

Silhouette



SPECIAL EDITION[®]

1046

\$3.99 U.S.

\$4.60 CAN.

August

ANDREA EDWARDS

A FATHER'S GIFT



“Is anything wrong?”

Jack questioned Cassie.

“Should there be?” she answered coldly.

Jack knew that when a woman answered your question with another question it meant you were standing/kneel deep in a mature pile.

“I was just wondering if you made it back safe and sound.”

“I’m fine, Mr. Mell. Is there anything else?”

“No, not at all.” He backed off toward the shop’s door. “Just glad to see that things are going well for you.”

Obviously Cassie was having second thoughts about having made love with him. And this wasn’t the place to go into that subject.

His aunt was right. Men and women weren’t meant to be friends. And he and Cassie apparently weren’t meant to be lovers, either.

Dear Reader,

Brides, babies and families...that's just what Special Edition has in store for you this August! All this and more from some of your favorite authors.

Our **THAT'S MY BABY!** title for this month is *Of Texas Ladies, Cowboys...and Babies*, by popular Silhouette Romance author Jodi O'Donnell. In her first book for Special Edition, Jodi tells of a still young and graceful grandmother-to-be who unexpectedly finds herself in the family way! Fans of Jodi's latest Romance novel, *Daddy Was a Cowboy*, won't want to miss this spin-off title!

This month, **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**, the wonderful new series of family and homecoming by Andrea Edwards, continues with *A Father's Gift*. And summer just wouldn't be right without a wedding, so we present *A Bride for John*, the second book of Trisha Alexander's newest series, **THREE BRIDES AND A BABY**. Beginning this month is a new miniseries from veteran author Pat Warren, **REUNION**. Three siblings must find each other as they search for true love. It all begins with one sister's story in *A Home for Hannah*.

Also joining the Special Edition family this month is reader favorite and Silhouette Romance author Stella Bagwell. Her first title for Special Edition is *Found: One Runaway Bride*. And returning to Special Edition this August is Carolyn Seabaugh with *Just a Family Man*, as the lives of one woman and her son are forever changed when an irresistible man walks into their café in the wild West.

This truly is a month packed with summer fun and romance! I hope you enjoy each and every story to come!

Sincerely,
Tara Gavin, Senior Editor

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ANDREA EDWARDS

A FATHER'S GIFT

Silhouette®



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Published by Silhouette Books
America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

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To Dad for his gifts of acceptance, understanding and
mostly for his unconditional, always evident love.
Thank you.



SILHOUETTE BOOKS



ISBN 0-373-24046-5

A FATHER'S GIFT

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**This Time, Forever*

†*Great Expectations*

ANDREA EDWARDS

is the pseudonym of Anne and Ed Kolaczyk, a husband-and-wife writing team who have been telling their stories for more than fifteen years. Anne is a former elementary school teacher, while Ed is a refugee from corporate America. After many years in the Chicago area, they now live in a small town in northern Indiana where they are avid students of local history, family legends and ethnic myths. Recently they have both been bitten by the gardening bug, but only time will tell how serious the affliction is. Their four children are grown; the youngest attends college, while the eldest is a college professor. Remaining at home with Anne and Ed are two dogs, four cats and one bird—not the same ones that first walked through their stories but carrying on the same tradition of chaotic rule of the household nonetheless.



nce upon a time, there was a beautiful young princess who loved a tall, brave warrior.

Their love was so great that the whole village rejoiced when they were wed. Then one day the little village was attacked. The tall warrior fought bravely to keep the attackers from crossing the river, but he was killed, his body slipping beneath the waters. Though she was brokenhearted, the princess fought in his place, turning back their foes when it got dark. She mourned the whole night, crying for her love. The next morning the attackers returned, but a fiercely beautiful white swan was on the river and fought whenever they came near. No arrows could touch it, and the attackers finally went away in defeat. For years the fierce white swan stayed near the village, protecting it. The princess would feed the bird and talk to it, and when she grew old and died, she had the other villagers bury her near the river. The next morning a young female swan appeared. Together the two birds swam down the river and were never seen again.

Prologue

July, twenty years ago

Cassie climbed down through the weeds. She was getting closer to the lake, but still couldn't see Juliet. Cassie had never seen the pair of swans apart from each other in the two weeks she'd been coming to this stupid camp. Yet there was Romeo, all by himself, down the lake a ways.

A funny feeling took hold of Cassie's stomach, twisting it like when their social worker got all chummy. Something was wrong.

She turned around and trudged back to the playing field where all the other nine-year-olds were. Nobody'd noticed that she'd left the group, not that she'd care if they did—Juliet was more important. The other kids were still horsing around while the counselor was writing stuff on his clipboard.

"Jeff!" Cassie shouted. "Hey, Jeff."

The tall, thin counselor turned toward her, smiling. But then he was always smiling. It was enough to make a person barf. "Cassie. Hey, I got you down as captain today."

Cassie hesitated. If there was one thing she really liked, it was being in charge of things, but Juliet was in trouble. Cassie knew it, sure as—

Actually she wasn't sure of too much these days. Mainly just that Daddy had lied to her, big-time. Now he and Mommy were dead, and Cassie was figuring everything he'd said had probably been a lie. So she wasn't wasting her time caring about anybody anymore.

Except Juliet, of course. Juliet was different. She was special.

"I have a stomachache," Cassie told Jeff.

He frowned at her, then began erasing something from his clipboard. "Okay." Probably forever wiping out her name as captain. She would be lucky to be put in charge of table cleanup after this. "Go see the nurse."

Cassie left the playing field, acting like she was going to head up to the nurse's tent. She didn't care what yucky job Jeff gave her. She had to find Juliet and make her okay. That was all that mattered. When Cassie got into the woods, she took the fork that led to the lakeshore path.

His Little Warrior Princess. That's what Daddy had called her after she'd fought with some kids who were making fun of Fiona. He'd said she was always fighting for what was right. But that was before. Lately there hadn't seemed to be much right to fight for, but she fought anyway.

As luck would have it—although Cassie wasn't sure whether it was the good or bad kind—she spied Fiona walking down the path. She was almost glad to see her sister, even dopey as she was. Fiona would help her look.

"Fiona. Hey, Fiona." Cassie put on a burst of speed and joined her sister. "Juliet's missing."

"Missing?"

Cassie gritted her teeth as Fiona threw her hands up to her mouth. All the people that got born in the world and she had

to be stuck with Little Miss Perfect for an older sister. Fiona didn't act like she was ten years old.

"Maybe she and Romeo are on the other side of the lake," Fiona said, her voice all shaky.

"Romeo's over here. And you know he never leaves her." Straight A's and her sister was still as dumb as a stump, "Come on." Cassie grabbed Fiona's hand. "We gotta go look for her."

Fiona didn't move. Not an inch. "We should tell Mrs. Warner," she said. "She'll know what to do."

Cassie could hardly keep from gagging. "Don't be so dumb," she snapped. "Grown-ups don't care about birds or kids or anything small."

She could see her sister's face kind of fade back and she knew that she had her. Fiona didn't like to argue with anybody, not even with the boys. And boys were always wrong.

"Miss Kerns likes kids," Fiona said. "She'd help us find Juliet."

Oh, right. Sweet-as-sugar Miss Kerns who was afraid of bugs and snakes and frogs and anything else that crawled around camp. Cassie could only roll her eyes. "I'm going to look," she said. "You do what you want."

Cassie just walked away. All Fiona worried about was getting in trouble. Well, trouble was Cassie's middle name. Even the Scotts, their current foster parents, knew that. They thought Samantha was the cutest thing around and of course, Fiona was so perfect, what adult wouldn't like her? But Cassie was always doing something wrong, always getting into a fight with somebody even when she tried to be good. The Scotts would never adopt them, no matter what they were saying, and it would be all because of her.

Suddenly she felt a burning in her eyes and she started to run. It wasn't like she was going to cry. She was just sick and tired of everybody. Everybody except the swans.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind her and Cassie quickly rubbed at her eyes.

"Aren't we supposed to be playing kickball?" Fiona asked.

"I said I had a stomachache. Jeff told me to go see the nurse."

For once, Fiona didn't argue with her. She just followed along as they crossed the little sandy beach. Cassie slowed a bit so Fiona could keep up with her.

"Where are you guys going?" a voice behind them called.

Oh, no. That was all she needed—a six-year-old tagalong. Cassie stopped and turned to their littlest sister. "Go back to camp."

Seeing the stubborn look on Samantha's face, Cassie didn't stay to argue. She'd let Fiona deal with Sam. Neither of them ever listened to her anyway. She started into the weeds at the far end of the beach, when she suddenly saw movement in the water near her.

Juliet!

"There she is!" Cassie shouted as she rushed toward the water's edge. "There's Juliet."

The poor thing was in among some fallen branches at the edge of the water, half flapping her wings. Cassie began to wade out toward her.

"Cassie, you can't go in the water!" Fiona cried. "There's no lifeguard around."

Cassie clenched her fists and settled for a quick glare at Fiona before wading in farther. But not too much farther. The closer she got, the more frantic Juliet became. She flapped her huge wings but still couldn't rise out of the water.

"She's trapped!" Cassie yelled. Her stomach twisted into a knot of fear as Juliet fell back, exhausted. The swan's head hung down and her wings drooped. Romeo swam closer, making worried sounds as Cassie bent to peer under the branches into the water. What she saw filled her with rage and drove the fear out of her body.

"Her foot's caught in one of those plastic ring things from pop cans!" Cassie shouted.

"We need to tell Mrs. Warner."

"She won't do anything." Cassie splashed back to shore. "You know how she went on and on that first day about swans being mean. She won't let anybody near them. She'll just call somebody and Juliet will die before they get here."

"She might not."

"Come on!" Cassie yanked on Fiona's hand. "We can help her. We just need something to cut the plastic."

But Fiona had taken root again. Probably scared somebody would catch them and she wouldn't be Little Miss Perfect anymore.

Cassie jerked harder and Fiona came forward. "You stay here," Cassie told Samantha. "Keep Juliet company."

"Me?" Samantha cried. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, Sam," Fiona said. "Sing to her. Read her a story. Show her what's in your knapsack. Just stay out of the water."

Then, before Fiona had a chance to take root again, Cassie hurried her up the path. They crossed onto the little beach. So far, no one was in sight. Once they cleared the beach, though, they could hear the kids at the playing field—and see Miss Kerns and Mrs. Warner at the arts-and-crafts tent. Cassie pulled Fiona to a stop.

"I could ask Miss Kerns for a scissors," Fiona said.

Cassie clenched her teeth. How could anyone who knew the names of all the presidents be so dumb? "No," she snapped. "She'll just ask you what you want them for. I'll go talk to Mrs. Warner. When they're looking the other way, you take one."

"Why can't I talk to them?" Fiona whined. "And you get the scissors."

"Because you're not cool," Cassie replied.

You could stick her sister in a barrel of ice and she still wouldn't be cool. In school, Fiona would confess to things she didn't do just so there wouldn't be any trouble.

Cassie waited as Fiona bit at her lip. The older girl didn't move. "Fiona," Cassie finally hissed.

"All right. All right, already."

Fiona slunk off, skulking from tree to tree. She looked like some kindergarten kid playing secret agent. Cassie shook her head before taking a deep breath and walking slowly toward the counselors.

"Hi, Mrs. Warner," she said as she got near. "Hi, Miss Kerns."

Cassie clenched her fists as both women turned toward her. Fiona was crawling on the ground toward the tables. A blind person could see that she was up to no good.

"You know, Mrs. Warner," Cassie stretched her lips into a smile until it almost hurt. "I was thinking. Could we have an all-star kickball team? The good kids never get a chance to play on the same team."

"It wouldn't be fair if they did," Mrs. Warner answered.

"Oh, I know." Cassie put on her most understanding tone, wiping off the smile and looking real serious. "But if we had an all-star team, we could play teams from other camps."

"Hmm." The camp director tilted her head and smiled. "That's not a bad idea, Cassie."

Fiona was now back to dashing from tree to tree, walking funny with her arm stiff down her side. Cassie hoped she'd stolen a scissors and not a paintbrush or something else stupid.

"But I don't think we can do anything about it this year," Mrs. Warner said.

"Huh?" Cassie replied.

"The camping season is half over," Mrs. Warner said.

"Oh, right."

"But it's something to look into for next year." Mrs. Warner came over and patted her on the shoulder. "Thank you for the suggestion, Cassie."

"You're welcome," Cassie said, trying to keep from watching her sister play hide-and-seek among the trees. "I'm glad you like it."

Fiona was now making wild signs with her arms. Oh, man. Cassie knew that if anybody looked at Fiona she would break into tears and confess to three years of sins. Cassie had to get her out of here.

"Well." Cassie jerked herself out from under Mrs. Warner's hand. "I gotta go. Jeff told me to come right back."

"Then you'd better go."

"Yes, ma'am," Cassie responded and ran down the path. Once out of the counselors' sight, she doubled back and found Fiona behind a clump of bushes near the dining tent.

"Let's go." Fiona was breathing real hard when Cassie caught up with her.

Groaning, Fiona hurried along. "What if they call the police?"

"Why would they do that?" Cassie asked, taking the scissors from her sister's hands. "They got so many scissors, they'll never know one is missing." She ran toward the river.

"Samantha!" Cassie heard Fiona shout from behind her. "I told you to stay out of the water."

Cassie looked down and saw Sam in the water. That same old twisty stomach took her breath away. Was she the only one of them with any sense? She raced ahead as Sam got to her feet and walked out of the water, holding a book over her head. She'd been kneeling—not standing—in water over her waist! Cassie felt her fear go, leaving her plenty annoyed. Why couldn't any of them look out for themselves?

"I had to show her the pictures," Samantha said as she came splashing out of the water. "You always show me the pictures when you read to me."

Cassie just gave Sam a look and plunged into the water. Juliet's wings were drooping away from her body. That was a bad sign. It meant that she was about done for.

But she quickly came to life when Cassie got close to the branches where she was caught. Juliet panicked, flapping her wings and lunging about. Cassie had heard enough warnings about those powerful wings and jumped back, even though the branches were protecting her.

She circled around behind Juliet but no matter which way she went, Juliet was able to turn that way—all the while, screeching and flapping those huge wings. Cassie could feel herself growing frustrated. She knew that she had to stay calm. But how could a person stay calm if the stupid bird was going to kill herself?

She was not going to lose someone else she loved!

"Stop it, you dumb old bird." Cassie tried to hold back her tears but they came anyway. "We're just trying to help you."

She tried again—this way and then that way. But it didn't matter how exhausted Juliet looked. Every time Cassie got close

enough to reach under the branches, the bird would start thrashing around and waving those big, airplane wings.

Cassie looked toward shore where her sisters were standing. Fiona was right at the edge of the lake and Samantha was a little behind her, clutching her book to her chest.

"Fiona!" Cassie cried out. "I can't cut the plastic away unless she holds still. You've got to come over here and help."

"In there?"

Why couldn't Fiona just stop being such a worrywart, for once? Didn't she see that Juliet needed both their help?

Cassie fought back the tears that seemed to be coming closer and closer, but then suddenly Fiona was in the lake, walking gingerly through the mud as she circled around Juliet. "When she's looking at me, you cut her free," she told Cassie.

Cassie just nodded, afraid that if she spoke, she would really start crying. And she never cried. Never.

Juliet turned to watch Fiona, and as Cassie watched, she felt relief fill her heart.

"Hi, Juliet," Fiona murmured to the swan. "You remember me? I'm Fiona."

Cassie eased closer to the bird and Juliet flicked a worried glance her way. "Don't be afraid, girl," Cassie whispered. "You're going to be okay."

Fiona was still talking and the swan went back to paying attention to her. Cassie sighed and inched forward. Just another foot. She inched closer, then closer still.

Then finally, taking a deep breath, she reached under the branches into the water. A quick snip and Juliet was free. Clutching the plastic in one hand and the scissors in the other, Cassie propelled herself backward. The swan half-swam, half-flew toward Rome.

Cassie watched the bird hurry away, feeling as if her heart might burst. But even as relief and happiness grew inside her, worry started to push in. What if this had happened over the weekend, when they weren't around? What if it had happened farther around the lake, past the point where the camp was? Juliet could have died.

Cassie felt the stinging behind her eyes again. Mad as she was at Daddy for lying, losing Juliet would somehow have been like losing part of him again. The hurt made her mad and she stomped back to the shore, splashing up a storm.

"Look at this stupid junk," she fumed, waving the plastic ringed strip in the air. "People who throw this stuff in the lake ought to be hung by their necks with it."

Fiona climbed out of the water right behind her. "Come on," she said as she took Samantha's hand. "We'll go back to camp by the nurse's office. We can say we went there with you."

"Whatever." Cassie was too tired to care. What was Mrs. Warner going to do to them, anyway, if they got caught—make them weed the woods?

But Cassie just followed Fiona and Sam along the shore. They were just about to start up through the trees when an old woman came toward them.

"I saw what you did," she said.

"So?" Cassie was in no mood to apologize to anybody. She could feel Fiona pulling at her but she ignored her sister's hand and glared at the intruder.

"It was my fault," Fiona said, stepping in front of them. "I'm the oldest and I should have known better."

Oh, man. The great confessor was at it again. "Gee, Fi—"

But the old woman's laughter cut Cassie's words off. "The gods will smile on you," the old woman said. "You fought so love might live. Someday, the spirits will return to fight for your love."

Cassie just stared at the old woman, stunned for the moment. She wanted to say something smart, something that would snap the old lady back on her heels. But what could you say when someone talked so dumb?

Love wasn't good for anything, anyway. You didn't need it to kick a home run, do chin-ups, or come in first in a race. Love was just a big waste of time. Actually, it was worse. All it did was make you cry.

Chapter One

“My, oh, my. Check it out, Cassie. This could be your Romeo.”

“Romeo’s a swan,” Cassie Scott said and went right on filling out her order form. She knew from Ellen’s tone that a man had entered her plumbing-supply house but she, unlike Ellen, was interested only in the supplies he’d come to buy.

“Is he or isn’t he studly?” Ellen Donnelly said in a stage whisper that probably woke sleeping dogs in Three Oaks, at least an hour’s drive from South Bend, Indiana. Ellen was a happily married mother of five who believed every woman needed a guy of her own and had taken Cassie on as a special challenge. “On a scale from one to ten, I’d rate him a twelve.”

Cassie knew Ellen would never let it rest, so she glanced up. Her heart stumbled for a long moment before it started to beat again.

The man had taken a turn to his right and was staring at a row of faucet fixtures that hung on the Peg-Board-covered wall. His well-tailored suit did nothing to hide his husky physique. His shoulders were broad, and tapered to narrow hips and long