



Silhouette®

1505
November

What a Woman Wants

TORI CARRINGTON

SPECIAL EDITION™

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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

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What a Woman Wants

TORI CARRINGTON



SPECIAL EDITION™

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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.



SILHOUETTE BOOKS



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WHAT A WOMAN WANTS

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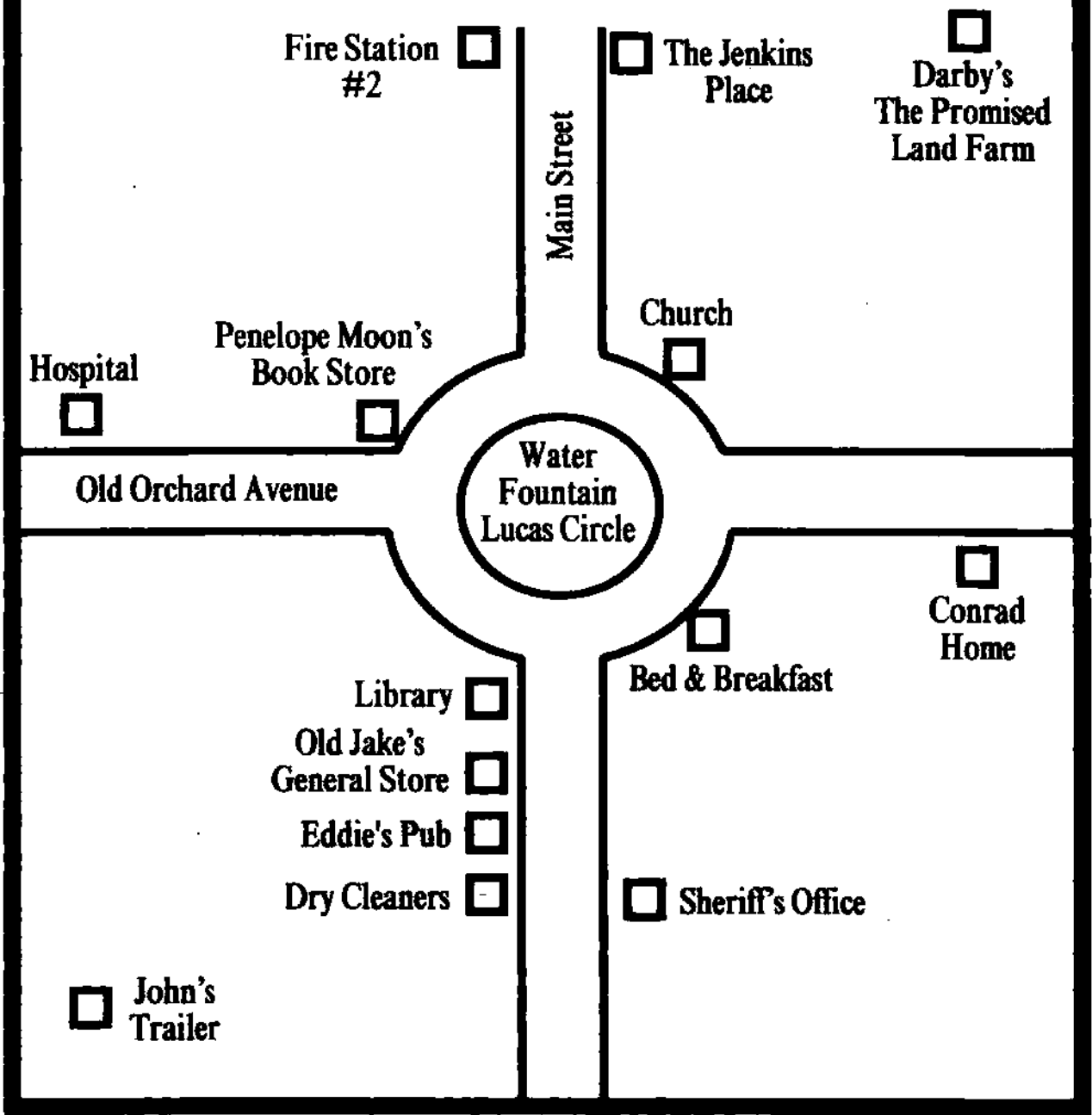
What a Woman Wants #1505

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, www.specialauthors.com or www.eHarlequin.com.

Old Orchard, Ohio



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 ar-

guing 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.