wrote something down on a pad, then scribbled something on the back of one of his business cards. “You’ll probably want to consult with your own ob-gyn when you’re ready?”

“Yes.”

He smiled and handed her a prescription. “This is for vitamins.”

She glanced at what he’d written and said, “I’ve already been taking them.”

“Good girl.” He pressed the other card into her hand. “I’m

heading out to Myrtle Beach tomorrow. This is the number I'll be at." He curved his hand around hers. "If you need anything, anything at all, call me."

"I will," she said quietly, although she knew that she wouldn't. She'd already asked too much of him. No, what she had to face, she had to face alone. Correction, she and her small family would face, together.

From the other room, the front door slammed, followed almost instantaneously by the opening of the examining-room door. Darby gave a start, then found herself staring straight into Tucker O'Neill's face. She wasn't sure who was more surprised. Then quickly decided he was the more surprised. While he had no reason to expect her to be there, she knew he'd been staying at Doc Kemp's place for some time now. A doctor himself, he'd opted not to follow in his mentor's footsteps and instead, took great pleasure in working in the emergency department at the county hospital.

Doc Kemp frowned at him. "I've always told you you needed to learn some manners, Tuck."

The younger man barely seemed to register the gibe. "I didn't know you'd hung the shingle back out, Doc."

Darby watched Doc shift the file he'd made for her into a drawer, then close it. He turned to face them. "I haven't. This is a personal visit. Isn't that right, Darby?"

She nodded and forced a smile. "Personal."

"And even if it weren't," Doc said, "whatever happens in this

house is strictly confidential. Isn't it, Tuck?"

Darby felt suddenly as if the topic had moved beyond her to something that existed between the two men. Especially when Tuck grimaced. "I'll be back in a while."

Just as quickly as the door had opened to let Tuck in, it closed on his departure, leaving Darby once again alone with Doc. She slumped and groaned.

Doc crossed to stand in front of her, a reassuring smile on his grandfatherly face. "What Tuck does or doesn't suspect is not what's important right now, Darby. Remember that. I'll see that he doesn't go shooting his mouth off where he shouldn't."

She looked into his eyes, wanting to feel at ease with his reassurance, but unable to. "I appreciate it."

He squeezed her shoulder.

A king. A man in charge of his domain. All-powerful, all-knowing. That was how Sheriff John Sparks usually felt when seated in his office. He dropped the telephone receiver back into its cradle, then pushed the paperwork in front of him aside. Okay, so maybe he only felt like that sometimes. When he was alone, took a deep breath and allowed his more fundamental side to step out from the shadows. But he never indulged the emotions for more than a few moments. Never longer than it took him to square his shoulders, puff out his chest and quell the desire to beat his chest like Tarzan.

He fingered the papers needed to transfer the federal prisoners back where they belonged. Of course, right now he felt like the

film that coated the bottom of his shoes. Like Judas for betraying his best friend. Like a heel for treating Darby as if she'd just told him she was coming into town to buy some new tires, not tell him she was pregnant.

Good God.

Just thinking the words made his gut twist into knots.

Pregnant.

Baby.

Mother.

Father.

Holy cow.

Propping his elbows on his desktop, John scrubbed his face with his hands.

First in community college law-enforcement classes, then at the fire-department academy, he'd learned how to save lives, protect lives, even take a life if it came down to it. But never in his thirty years had anyone ever talked to him about creating a life.

He grimaced. Okay, there was the botched attempt his father had made when he was ten. It had been all John could do not to laugh as Walter Sparks had awkwardly paced in front of him, where he sat on the bottom bunk in the room he shared with Ben, reciting a speech John was sure he'd used at least four other times with his older brothers. Remembering it now, he thought that with eight kids of his own, his father should have been a pro at relating just how children came into being. But he hadn't been. Most of John's knowledge about sex had come from his older

siblings and his peers.

And the greatest lesson he'd learned had come from Erick. When you got a woman pregnant, you married her.

Something brushed against his leg and he started. He pushed his chair back to stare at the black-and-white firehouse cat. "What do you want, Spot?"

If one was to believe the stories circulating around town about the feline that thought she was a dog, she had a habit of showing up on the doorsteps of those most in need of help, no fires necessary. And it was there she stayed, seemingly for no reason at all. Then, when the crisis went away, so did the cat.

Dusty Conrad's wife, Jolie, believed the stories. She even credited the cat for helping to bring her and Dusty back together last autumn.

Of course John didn't buy into any of the stories. Not even Jolie's, although Jolie was one of the most levelheaded people he knew. He patted the cat on the head, then scooted it toward the door before his allergies kicked in. "Go on now. Why don't you go see what ol' Ed has for you." He gestured toward the door and the counter behind, where Ed Hanover had taken over for George Johnson. Ed was always eating something or other.

John absently plucked the papers from his desk, read the fax number he'd been given over the phone, then dialed it and laid the papers in the document holder.

He imagined what his father might say at the news that his youngest had gotten a "good" girl pregnant. He could practically

envision him tucking in his shirt, hiking up the waist of his slacks and then saying, “a Sparks always lives up to his responsibilities.”

Of course his many memories of his father saying that had come as a result of some minor infraction such as Ben’s being an hour late delivering his newspapers. Or his own promise to shovel the neighbor’s walk in the dead of winter. Certainly nothing that even neared the magnitude of this.

Still, his father’s words made a lot of sense. Had he planned on being a father? Unequivocally, no. Did that change things one iota? Again, no.

He leaned back in his chair, rocking slightly. Well, then, it only stood to reason that this particular Sparks should live up to his responsibilities, didn’t it?

He sprung from his chair as though it had catapulted him. No way. He couldn’t believe he was even contemplating such an option. No, not an option. It didn’t even near possibility status, as far as he was concerned.

He paced one way, then the other, but stopped when he caught himself tucking in his short-sleeved shirt and hiking up his pants.

What would Darby expect him to do?

The mere thought of her made his stomach pitch toward his feet. Not because she was pregnant, although that detail didn’t exactly have a small impact on him. No. Just thinking of her made him long for something he’d never known he wanted. Something he couldn’t quite define. Filled him with an unnamable something that made him want to hop in his SUV and

head straight out to her house.

He decided to do just that.

Pressing the button to forward his calls to his cell phone and plucking his hat from the desktop, he headed for the door. He still didn't have a clue about what he was going to do or say. But he suspected he'd figure it out by the time he got there.

## Chapter Three

The four-bedroom farmhouse on the outskirts of town sat nestled in the middle of the Promised Land Farm, 150 acres of ripe farmland that had just been plowed and planted. Having been raised in an apartment over the Laundromat in downtown Old Orchard, Darby usually took great satisfaction in her home, her surroundings, living the life she'd always longed to but never had until she married Erick.

Right now, however, she just wished the world would stop spinning for thirty seconds.

No, ten. That was all she needed. Just enough time to find the patience she usually had for the people who tried to help her out since Erick's death but somehow managed to make life even more of a challenge.

She'd returned home after her doctor's appointment to find that the teenage girl from up the road had left the pen gate open when she'd fed the animals. Everything from a llama to a miniature horse was left trampling all over the crooked rows of corn Old Man McCreary had planted last week. And now Erin had let Billy the Goat into the kitchen, the dinner potatoes were boiling over, Lindy was on Darby's heels with nonstop questions, and somewhere in the house the cordless phone was ringing, even though Darby couldn't for the life of her remember where she'd left it.

“Mom, do babies really come from mommies’ stomachs?” Lindy’s latest question nearly sent Darby skidding across the tile as she tried to keep Billy from devouring the blue-and-white checkered tablecloth. She tugged on the full-grown goat’s collar, and he in turn tugged on the tablecloth, sending the dinner placements crashing to the floor.

Darby sighed, nearly backing into Lindy. “Yes, sweetie, babies really do come from mommies’ stomachs.”

She swallowed hard. There wasn’t even a remote chance that her six-year-old daughter was talking about her own mommy, or the brother or sister who was on the way.

She tousled the girl’s blond curls as she bent over to retrieve the plastic cups. She’d learned long ago that while plastic might not be the most refined choice, it was the most practical. And the latest mishap only served to prove the point.

“But...” Lindy began.

Darby began stacking the plates and gathering the silverware, then leaned over and switched off the heat under the pan of potatoes. “Lindy, you remember when Petunia had her colt last year, don’t you?”

From the corner, where Erin was ineffectually pulling on Billy’s lead, came a laugh. Then Lindy said, “Mom, Petunia’s baby came out of her butt.”

Darby snapped upright, finding the imagery on top of everything else a little much. She wasn’t going to touch that one with a ten-foot pole. The girls were six. She’d explained where

babies come from when Petunia gave birth and wasn't quite up to another run-through just now. Not considering she'd be coming awfully close to describing the circumstances that had led to her own current pregnancy.

"It did not come out of her butt, stupid," Erin said, giving up trying to control the goat and planting her hands on her hips.

"What did we agree about name-calling, Erin?" Darby asked.

"Dummy," Lindy said to her sister, then stuck out her tongue.

Darby put her hand on Lindy's head and turned her in the other direction. "Go see if you can find the phone before it stops ringing, okay?" As soon as one twin was out of the room, she turned to the other. Completely oblivious to her mother, Erin opened the back door and gave Billy a swift kick to the hind leg. The goat brayed and darted outside.

"Erin!" Darby gasped, appalled at her daughter's actions.

"Whoa there, buddy," a male voice sounded.

Darby's heart hiccupped as she waited for the visitor to show himself. A second later, John's hesitantly smiling face appeared on the other side of the screen.

"Hi," he said.

Hi, indeed. Amidst the chaos swirling around Darby, just looking at John standing there, crisp and fresh in his sheriff's uniform, his hair neat, his chin shaved, his grin warm and sexy, made her feel a different kind of chaos swirl inside of her. He looked better than any one man had a right to. Always had. But now that she'd not only been intimate with him but carried his

child, she felt a connection that bound them as surely as the attraction that hummed between them.

“Um, hi,” Darby managed, hoping her smile wasn’t silly or too revealing. But so what if it was? She was glad to see him.

She watched his hazel eyes water. He turned his head, then sneezed.

Allergies. The goat...

Erin soundly closed the door in John’s face even as he murmured a “Pardon me” for the sneeze.

“Erin!” Horrified, Darby stared at her daughter. First the kick to the goat, then slamming the door on John. What had gotten into the girl? While Erin’s tongue could be sharper than a rapier, Darby had never known her daughter to be cruel to any of the animals, and she’d certainly never displayed anything but adoration for her “Uncle Sparky,” a title bestowed on John before the girls could even walk. Just that morning she’d flung herself at him as if he were king of the world. What had happened to change that?

Darby hurried to the door, nearly tripping over Lindy as she came rushing in from the other room, the cordless phone in her hand.

“It’s Aunt Jolie, Mama.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Darby took the phone, then opened the door. John still stood there, his shocked expression likely mirroring her own. “I’m so sorry, John. Come. Come in.”

Darby moved from the door and whispered to Erin, “That was

very rude. Apologize.”

Erin stuck out her bottom lip, stalked to the kitchen table and plopped down in her chair. Darby gave John an apologetic look. “I’ll be with you in just a moment.” She lifted the receiver to her ear. “Hi, Jolie. Is it all right if I call you back?”

Her best friend and sister-in-law’s quiet laughter told her she’d overheard. “Sure thing. Sounds like you’ve got your hands full.”

“Understatement. Thanks, Jol. Talk to you later.”

She pressed the disconnect button, then curled her arms until she held the phone against her chest. “Hi, again,” she said to John.

If her voice sounded a little breathless, that was normal, wasn’t it? Considering the past hour and all that it encompassed? It didn’t have to mean that just looking at John made shivers rush over her skin or her toes curl in her clogs.

His grin only heightened her reaction.

Darby jumped at the sound of a thud, making her realize she’d been staring. She glanced at where Erin had set a glass down hard on the table, finishing the place settings with Lindy’s quiet help. Then the sulky six-year-old pushed the fourth chair to the corner and put a laundry basket full of clean clothes on top of it. Darby realized her daughter was attempting to circumvent any intentions Darby might have of inviting John to dinner. Just what had happened when she wasn’t looking to make her feel such animosity toward John?

He cleared his throat, the sound filling the quiet room. “I, um, didn’t think that it was dinnertime. Maybe I should come back

later,” he said, apparently not missing Erin’s actions, either.

“No,” Darby said quickly. A little too quickly. Movement caught her eye, and she stared at the cat that had nearly tripped her that morning outside John’s office. What was Spot doing all the way out here? She smiled at John. “I mean, you know there’s no such thing as a wrong time to drop in. Here—” she cast a warning glance at Erin, then pulled out her own chair “—have a seat. Would you like some coffee or something? And of course you’ll have to stay for dinner.”

John sat down. Behind him, Darby ignored Erin’s openmouthed, aghast reaction even as the girl picked Spot up. “Sorry, but I can’t—stay for dinner, that is. I’m on call tonight and should stick a little closer to town.” He cleared his throat. “Can we talk? You know, for a couple of minutes?”

Darby nodded as she drained the water from the potatoes. “Sure.”

“I was hoping we could maybe talk alone?”

“Oh.” She looked at the twins. She made a point of including them in everything that went on in the house. Especially since Erick died. Her cheeks flamed as she remembered things in which they weren’t welcome to participate. Like her hot-and-bothered tryst with John in the barn three months ago. “Lindy? Erin? Why don’t you two go wash up for dinner?”

They raced for the door, obviously intent on completing the chore as quickly as possible. Darby added, “Then pick up your rooms until I call for you, okay?”

“But, Mom—”

“Erin, please. Can you do as I ask just once without questioning me?”

To her surprise, Erin didn't argue. Though her pouty expression didn't disappear, she did do an about-face and leave the room without another word, clutching Spot to her chest.

Darby grasped the back of one of the chairs. “I'm sorry about that. I don't know what's the matter with her today.”

“Funny, it's almost like she can't stand the sight of me.”

Darby sat down and leaned forward. “Oh, no, that's not it at all. Erin's too young to know whom she likes or dislikes. I think maybe she's feeling a bit... I don't know, threatened by you, that's all.”

“I'd never do anything to hurt either of those girls,” he said quietly.

She smiled. “I know you wouldn't. And they know that, too. That's not what I meant by ‘threatened.’ Whenever you come over, you distract me from them. Take my attention. And it hasn't been quite a year yet since...”

She trailed off. If anyone knew when Erick had died, it was the man in front of her.

She looked everywhere but at his face. “Anyway, I'm sure Erin's just having a bad day. We're all known to have one every now and again. She'll probably be back to her old friendly self before we know it.”

At least she hoped so. It was going to be hard enough for her

to handle what she was facing without a rebellious child on her hands.

She took a deep breath and smiled at John again, finding that the mere act of doing so made her feel a thousand times better. “So...what’s so all-fired important that you need to talk to me alone?”

He shifted, looking doubly uncomfortable. Darby’s gaze dropped to where he juggled something in his hands. Her eyes widened. She’d been so distracted when he’d come in, she hadn’t noticed he was holding anything, much less the bouquet of wildflowers, a red foil-wrapped package of chocolates...and a suspicious, small jeweler’s box.

A lump the size of a potato clogged her throat. Even as she wondered what he was doing with the items, it registered that the gifts might be the cause of Erin’s behavior. In one glance, Uncle Sparky had transformed into someone interested in taking her daddy’s place.

“John?” Darby said slowly, “What are you—”

She gasped as he leaned forward and wrapped his free hand around hers.

“Darby, I...I, um, know I wasn’t exactly coherent when you told me the news this morning,” he said, his thumb setting fire to her skin as he stroked it. “Truth is, you could have knocked me over with a feather.”

“John, I—”

“No, please. Let me say my piece.”

Darby bit hard on her bottom lip and nodded, trying not to notice how handsomely earnest he looked.

“What I’m trying to say is that if I looked less than happy about the news, it’s only because of the surprise factor. You’re a great woman. Wonderful. And it’s no secret that we have...feelings for each other.”

Oh, God.

“I think...no, I want...”

Darby stared at him, completely spellbound. Her mouth refused to work. Her heart beat so loudly in her ears she barely heard him.

“Aw, hell, Darby, will you marry me?”

## Chapter Four

“N o!”

John winced away from Darby’s gasp. She looked like someone had just turned a fire hose on her and was desperately searching for a way to dodge the spray.

Yet somehow she was still one of the most beautiful women he’d ever laid eyes on. Her green eyes were wide and compassionate, her mouth built for kissing for hours on end, her body made for the kind of loving he couldn’t stop thinking about wanting to give her.

When he’d decided to come out here, he hadn’t known what he was going to do. Okay, maybe he’d known. The flowers and the ring were evidence of that. Only, he hadn’t known whether he would have the guts to do it. Proposing marriage was so foreign, the idea alone was enough to strike fear deep into his heart. But when he’d said the words, he’d immediately known they were the right ones to say. They felt right. Darby was pregnant with his child. He was going to do the right thing and marry her.

He’d never imagined she’d say no.

John cleared his throat, for the life of him not knowing what to say now.

He did his best, though, along with a grin that missed the mark. “Well, that certainly didn’t come out the way I meant for it to, did it?” he spoke more to himself than to her, finding the

house suddenly quiet. Too quiet. Somewhere two six-year-old girls were probably listening with their little ears pressed to the wall. "I've surprised you."

Darby blinked several times, then smiled in a way he could only classify as uncertain. "Umm, I think 'shocked' is more the word I'd use."

A roughly cut flower stem bit into John's palm. He looked down at the bouquet. He'd told Janice at the recently rebuilt General Store that he was picking up the flowers for his mother. It was only after the impulse buy that he realized Janice would probably say something to Mona, then Mona would talk to his mother's best friend, Beatrice, and before the day's end everyone would figure out he hadn't bought the flowers for his mother, but had, in fact, purchased them for someone else.

But he hadn't been thinking about that at the time. He knew how much Darby liked daisies, and he'd wanted to buy her these, no matter the consequences.

And she didn't even appear to notice them.

"Won't these things die or something if you don't put them in water?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Darby merely blinked at him again, not having moved more than that since the moment he'd blurted out his question.

He shrugged, going for nonchalance, but probably looking like an idiot. "Be a shame to have to throw such pretty flowers away."

Finally Darby seemed to snap out of whatever trance she'd gone into. She snatched the flowers from his hand and put them

on the opposite end of the table. “Forget about the flowers, John. I want you to, um, tell me that you didn’t just ask what I think you asked.”

He winced. Her words were like a punch to the gut. No-nonsense Darby. She’d earned the nickname while they were still in college. No matter what was going on, you could count on her to tell it like it was, no-holds-barred. He’d never wished otherwise—until now.

Okay, so maybe he’d mucked up the proposal. But he never thought she’d respond the way she had. He searched her eyes, finding in their depths confusion, a smear of sadness he’d become all too familiar with after Erick’s death, and a light that drew him in farther, deeper. He’d always been able to talk to Darby. Always. Yet the prospect of discussing his reasons behind his proposal now seemed impossible.

“But I did. Because it’s the right thing to do,” he said finally.

The light vanished from her eyes, leaving only the sadness and confusion. “I see.”

John cursed himself. Maybe he hadn’t done this right. Maybe he should have gotten down on one knee, as he had planned, instead of just blurting out the question like that. There seemed to be some sort of magic involved when guys did that.

He pushed from the table and bent down on one knee, his heart threatening to beat straight through the wall of his chest.

“John!” she whispered urgently, her gaze darting around the room. “What are you doing? Get up!”

He shook his head and reached for her hands, but she tugged them out of reach. He reached farther and caught them in his fingers. Her hands were warm, her palms as damp as his were. It was all he could do not to forget what he'd been about to do in order to marvel at her soft skin. He settled for turning her hands over and rubbing his thumb along the length of her palms. He only half registered her shiver.

“Darby, I...I know neither one of us planned...well, you know.” She glanced away. He caught her chin in his fingers and coaxed her to look back at him. “But facts are facts, and things being as they are, I think it would be a good idea if you and I became...”

He nearly said “husband and wife,” but somewhere between his lungs and his mouth the words got lost. He stared at her, trying to think of her as his wife. The only wife Darby had been was Erick’s.

“I think it would be a good idea if you and I got married,” he finally finished. He straightened his shoulders, trying to ignore the sudden itching of his nose.

“Oh, John,” she whispered, no longer trying to tug her hands away. But the words weren’t said in a wistful, happy way, as he’d hoped. Rather, Darby was looking at him as if he was in his Sunday best and had just fallen headfirst into a mud puddle.

Whoa, rejection. He didn’t have much experience in that department. In fact, he didn’t have any at all.

This time, he was the one to do the hand tugging. She held fast.

Darby leaned closer to him, but John refused to look at her for fear of what he'd find there. "Is this what you thought I was looking for when I told you...what I did this morning?"

He grimaced. Her gaze traveled over his face, then she ran her fingertips over his hair. A soft smile tilted her full mouth.

"It's the right thing to do," he said, damning his allergies to all her animals as he gave in and rubbed his nose against the uniform of his shirt to ward off a sneeze.

She shook her head, disturbing her auburn curls. "It's completely the wrong thing to do," she whispered. "You don't want to marry me, John. You don't want to marry anyone."

He opened his mouth to say all that had changed, that it no longer mattered what he wanted, but she lay a finger across his lips to stop him. He nearly groaned at the feel of her flesh against his flesh. That so simple a touch sent his hormones to raging should have concerned him. But he couldn't think much of anything at the moment.

"Thank you, though," she said quietly, her gaze dropping to his chest where her fingers ran over the starched material of his shirt. "I think it's really sweet, you know, that you asked."

Heat fanned over his skin. "I wasn't exactly going for sweet," he said, his voice sounding much too gravelly.

The hint of a smile turned into a smile. "I know. And that's what makes it even sweeter."

Her hand dipped millimeters lower to touch his stomach. He drew a harsh breath and caught her fingers. "You know, I'm not

used to taking no for an answer, Darby.”

Her smile faded.

“I believe marrying you is the right thing to do and I’m not going to give up until I see you and me at that altar.”

Darby’s breath snagged in her throat. The material under her fingertips was silky and inviting. John’s eyes held a resolution that touched her to her toes.

He wants to marry me.

Despite her initial shock at his bumbled proposal, Darby found that his words warmed her, touched her in a way she was helpless to explore just then. He was so earnest, so determined that she couldn’t help but be drawn to him, long to kiss him, if not for the panic swirling through her bloodstream, along with a thousand other jumbled emotions. Panic caused not by the thought of marrying him, of becoming Mrs. John Sparks, but fear that he was serious. That he intended to take this ridiculous idea of his and run with it.

“John...I think you and I need some time to adjust before either of us says anything we don’t mean.”

His jaw flexed, making her itch to inch her palm along the strong length of it. To press her mouth there, against his freshly shaved skin and drink in the tangy taste of him at her leisure. “I don’t need time, Darby. I know how I feel. I know what I need to do. And nothing you can say is going to change that.”

Something tickled her chest from the inside. “We’re not teenagers, John. When something like this happens, you don’t

have to get married. There are alternatives now.”

His eyes narrowed.

“No, no, I didn’t mean that alternative. I’m going to go through with this.”

The relief on his face was so complete even she felt it rush through her body and warm her all over.

“Time,” he said pensively. “If it’s time you want, Darby, then it’s time I’m going to give you. But I promise you, no matter how long it takes, you are going to marry me.”

“No!”

Darby stared at him as if he had made the vehement announcement. Because if there was one thing she was sure of, she hadn’t said the word. Her heart was too busy doing a silly little dance for her to have responded in any manner.

Reality sank in and every one of her muscles went on alert. If the word hadn’t come from her or John, who had said it? She wasn’t sure she wanted to find out.

She pried her gaze from John’s sincere face to find Erin standing in the kitchen doorway. Her tiny frame was tense and battle-ready, her angelic face drawn and tight. Both hands were curled into fists at her sides and she shook as she repeated the word, as if the entire farm outside hadn’t heard her the first time. The passion behind her exclamation made the hair on Darby’s arm stand on end, made her stomach squeeze ominously. Extricating her hands from John’s, she somehow managed to stumble to her feet, and then wondered why the floor suddenly

seemed to be swaying. Then she realized that the floor wasn't, she was.

Not a good sign.

"Erin!" she said, her tone one of reprimand. Her gaze darted from her daughter's flushed face to John, who stared at the tablecloth as if afraid it had come alive and was about to smother him.

The six-year-old's entire stance seemed to crackle with electricity as she pointed a stiff finger in John's direction. "You are not going to marry him. You're not!"

Of course that had been Darby's own response only minutes ago. But hearing it come from her daughter's young mouth was completely different. Erin's aberrant behavior all day left her drained and confused and just a tad angry.

"Why not?"

As John asked the question, Darby stared at him as if he'd grown another head. He'd lifted his gaze from the table and now stood next to her, looking at Erin with infinite patience.

"Because my daddy's coming back, that's why."

A strangled sound erupted from Darby's throat as every moment of the past year swept through her mind. From that terrible phone call in the middle of the night telling her Erick was dead, to the funeral where she'd clutched the twins to her so tightly she'd been afraid she'd break them, to the here and now and everything that had happened in between. She wouldn't exactly classify the past year as easy. It had been everything but.

But she never, ever, would have thought that either one of her daughters would have a doubt about the permanent absence of their father.

“He is coming back. He is,” Erin whispered again, moisture sparkling in her wide brown eyes, her crushed expression making Darby feel as if she’d just run over the family dog with her truck. “And that means you can’t marry anyone.”

Looking much like a rag doll in need of cuddling, Erin turned on her heel and trudged from the room and all the way back up the stairs. Movement nearby drew Darby’s attention. She watched as an eerily silent Lindy stepped from the shadows of the living room, her gaze confused and vulnerable as she turned and followed her sister up the stairs.

Darby’s stomach roiled ominously. Unlike when she was pregnant with the twins, the first three months of this pregnancy had been so far uneventful.

She had the awful sensation that was about to change.

“Excuse me,” she said softly. “I think I’m going to be sick....”

## Chapter Five

Saturday. Usually Darby's favorite day of the week. But as she stood staring out the kitchen window at the rain washing out what had started as a perfectly beautiful spring day, she wondered if the world at large was out to get her.

For some reason, she'd thought time would make losing Erick easier. And it had in some respects. She no longer woke up in the middle of the night, her pillow soaked with tears, her throat sore from sobbing. She'd even finally packed up the last of his clothes and other things and stored them in the attic a couple of months earlier, and placed the silver-framed picture of him that had once sat on her nightstand in the girls' room.

But she would never in a million years have guessed that Erin thought her father was coming back.

She crossed her arms to quell a shiver, remembering the expression on John's face when she'd come out of the downstairs bathroom last night, her teeth freshly brushed, feeling like she'd been hit by a tractor. He had been standing in the same spot she'd left him, looking as shell-shocked as she felt. All in all, she figured yesterday had been a banner day for everyone.

She looked down to find her fingertips rubbing against the inside of her palm. John had been so sweet, so endearing—and so incredibly sexy when he'd dropped to one knee and proposed to her even after she'd already told him no. Not many men would

have continued after the first rejection. But he had. She caught herself smiling. With everything happening, she couldn't even begin to classify what she felt for John. Whenever he was within touching distance, she wanted to run her hands all over him. Press her mouth against his if only to stop the ever-present flow of words coming out of it. Feel his hungry, almost reverent touch on her heated skin.

But last night she'd had little choice but to ask him to leave after Erin's heart-stopping display. He'd asked if she needed help, if she'd like him to talk to the six-year-old, but she'd refused the offer, no matter how tempting. It seemed so very long since anyone but her had been responsible for the twins. Still, she watched with her heart in her throat as he gathered his hat and left.

She glanced down at her ring finger and the one item from her time with Erick that she hadn't been able to part with yet. Her simple platinum wedding band. She absently twisted it around and around on her finger, her gaze drawn to the silverware drawer. Hands suddenly shaking, she slid it open. There, under the extra packets of ketchup and mustard she always hoarded when she gave in to the twins' demand for fast food was the small box John had left behind.

Darby's heart dipped low in her chest as she picked up the box and snapped open the lid. She'd been so surprised when he'd sprung it on her last night that she hadn't given the ring more than a cursory glance. There, nestled in the dark-blue

velvet, sat the ring he usually wore on his left pinky finger. No sparkling diamond solitaire. No ornate piece of antique jewelry passed down through generations of Sparkses. No, instead, a large tigereye set in thick warm gold drew her touch. She slid the ring out and admired it, curious about the etching on the inside. She squinted for a closer look.

Erick and John. Best Friends Forever '89.

Darby's heart jumped as the significance of John's actions clamped around her shoulders. He'd proposed to her with a ring Erick had given him.

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