



OUT OF AFRICA - BOOK 9



OUT OF

Chances



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



Out of Chances Copyright © 2019 Michele Pollock Dalton. All Rights Reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the e-mail address below.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Unless marked, all scriptures are taken from the New International Version (NIV): Scripture taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™.

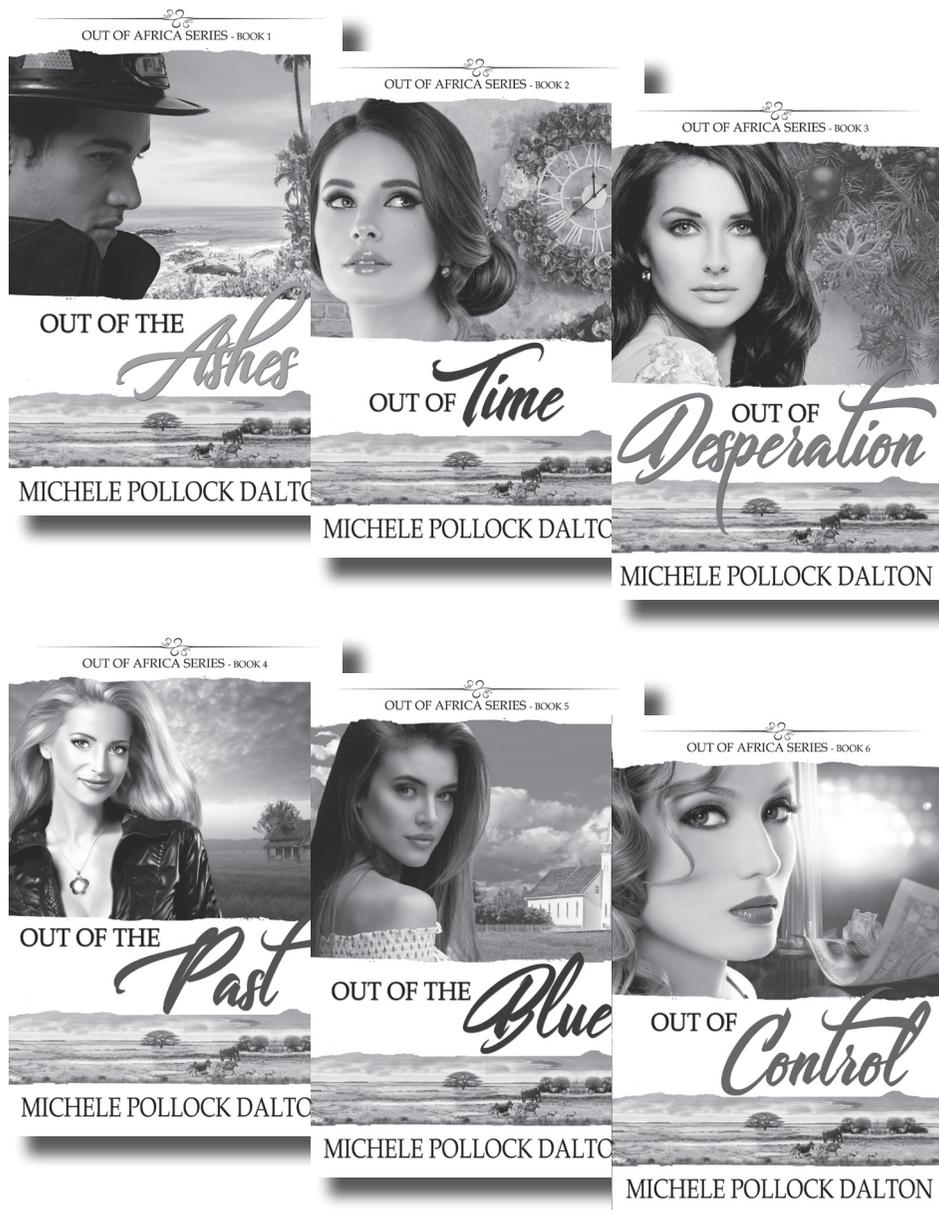
Cover images provided by Shutterstock and/or Canstock.
Book design by *Digital Daisy Creative Services* | www.DigitalDaisy.net

www.MichelePollockDalton.com
author@MichelePollockDalton.com

Published in the United States of America
June 2019

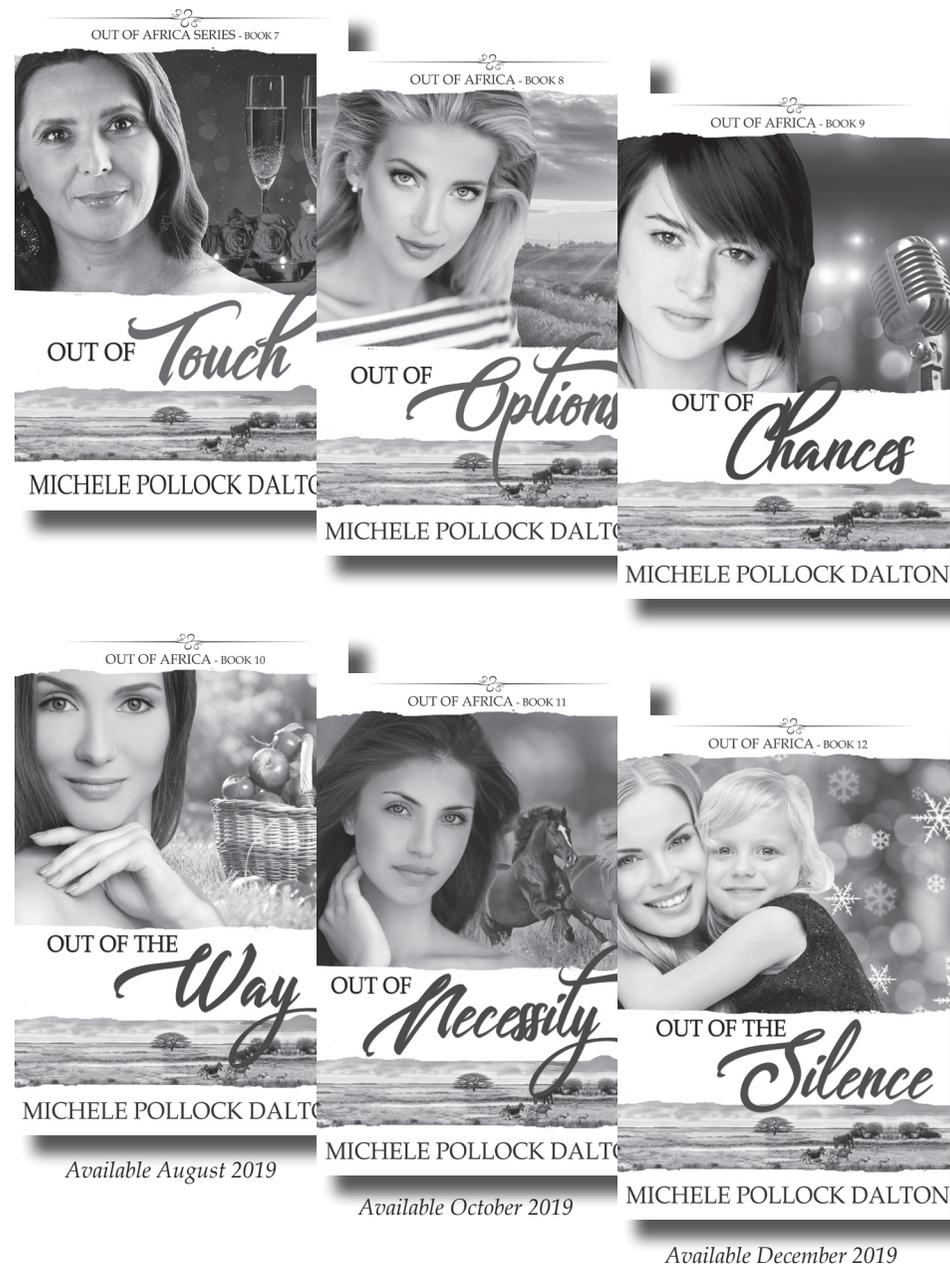
*For the woman who has always been my rock and shelter.
I miss you, Mom.*

Start a New Reading Adventure!



Set in California during the late 1970s, the Out of Africa series covers the lives of John and Catherine Brandt along with a host of family and friends. Meeting the challenges of life with faith, hope, and love, this dynamic couple faces every day with a good dose of prayer, common sense, and humor.

These Titles are Coming Soon



www.MichelePollockDalton.com



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Dr. Catherine Kavanagh Brandt: A pediatrician, married to John Brandt. Residing in Joplin, Missouri.

Genesis “Gen” Lorraine Brandt: Married to Billy Brandt (Jr/III). Farming with her husband in Joplin, Missouri.

Johann Wilhelm “John” Brandt III: A fireman/paramedic for the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Married to Catherine Kavanagh Brandt. On administrative leave, residing in Joplin, Missouri.

John William “Billy” Brandt Jr.: Illegitimate son of Wild Bill Brandt. Incorrectly named by his birth mother, using the Americanized version of the name. In actuality, Billy would be a “third” like his half-brother, John. Surrendered to an orphanage in Joplin, Missouri as an infant. Married to Genesis Brandt and running the family farm in Joplin, Missouri.

Lily “Lil” Brandt: Matriarch of the Brandt clan. Widow of Johann Wilhelm Brandt Sr.

* * * * *

Captain Charles “Chuck” Harris: Captain at Fire Station 07 - “A” Shift - with the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Follow me:



www.MichelePollockDalton.com



www.Facebook.com/OfficialMichelePollockDalton



www.Pinterest.com/MichelePollockDalton

Augustus “Gus” Reid: Fireman at Fire Station 07 - “A Shift” - with the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Gabriel “Gabe” Vaccarello: Engineer at Fire Station 07 - “A” Shift - with the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

* * * * *

Maude Baumgartner: Wealthy widow employing Dr. Catherine Brandt. Currently living in Chicago, Illinois.

Martha “Martie” Biederman: Private nurse to Maude Baumgartner. Maternal aunt of Gabe Vaccarello.

Shaughnessy Forsythe: Legal counsel for Maude Baumgartner. A resident of Sonoma, California.

Luca Ricci: Head of the Chicago branch of the Ricci crime family. A resident of Chicago, Illinois.



PROLOGUE

Saturday, December 24, 1977

When the receiving line disbanded, Gus was caught in the melee as the bridal party and immediate family moved back toward the solarium for photos. “Hey, don’t think we’ve met yet,” he explained to the raven-haired girl that made the chiffon bridesmaid’s dress a work of art. The deep ruby of the garment was an eye-catching contrast to the woman’s skin tone; and, the off-the-shoulder, beaded lace bodice enhanced her cleavage in a way that made Gus’ mouth water.

“Ronnie,” she replied, her obsidian eyes going wide as she took in the fine specimen before her. Brilliant blue-green eyes surveyed her with appreciation. “You know Johnny or his wife?”

“Both,” Gus proudly answered. “I work with Johnny; but, Cat’s been helping out at the station too.”

“Hmm. Heard tell she’s some kind of genius.”

“She’s smart alright - a smart aleck,” Gus joked. “My kind of gal,” he said, giving the petite woman the once over. After sweeping a glance over the sweet curves of the form in front of him, Gus stood taller. At 5’10” he was often dwarfed by the men he worked with; but, the tiny lady by his side made him feel like a giant. “What about you?”

“Family,” Ronnie answered with a devil-may-care shrug. “Well, let’s get this over with,” she grumbled as they watched the photographer get everyone arranged in front of the wedding arbor. The candles used during the ceremony had been extinguished; and, the French doors

were thrown open to let in some fresh air. "I'll catch up with you later," she promised as she moved past, purposely allowing her arm to brush against the muscular man.

"Save me a dance."

"You got it, fireman!" Ronnie declared as she trundled into the mass of bodies to take her spot next to her newly-discovered older brother. "Can you believe all this hubbub?" she whispered to Billy. "I could have bought a house and a new car for what they spent on decorating this mausoleum."

"Gen and I snuck up to the third floor earlier. Just wait 'til ya get a gander at that," Billy softly twanged. "The lady they work for sure 'nough went all out on this party."

Snorting, Ronnie reached up and patted her half-brother's cheek. "Some people got all the luck."

Billy waited until the photographer took the first series of pictures before he answered. "Don't know about luck. That crazy old woman keeps our brother hoppin'," he quietly responded. "Him and the missus got a mite more patience than me - that's for sure."

"Still, it's gotta be worth it. Can you imagine living in this place?" Ronnie asked as the group moved out onto the back patio. Once again, the photographer took an inordinate amount of time positioning them on the steps of the gazebo, so she poked her sister. "Think they need a lounge singer to entertain them in the evenings?"

Sandy chuckled at her sister's irreverent humor. "I'm sure Johnny and Catherine find other things to keep themselves entertained in the evenings."

Gasping in mock horror, Ronnie leaned in and bumped hips with Sandy. "Did my painfully shy sister just make a sex joke?" she asked her brother-in-law with glee.

James cuddled his bashful wife and winked at Ronnie. "Pretty sure Sandy is right. Those two got a healthy glow that only comes from certain activities."

After several more location changes, the photographer finally set the group free; and, Ronnie was pleased to find a certain fireman fixed to her side in quick order. "You again?" she teased.

"Doll, you're gonna have to pry me loose," Gus quipped back before offering his arm. "Ready to get this party started?"

"Lead the way, Romeo."

* * * * *

The evening stars had just begun to twinkle in heaven's silky expanse when Ronnie and Gus snagged a private table in the corner of the flagstone terrace. Ceramic heaters around the periphery warmed the area nicely; but, Ronnie moved closer to the handsome firefighter, seeking his body heat.

"Hate to cover up that dress, doll. But, you can have my suit jacket if you need it," Gus offered as he refilled their champagne flutes. In the muted lantern light, the ambiance of the spectacular evening was making his head swim. Setting aside the empty bottle of Dom Perignon he'd snagged from the bar, Gus lifted his glass in a toast to the vivacious girl. "So, beautiful, what's it going to be?" he asked, waving a double-sided menu with silver filigree along the edges. "Do you want to rub elbows with the formal crowd in the ballroom? Or, for those with more sophisticated tastes they have a BBQ style steakhouse set-up in the courtyard," he stated with his best impression of a stuffy English butler. "And, it says here, 'For a touch of true romance, select one of our pre-packed picnic baskets and enjoy the gardens and grounds at your leisure.'"

Ronnie giggled at the gregarious man. "You choose, Romeo. I'm good with any of it. Just remember we've got to be back for all the hoopla when they start dancing upstairs."

Snuggling closer to the raven-haired beauty, Gus slipped an arm around her shoulders. "What do you think about taking one of those picnic baskets out for a spin? I'll grab another bottle of their expensive alcohol, and we can make our own party."

A sultry chuckle sprang from Ronnie's berry red lips. "Forward, aren't you?"

"Honest," Gus countered with a naughty twinkle in his eye. Leaning in, he whispered, "I'm dying to see what's under that dress."

Beneath the table cloth, Ronnie ran a hand up the inside of the muscular man's thigh and gasped in delight when she connected with a wonderful surprise. Well aware of her feminine wiles, she stroked the writhing anaconda under her hand until her Romeo's eyes crossed. "A picnic basket it is," she agreed.

* * * * *

Saturday, December 31, 1977

"Ah, sorry for the interruption, Mom," Ronnie grumbled. "But Johnny is looking for you. He said to meet him in the kitchen." With the message delivered, she fled before her mother could give her a tongue lashing. "Oh, thank goodness you're here!" Ronnie exclaimed when she ran into her favorite fireman in the temporary cocktail lounge. "I'm going to need liquid courage to get through the rest of this family funny business," she told Gus in an undertone.

"Don't worry, doll. If they run out of champagne here, I have plenty more back at my place," he joked half-seriously. Looking around, he gave a self-deprecating grin. "But, I gotta warn you . . . not many firemen can afford a place like this," Gus quipped, gesturing to the luxurious surroundings. "I heard Johnny call this Catherine's Parlor. Can't match that; but, I can swing a matching chair . . . we could call it Ronnie's Recliner."

"Easy there, big boy. Unless you plan on hauling those recliners to Reno, tonight is the last night of our fun. I got a job to get back to."

"Sure you don't want to give it a whirl, doll? We make beautiful music together; and, I bet there are plenty of places around here looking for lounge singers."

"Auggie, you're gonna turn my head," Ronnie playfully retorted, taking the offered arm.

Gus flushed at the mention of his childhood nickname. "Baby, don't ever call me that around Johnny, or I'll never hear the end of it."

Ronnie snickered and drug her new Romeo through the packed bar area until they broke out into the cool night air. "Don't worry, big boy.

Your secret is safe with me. Let's see if we can find a little peace and quiet."

Snagging two more glasses of bubbly, Gus maneuvered his pretty lady through the mingling guests towards the gazebo at the center of the rose garden. "This will do," he decided as they settled on one of the built-in benches. With an arm tossed casually around Ronnie's shoulders, Gus fingered the black beaded gown that displayed his date's womanly charms. "You warm enough?" he whispered in her ear - delighted when Ronnie burrowed closer. "Sure I can't talk you into sticking around?"

"Hey! Remember - no strings," Ronnie quietly admonished. "You're a great guy, Auggie. I'm just not ready to get serious about anything more than my music. No hard feelings, right?"

"Nah, doll. No hard feelings."



CHAPTER 1

Sunday, June 18, 1978 – Father's Day

Drawing up her courage and a deep breath, Ronnie Brandt reached out and rang the doorbell. After several tries, she considered giving up; but, she was out of money and had no place else to go. As a last-ditch effort, Ronnie resorted to pounding on the apartment door.

"Yeah, yeah!" a low rumble announced. "Hold your horses!"

The rattle of the chain and the click of the lock disengaging made Ronnie heave a sigh of relief. She pulled the strap of the heavy duffle bag back over her shoulder and positioned the awkward piece of luggage against her body. Reminding herself that the man on the other side of the door was her last hope, Ronnie tried to smile.

Clamping the striped sheet tightly around his waist, Gus Reid took a moment to scrub the sleepy sand from his eyes. "Do you know what time it is?" he grouched with a scratchy voice as he swung the door open.

"Sorry, Auggie. Blame it on Greyhound," Ronnie joked nervously, waiting for the man to ask her inside.

Blinking groggily at the petite girl, Gus widened his eyes in an attempt to get them to stay open. "What'cha doing here, doll?"

Shifting the duffle bag that contained everything she owned, Ronnie waved at her protruding middle. "Happy Father's Day?"

That did it! Gus' eyes no longer needed help staying open. Without thinking, he let out a low whistle of disbelief. "Is that what I think it is?" he stammered, bending down for a better look. Then his brain finally

started firing on all cylinders. "Did I do that?" he squeaked.

Ronnie nodded and stroked the burgeoning baby bump under her dress.

"Oh, man!! You'd better come in quick before someone sees you," Gus yelled, dragging the pregnant girl into his apartment. "Oh, man! Oh, shi . . . oh, crap! I'm dead. Your brother is going to kill me," the panicked firefighter rambled as he began to pace. "Does he know?! Did you tell Johnny? Oooohhh, I'm gonna die!!"

Ronnie huffed and dropped her bag. "You're taking this better than expected," she sarcastically commented as the pasty-faced man sank into his brown plaid recliner still bemoaning his imminent demise.

A winsome blonde peeked around the corner from the bedroom. "Um, could I get my dress?" she sheepishly questioned, trying to avoid looking at Ronnie.

The marigold colored bedspread wrapped around the other woman did little to hide her state of undress; and, Ronnie rolled her eyes. This was seriously not how she imagined this day going; but, she did a turn around the room looking for the other woman's missing dress. On the doorknob to the coat closet, she found a pair of panties. "Take it these are yours?" she questioned before flinging the underwear toward the bedroom. In the kitchen, Ronnie kicked at the metallic bronze pleated disco dress she found in a heap on the floor near the table. Patting her belly and then the table, Ronnie smirked. "Hey kid," she said, addressing her abdomen. "This should look familiar. Your dad isn't a very patient man, but I suppose it's as good a place as any for puttin' a bun in the oven."

"Ah, my dress?" the disgruntled girl reminded.

Ronnie shook her head at the absurdity of it all. "Honey, I can't even reach my own feet. You want that dress, you're gonna have to get it yourself," she answered, waving to the glittering pile of fabric. "Nice dress by the way. Plenty of room around the middle," she viciously teased, drawing particular attention to her own distorted shape. "It should still fit for a couple more months."

Going tomato red, the bottle blonde strode forward and scooped her wardrobe from the floor. "Some of us know how to keep mistakes

like that from happening," she hissed at Ronnie before fleeing into the cramped bathroom and slamming the door.

Feeling particularly impish, Ronnie pounded on the door. "Double up on your pill today, Disco Betty, if you want to make sure of that, 'cause I was on birth control too."

* * * * *

"Snap out of it, Auggie. I need your help," Ronnie admonished after the furious blonde stormed out of the apartment.

Gus looked up, his face still unnaturally pale. "Your brother is REALLY going to kill me! He's insane; and, when he finds out what I did? Oh, I'm gonna die!!"

Crossing her arms over her chest and resting them on the crest of her belly, Ronnie faced down the hysterical man. "Settle down! Johnny doesn't even need to know I'm here!" she exclaimed in exasperation. "I am flat out of money and luck; so I need a place to crash until this kid comes. After that, I'll disappear. I promise. But for now, I need your help."

"I don't know, doll. You know what Johnny's been like since the little doc died. If he finds out, he'll take an ax to me!" Gus tensely answered. "And, that is no exaggeration."

Confusion clouded Ronnie's face; and, she dropped into a kitchen chair. "What did you say?"

"Which part?" Gus rambled. "Man, how did this happen?!"

Pulling a wry face, the discombobulated woman glared at the agitated man. "Augustus Reid! Sit down and be quiet," she harped. "Now, what did you say about Johnny's wife?"

On unsteady feet, Gus meandered into his tiny kitchen and pulled a beer from the refrigerator. After a long pull on the bottle, he sat it down with a thump and stared at the pregnant girl in his apartment - HIS APARTMENT! Piano crashing, window smashing, ax-wielding Johnny Brandt's sister was in his apartment?!?

In disgust, Ronnie threw up her hands and heaved herself from the chair. "Never mind," she muttered. Laboriously, she squatted and

managed to get ahold of the handle on her duffle bag. With a hopeless sigh, she banged out of the apartment and began the walk back to the bus stop. "At least it's warm," she thought. Living on the street was Ronnie's next choice; and, it was still better than crawling home to any member of her family. Then she remembered the last few pieces of change in her pocket. No use wasting any of it on a bus to nowhere.

"Hey! Hey, Ronnie, hold up!" Gus shouted at her from the door of his apartment. When the stubborn woman didn't stop, he cinched the sheet tighter around his waist and gave pursuit. "Come on, doll. Wait up!"

"Leave me alone, Gus. Go back to your messy apartment and one-night stands. I got other things to worry about," Ronnie dismissed as she huffed along.

Gus tried to ignore the stares and laughter as he hurried along behind the perturbed woman. "Please, just come back to my place. Then we can talk about whatever you want," he pleaded. "Ronnie! Be reasonable."

Pivoting, Ronnie brushed away the frustrated tears that clouded her eyes. "I don't want anything from you, you coward!" she screeched. "Just leave me alone." Swirling away, Ronnie drew up short. "Let go!" she protested when she found Gus clinging to the shoulder strap of the gym bag.

Awkwardly Gus worked the bag off her shoulder and heaved it onto his. With one arm, he circled what was left of Ronnie's waist and tried to herd her back toward his apartment. "Give me a chance, doll. I'm tryin' here." Once inside, he pointed the upset woman toward his chair and looked down at the sheet he was wearing. "Aw, the heck with it," he mumbled, drawing up a kitchen chair. The sheet would have to do for now. Gus wasn't going to risk her running off again while he was changing. "So, um, I guess we need to go to City Hall," he weakly offered.

"That's not why I came here," Ronnie sniffled. "I just need a place to stay for a little while. After that, you're off the hook. There's a place called St. Anne's; but, they didn't have room for me right now. Once the kid is born, they will find a home for it."

Gus couldn't help it, his sigh of relief was long and drawn out. "Well, uh, sure. Whatever you want, doll. But, we got to keep this under wraps. I'm not joking when I say Johnny will chop me into small pieces and

throw me in the ocean."

"Enough about Johnny!" Ronnie shouted. "He's got nothing to do with this! If you don't say anything, he'll never know. No one will."

"Ah, how long till the kid shows up?" Gus asked when the silence lengthened after Ronnie's outburst.

"Sometime in September I guess," she grunted. "I'll see if I can find a job of some sort; and, I'll stay out of your way, Auggie. I just didn't have anywhere else to go. As soon as I started showing, my gigs canceled; and then, my landlord gave me the boot." Raking a hand through the black hair that kept falling into her eyes, Ronnie finally looked up at the man who'd been a heck of a lot of fun during their week together. "Sorry to lay all this on you."

The firehouse comedian shrugged good-naturedly. "Guess it was bound to happen sooner or later," he mused. "And, you know, it's too bad about the timing. I bet you the little doc would have given the kid a home. That'd been something - Brandt raising my kid," he chuckled, then frowned.

Ronnie shook her head. "No one in my family is going to want a kid of mine," she griped, her thoughts turning sour.

Uncertain, Gus reached out a hand and lightly touched the protrusion in the petite woman's lap. "Talk nice, doll. The kid can hear you, ya know." Leaning down, he cupped his hands around his mouth and placed them near Ronnie's belly button. "Hey, little midget. Don't worry about nothing, okay? I'll take good care of your Mama while you're cooking." With a wink at the pretty lady, Gus rubbed a little circle on her belly. "Not much in the kitchen right now; but, help yourself. I'm gonna shower and then make some space for your clothes in the dresser."

Relaxing, Ronnie gave the anxious man a timid smile of thanks. While he was gone, she surveyed the grubby apartment. Not only was it small; but, it was ugly as well. "You got a shovel?" she called when she heard the shower go off.

"Very funny," Gus retorted as he appeared rubbing his wet hair with the bedsheet he'd worn into the bathroom. "I've been busy."

Ronnie smirked. The man was a pillar of well-defined muscle. He was also naked as a jaybird. "Yeah, I saw what's been keeping you busy

on her way out the front door," she quipped, not the least bit fazed by the other woman's existence. But, oh! The hunk of man in front of her did funny things to Ronnie's nervous system. "You planning on using that while I'm here?" she brazenly asked with a pointed look at his arousal.

"Don't see how it'd hurt," Gus glibly teased. "You can't get any more pregnant, right?"

* * * * *

The 1954 Bermudan Sloop made good time from Long Beach to Ensenada; but, by the time he docked, Gabe was exhausted. A spat of calls during the overnight shift had been enough to leave him worn out. But, his Aunt Martha's emergency summons had left him no choice – Gabe outfitted his boat for the journey and made tracks for the Baja Peninsula.

As he secured the bowline, Gabe was surprised to see his aunt hurrying down the dock.

"Don't shut down! We are ready to board," Martha Biederman rushed to say before hurrying back the way she'd come. In quick order, she reappeared with her elderly patient and their luggage.

"Martie, I don't have room for all this," Gabe protested when a stooped Mexican man began handing over several smaller pieces of luggage. When Gabe spotted the enormous steamer trunk, he shook his head in consternation. "There is no room for that!" he spluttered.

Faded blue eyes assessed the big fellow; and, Maude Baumgartner shook her silver-tipped cane at the brawny man. "YES!" she slowly, but forcefully enunciated. "Mine!" she proclaimed imperially, her slurred speech doing nothing to hide her strident commands.

Narrowing his eyes and lowering his brow, Gabe scowled at the ancient crone. "If you expect my help, I suggest you go below decks and stay there," he growled, unwilling to forget the bent little witch's complicity in Catherine's horrifying death.

"Gabriel!" his aunt corrected in a huff. "We must have the trunk."

Waving at the cramped deck of his boat, he snapped, "Where do you expect me to put it?! That thing is huge!"

"Up there," Martha pointed to the bow, frantic to be away with her precious cargo.

Resigned, Gabe jumped onto the dock and hoisted the massive piece of luggage onto the deck of his sloop. "This is ridiculous," he mumbled contrarily under his breath. Normally a patient man, Gabe was feeling every one of the nearly forty hours he'd been awake. Ignoring the old woman and the eyes that glittered with triumph, he wrestled the dang-blasted steamer trunk into place with a good deal of thumping and muttering.

"Be careful!" his aunt shrilled when he plunked the cumbersome piece of baggage into place.

Heaving a sigh deeper than the Pacific, Gabe propped his meaty paws on his narrow hips and scowled at the women cluttering his deck. "Anything else?" he grumbled, ready to dump them both off the leeward side. A call from the dock turned his thoughts away from mayhem, and Gabe focused on the rapid-fire directions from the Harbor Master. "Alright you two, get below decks while I take us out," Gabe directed as he took the helm. "The Harbor Master needs this slip."

Martha shook her head. "You haven't secured our trunk," she reminded. "And Mrs. Baumgartner will need help to get below decks."

Thunderclouds forming over his brow, Gabe spun and scooped up the wizened old woman in a fireman's hold. The "oof" as her rib cage hit his shoulder was a satisfying sound, and a corner of Gabe's mouth hitched up in satisfaction. "That's for you, Cat," he thought to himself. Memories of the sweet girl's smile made Gabe's heart ache; and, he absently wondered how Johnny was fairing. In the cabin, he dropped the ancient crone onto one of the benches and escaped before Mrs. Baumgartner could clobber him with her cane.

"What has gotten into you, Gabriel?" his Aunt Martha hotly demanded as he reappeared on deck.

"Drop it, Martie," he coldly advised. "If you knew what that woman cost me . . ." Gabe trailed off. There was no sense in unleashing his anger on his aunt. She wasn't responsible for Catherine's death.

Starting the engine, Gabe gave the signal, and his mooring line was tossed back onto the deck. The last of the golden sunset dipped into the

ocean, and the night breeze carried the salty scent of wind and wave as he moved away from the dock. Sailing was a balm to his wounded spirit, and Gabe patted the ship's wheel. It was strange to think that the maiden voyage of his recently re-christened boat would be to rescue the woman partially responsible for his sweet lady's demise. As he steered, Gabe's thumb stroked the engraved metal ring that adorned the ship's wheel. Softly, he traced each letter. "My Fair Lady," he whispered into the dying light.



CHAPTER 2

Monday, June 19, 1978

Gabe blinked into the darkness and groaned.

"I need your help," his aunt whispered next to his head.

"Can't it wait until morning?" he snapped. Gabe's head was pounding from lack of sleep, and if the absence of light outside was any indication, it was too early to catch the morning tide.

"No! Now, Gabriel," Martha harshly commanded, her voice tinged with worry. The fact that they were moored in Ensenada Bay was bad enough. She'd hoped they would be away long before anyone noticed they were missing. But, her stubborn nephew insisted that he would not sail unfamiliar waters at night. Even more dire was the next step in their escape. "Hurry," she directed as the sleepy man lumbered from his bunk and scratched at the mess of blonde hair on his head.

Gabe lurched for his pants; but, his insistent aunt snagged his hand and drug him through the main cabin. He tugged at the gym shorts that did little to cover his manly assets and obediently followed along. "What's so blamed important now?" he bellyached. "It's barely midnight," Gabe grouched as he stretched to his full height once they made it topside.

"Help me," Martha implored as she wobbled toward the bow. "I need to get that trunk open," she said in desperation.

"OH, for Pete's sake! You woke me up to dig through your luggage?" Gabe carped before turning back toward the hatchway. "Whatever it is can wait until morning. I just got that stupid thing tied down!"

"Now, Gabriel!" his aunt demanded, fierce with determination.

"The next time you need rescuing, call Gil," he suggested, referencing his stodgy older brother. The man was built like a mountain and had just about as much personality.

"That's enough of your sass, young man," Martha hotly scolded. "Just get that trunk open!"

Grudgingly, Gabe dropped to his knees and yanked at the knots he'd secured less than two hours ago. Lumbering to his feet, Gabe stepped back and gestured to the latch. "The rest is up to you. I'm going back to bed."

Stepping quickly into the narrow gap, Martha opened the lock and yanked the lid open. "Oh! OH!" she cried. "Gabriel, help me!"

Gabe might have argued if the fear in his aunt's voice hadn't sent a shiver of dread down his spine. He hurried back to her side to see what had her so distraught. In the waning light of the moon, all he could make out was a lumpy white blob. "What is it?" he questioned, his face scrunched in confusion.

"Hurry! Get her out of there," Martha instructed, her voice wavering.

"Her!?" Gabe shouted in disbelief.

"SSSSH!" Martha admonished, reminding him of how sound traveled over the water.

Bending over, Gabe carefully lifted the tightly balled form from the steamer trunk. It no longer seemed so big when he considered the girl inside. "She's burning up," he hissed, lifting the sweat-drenched child from her hiding place.

"She was in there too long," Martha fretted. "Too long," she said again, near tears.

Moving aft, Gabe gently lowered the girl onto one of the benches and hurried below decks to retrieve a bucket. When he returned, he dipped up pail full after pail full of cool ocean water and poured it over the shrouded form.

"It's not helping," Martha lamented ten minutes later. "Maybe if we submerge her?"

Gabe quirked an eyebrow. "I don't know what roams these waters," he said, trying to dissuade his frantic aunt.

Using her best starched nurse's voice, Martha pinned Gabe with a no-nonsense gaze. "Fine, put a rope around her waist. I will accompany her into the water."

Puffing out his cheeks and expelling a pent-up breath, Gabe gently lifted the child over his shoulder. Flinging the rope ladder over the side, he carefully made his way into the water. Clinging to the ladder with one hand and the girl with the other, he cringed as the cold water closed over him. Gingerly, he shifted the kid from his shoulder and let her slide down his chest. "Damn!" he anxiously muttered when the sheet she was wrapped in began to drift away. But, Gabe suddenly realized he had bigger problems when the satin separating them was gone. "How old is this girl?" he squeaked when he felt firm breasts pressing into his chest. Then the young woman started to thrash. "It's okay, kid!" he admonished. "Jeez, hold still," he muttered to the writhing girl. "Martie!" he softly called, mindful of drawing attention. "Martie! I think she's having a seizure."

"We HAVE to cool her off," Martha frantically whispered back. "Just hold onto her!"

Gabe huffed in consternation. "It's like wrestling an electric eel!" As a last resort, Gabe guided her into position, so she straddled his drawn up leg. The jolt he received when he felt the soft down between her legs brush his upper thigh made Gabe's eyes drift closed as he savored the immediate and sudden arousal. "Oh, boy," he mutely groaned. More than fifteen months of celibacy was wearing his control thin; and, Gabe scolded himself. He was surrounded by cold water; but, his libido didn't seem to mind. The warm body in his arms was as tantalizing as any he'd ever held. "Ah, lead me not . . . oh, boy . . . um, into temptation," he reminded, determined to keep his mind focused on the reason he was holding the young woman.

Brief glints of moonlight peeked through the clouds, and Gabe could make out the shaved head resting against his heart. Darkness shrouded most of the details; but, he could make out the delicate bone structure of her face and the long lashes that curved over high cheekbones. "Poor kid," he whispered, drawing her closer as her energy fizzled and the thrashing ceased.

Easing her off of his leg brought scant relief to his sexual tension; but, Gabe was determined to concentrate on keeping the girl safe. "It's just biology," he thought. "Two warm bodies. It's natural," he explained through inner dialogue. Then a new situation developed below his waist. "Errr!" he groaned as the rhythmic rocking of the waves pushed and pulled their bodies into the natural rhythm of gentle lovemaking. The tightness in his gym shorts was unbearable! And apparently, he wasn't the only one feeling amorous, if the soft moans and whimpers of his swimming companion were any indication. "Oh, angel," he murmured to the girl in his arms. Hoping to limit the motion of the tide, Gabe tightened his hold and drew the nearly limp girl closer. "It's just chemistry," his conscience scolded.

"Everything okay down there?" Martha asked, looking down over the side.

"Peachy. Just peachy," Gabe rasped, his breath hitching every time the waves rocked the unconscious girl against his erection. In desperation, Gabe tried to recall the lyrics to his favorite hymns. Nada. Not a word came to mind. There was nothing left in his brain - every ounce of blood in his body was circling below his waistband. Tipping his head back, he looked to the stars for help; and, then Gabe dropped it back toward his chest. He kissed the top of the girl's bald head and gave up fighting the inevitable. Like a randy teenager's first experiment with sex, he lost himself in the powerful connection he felt to the woman in his arms. When his climax shuddered through him, Gabe turned his face into his bicep and bit his own arm to keep from crying out his release.

Voices from above carried to him over the lapping of the water against the hull. "Bella?" he heard the old lady question in her faltering speech pattern.

"I don't know, Maude," Martha answered worriedly. "She was in the trunk too long!"

Gabe looked down at the young woman. "Bella," he whispered. The name suited her; and, he hoped that this strange interlude was the beginning of something beautiful. "Don't worry, Bella, I've got you," he promised when she began to move of her own volition. The lithe arm that snaked around his neck sent shock waves rippling through his system

once again, and they rocked together in harmony with the rhythm of the waves. "Bella, my Bella," he huskily proclaimed, aching for the moment he could truly claim her.

* * * * *

"How can you live like this?" Ronnie questioned as she stepped into the kitchen that morning. Tugging at the hem of her only maternity top, she surveyed the messy space with a grimace.

Ever cheerful, Gus winked at the feisty girl. "It ain't so bad. I washed out a coffee cup for you," he offered with a self-satisfied smile. Handing over said cup, he dropped a hand to Ronnie's protruding belly. "Morning, midget," he greeted, intrigued by the ripples and bumps he felt under his hand. "What do you think, boy or girl?" he questioned before scooping up his own coffee.

"I don't know; but, the heartburn has been horrible with this one," Ronnie complained. "Guess that means the kid has lots of hair or something like that. Now, stop trying to distract me. I want to know what happened to Johnny's wife!"

Spluttering his coffee all over, Gus choked out, "This one?"

Harrumphing, Ronnie scowled at the man who made her toes curl in pleasure. "Stop trying to change the subject again!" she grouched. "I'll tell you my life story later. What's going on with my big brother?"

"Pffft! You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope," she said, wagging her head before snagging a piece of Gus' toast.

Kicking aside some of the rubbish that had fallen out of the overflowing garbage can, Gus gestured to the path he made, ushering Ronnie before him to his recliner. It was the one piece of furniture he'd purchased new. Sinking into the comfort of the overstuffed chair, he pulled Ronnie down into his lap. When she relaxed into him, he snuck a hand up her shirt and stroked the mound of her belly. "Your skin is so soft," he mumbled next to her ear before leaning in to nip at the tender pink shell.

"You are not distracting me that easy, Augustus Reid," Ronnie asserted, although her sweet moan might have taken a bit of the sting

out of the statement.

"You are one darn persistent woman," Gus complained, pulling the lever to bring the footrest up. He smirked when the action launched Ronnie back into his chest. Lifting Ronnie's shirt higher, he sought out the heavy breasts that filled his hands to overflowing. "I don't remember you being this big before," he commented before latching on to one of the succulent nipples.

Swatting his hands away, Ronnie wiggled and squirmed until she was able to lever herself out of the chair. "Speak!" she demanded.

"She was murdered, alright? No one knows why! And Johnny? He's gone off the deep end, doll. Someone sent him her head in a big white hat box. Sent it right to the station, ok? Now can we quit talking about it?" Gus clamored to say, going green around the gills.

Ronnie sank down on the stained, pink velvet settee and stared in shocked silence at her lover. "You . . . you're just saying that! You're just saying that to shut me up," she derided, furious that Gus would do such a thing.

Hopping out of his recliner and pushing aside a pile of dirty laundry, Gus snuggled into Ronnie's side. "Sorry, doll. That's the truth of it. Now, do you understand why I didn't want to tell you? I don't want the midget hearing about that kind of stuff. He might never want to come out," Gus teased without humor. "Your family never told you about any of this?"

"Romeo, how many times do I have to tell you - my family doesn't want anything to do with me."

"I am sorry to hear that, doll. But, that doesn't seem like Johnny and the little doc. They went nuts when your other sister went missing," he explained before he realized Ronnie likely hadn't heard that news either. Her gasp of dismay confirmed that suspicion. "Aw, jeez. Sorry, baby," he mumbled before gathering her into his arms. Gus patted Ronnie's back awkwardly and waited for the waterworks to start. All he got was a few snuffles before the independent girl pulled away and looked at him.

"Who is missing?"

"Not sure, Ronnie. Brandt didn't want to talk about it when it happened - at least not to me. I'll see if one of the other guys knows when I'm on shift tomorrow." Lurching forward, Gus tried unsuccessfully to

stop the avalanche of dirty clothes as they slid to the floor. With a sigh, he kicked the mountain of laundry to the side. "Guess I'd better make a trip to the laundromat today."

"And food," Ronnie quietly reminded. "Your refrigerator is empty."

"Yeah, that too," Gus agreed. "I, ah, well . . . I don't have much money, doll. But, I'll do what I can."

Ronnie gazed at the embarrassed man for a minute. "Hey, it's no big deal. I can wash some things out in the sink," she suggested. "That will save some money."

"I'd give you whatever you want if I could," he stated, flushing again. "But, I never had to take care of anyone but myself before," Gus sheepishly stammered. "I'll do better with my next paycheck, ok?"

Staggering to her feet with an awkward lurching move, Ronnie shrugged. "It's okay, Auggie. I said I'd get a job; and, I will. Let's just figure out what we can manage for now and work on the rest later," she suggested.

"You got it, doll!"

* * * * *

Prying open one sleep encrusted eye, Gabe soothed the huddled ball of misery curled into his chest. Wrapped in layers of blankets, Bella shivered in the throes of benzodiazepine withdrawal; and, Gabe vehemently wished he could take away her pain. The hushed voices of the other two women filtered through the cabin to his bunk fitted into the bow.

"Lovers?" Maude's feeble voice questioned.

"Of course not!" his aunt retorted.

"Yes," the elderly woman advised, her expansive knowledge of such things picking up the tell-tale scent of musk. "Good."

Martha Biederman shook her head in adamant denial. "Gabriel is a good man. He wouldn't take advantage of that poor girl."

Burying his head against Bella's neck, Gabe silently acknowledged his aunt's declaration. Gabe would never force his attention on any woman; but, Bella lit a fire he'd never expected to feel for anyone but

Catherine. It was sheer agony to hold the sick young woman without giving in to the desire. Gabe had waged a fierce battle with his libido during the night; and, for the moment, he was the victor. Still, he couldn't help his body's response while he was sleeping. And the stickiness in his shorts was a blatant reminder, that despite his best intentions, Gabe was still a hot-blooded male.

Even in her current state, Bella called to him at a primitive level; and, despite his aunt's warnings to the contrary, Bella reacted to his tender care by clinging to him. The chills that racked her body worried him; and, Gabe reached under the layers of blankets to rub small, comforting circles on her hot, damp skin. "Don't worry, angel," he crooned. "I've got you, honey." Claspng her more tightly, Gabe tried to ignore the throbbing need in his nether regions as he drifted back to sleep.

Daylight was just breaking when Gabe withdrew from the clinging girl and searched out his discarded jeans. After dressing, Gabe leaned down and kissed both of Bella's closed eyes with tender affection.

"Let me at her," Martha directed from the doorway to his minuscule bedroom. "I have something for her. It will ease some of her symptoms."

Gabe shifted to the far corner of the blue-ticked mattress and tried to make room for his portly aunt as she reached for the girl.

"Bella, no one is going to hurt you," Martha consoled as the young woman started to thrash about. "I have something that will help you," she promised before shoing Gabe out of the way.

"Let me help," he cajoled as he reached for his woman.

Harrumphing, the older woman scolded, "I think you've done quite enough, Gabriel."

Gabe flushed under his aunt's reprimanding gaze; but, he refused to back down. The sickly girl shuddered in his arms when he gathered her up. Exposing one thigh, he waited until his aunt administered the injection; and then, he tucked Bella back into their berth.

A minefield of unspoken accusations passed between Martie and Gabe; and, the older woman faced off with her nephew. "Nothing can come from this," Martha whispered, her stomach rolling with the realization that Maude might be right. "I should have taken charge last night when you brought Bella back up on to the deck," she mumbled to

herself. "But, that postage-stamp-size shower is useless to me!"

With a terse nod, Gabe agreed about the tiny bathroom compartment. His aunt was a good sized woman; and, she'd been unable to assist Bella with washing off the briny seawater after their midnight swim. So Gabe had accompanied the fragile young woman into the shower. Seated on the toilet, he'd cradled her in his lap as he gently sponged her off under the shower spray - with Martie's supervision. Those few moments had turned Gabe's instant attraction into deep affection. And that affection turned into a fierce protectiveness when he'd discovered the mottled marks around her neck, wrists, and ankles.

"That's not for you to decide, Martie," he firmly stated, ushering his aunt into the main room. "I want to know what happened to Bella; and, I want to know now," he furiously demanded in an undertone.

Martha gave a resigned nod and pointed to the hatchway. "Get us out of Ensenada; and, I'll explain what I know." With an admonishment for Maude to call if needed, Martha followed her nephew topside.

After weighing anchor, Gabe pointed his sloop north and then waited patiently for his aunt to settle. When the silence continued, Gabe clenched his jaw. The bruised, broken skin on Bella's back came to mind; and, Gabe shuddered. "Saltwater in those raw wounds must have been agony," he snarled at his aunt. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have protected her!"

"There was no other choice. We had to bring Bella's temperature down. Heat stroke that severe can be fatal," Martha argued, her temper taking the front seat. "From now on, you'll leave that girl to me, Gabriel. I mean it! You have no business . . ."

"I made it my business last night, Martie. And, I'm not changing my mind," Gabe interrupted, his head heavy with fury and fatigue. "Maybe it's out of the ordinary; but, Bella is mine now. I will take care of her." Warding off his aunt's objections with a raised hand, he prompted, "Now out with it. What are you doing in Mexico?"

"Dr. Brandt sent us into hiding," Martha began, flinching when she caught the coldness enter Gabe's eyes.

"Cat sent you to Mexico?" he finally managed to grind out through clenched teeth. His newfound love interest did nothing to soothe his

ragged grief over the loss of Catherine. Dragging a hand through his bedraggled hair, Gabe heaved a heavy sigh of discontent.

Confused by the play of emotions on her nephew's face, Martha tried to gauge his reaction. "Ah, no. She sent two bodyguards; and, they moved us from place to place. But, when news filtered down through Maude's acquaintances that her movies were being used to blackmail important people, she insisted we travel to Ensenada."

"When we arrived," Martha continued, "we found that poor girl; and, Mrs. Baumgartner . . . well, her predilections are well known. And, one of the men she is intimate with was training Bella to be Maude's, um, . . . well to be her, ah, slave."

Perplexed, Gabe raised an eyebrow before slipping on his sunglasses. The glare off of the water was making his head dance the can-can. "Slave?" he finally questioned, unable to make sense of it. "Slavery is illegal," he muttered.

"Ah, a . . . um, a sexual slave," Martha stammered, her face going hot. "The General was training her to be submissive to her new mistress; but, Bella was stubborn and wouldn't relent. So, his abuse became more extreme," she explained, soul-weary and feeling a heavy burden for her newest patient. "He proudly explained all he'd done to break the girl; and, the atrocities he detailed . . . I may never have a peaceful night's sleep again."

Gabe choked. "She was . . ."

"No!" Marta exclaimed. "At least I don't think so. Bella was meant to be a gift to Mrs. Baumgartner; and, Maude was happy to receive her. But something happened. Maude has explained some of it; still, I'm not certain how it all fits together."

"That's why you want me to leave her alone?" he questioned, feeling nauseated. What if . . .? Oh, dear Lord. He couldn't even finish that thought. "Just start at the beginning, Martie. I have strong feelings for Bella already; but, I need to know how to help her," he choked out.

Martha sighed and pleaded, "Gabriel, please reconsider! She is . . . she may never . . ." Unsure of where to begin, Martha looked out across the brilliant blue water and then toward the horizon. How could she explain what she barely understood herself? Drawing up her nerve,

she began, "Maude has some sort of strange club . . . or maybe religion would be a better word. I don't know exactly what it is; but, these people idealize sexual expression in any form. Maude claims the Marquis de Sade was one of her ancestors. And, when Maude formed this club back in the 20s, she became something like their priestess. She has thirteen men that she calls her 'princes.' One of those men took Bella. At first, he tried to tame her with heavy doses of tranquilizers; but, it wasn't enough to break through her resistance. I guess Bella's faith protected her in that way - she wouldn't act against it."

Loosening his grip on the ship's wheel, Gabe heaved a sigh of relief. "She's a Christian?"

"Oh, yes! Definitely. Bella's mind clears briefly here and there - you can always tell because she begins to hum the same old hymn," Martha stated, but that small piece of good news faltered in light of the rest. "When the tranquilizers didn't work, The General resorted to other measures. He took great delight in detailing his 'training.' He stripped Bella of everything except her integrity," she whispered, her voice breaking. "First, it was her clothing, then her hair. When she still resisted, he started beating her. But, the girl still refused - she wouldn't eat from his hand or perform sexual favors for The General's wife. In the end, she was collared, tied up like a pet - bereft of the most basic necessities. Bella wasn't even allowed to use the bathroom unless she complied with The General's demands," Martha finished in a distressed tone. "When we arrived, she was covered in her own filth and paraded through the courtyard like a prisoner of war. The household staff hosed her off in front of us; and, a heavy silver collar was put around her neck. A leash was attached and that . . . that man led her to Maude and presented Bella like a gift. He forced the girl to bow at Maude's feet." Clasp her hands in her lap, Martha closed her eyes and tried to control her breathing. The pounding in her chest thrummed like a tribal drum.

"The General and Maude led Bella away on the path going to the beach. Voices carried back as The General detailed the scenario for the girl's final act of submission; and, I fled. An hour later, I was being called to tend to Bella; and, Maude ordered the bodyguards to tie The General and his wife to the ornate dining room table in their villa. And,

that is where we left them – their fate given over to those they used in their depraved games.” Gabe couldn’t fathom everything his aunt was detailing; and, his weary mind demanded rest.

In the end, it was Maude’s frantic call for help that turned them back toward shore. At the pier in El Sazual, his Aunt Martha hurried away with Mrs. Baumgartner in tow. Below decks, Gabe helped Bella into the shower to keep her from overheating again. The intimacy of caring for her was left to him, despite Martha’s protests; and, Gabe relished the private time to become more familiar with the woman in his arms. With Martie’s consistent, nagging reminder replaying in his head, Gabe kept his mind fixed on the medical necessity of such an activity. Although, Gabe naughtily grinned when he considered undertaking the shared shower again when circumstances were more favorable.

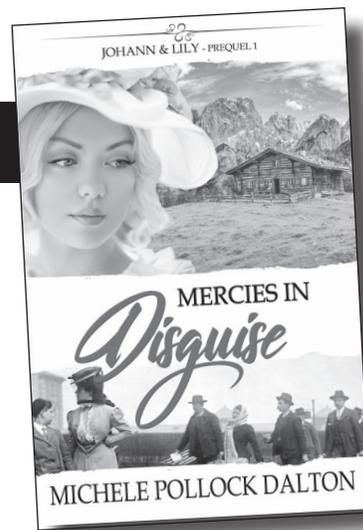
*** END OF SAMPLE ***

Available for purchase at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other fine retailers.

Want a FREE E-Book?

Exclusive offer for magazine subscribers!

MERCIES IN *Disguise*



Johann Brandtstadter returns home a weary man, tired of the bloodshed and horror that war brings. When he finds a dear childhood friend grown into young womanhood, he cannot help but claim her for his own.

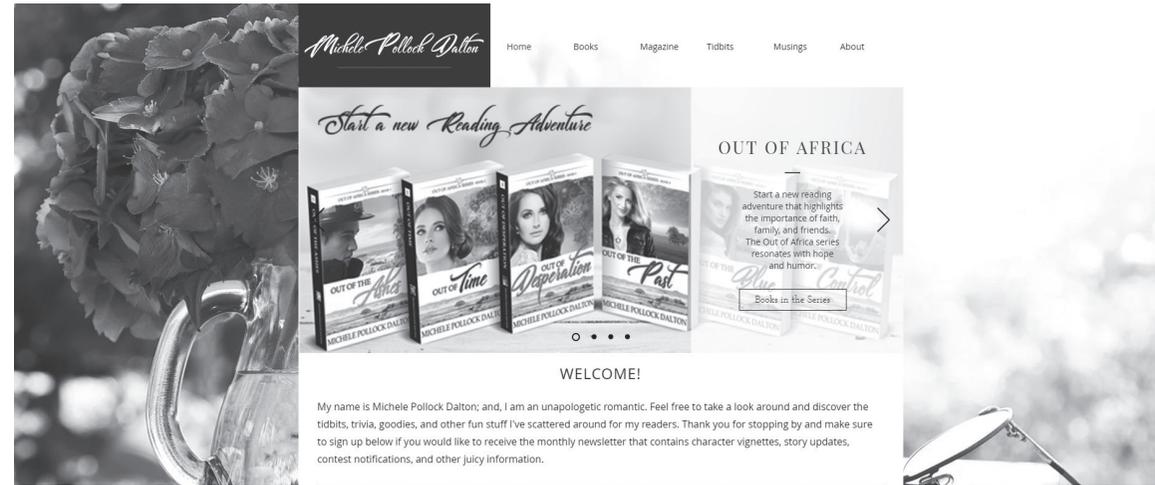
At the turn of the twentieth century, life is changing and not necessarily for the better. Can Johann and his young bride find a safe place to call home despite the tension and mayhem of a world on the brink of war?

Mercies in Disguise is a prequel to the OUT OF AFRICA series and follows the journey of Johann and Lily Brandtstadter from their German Fatherland to the shores of America.



Visit www.MichelePollockDalton.com and sign-up for the monthly magazine, *Romantique*, to claim this FREE E-Book, made available exclusively to subscribers. (You cannot buy it or borrow it).

I look forward to sharing Johann & Lily's story with you!



Stop in for a visit at
www.MichelePollockDalton.com

And don't forget to *sign-up* for my monthly interactive magazine, *Romantique*. This complimentary publication is chock full of behind the scenes information, character short-stories, and everything romance!

I love sharing FREE stuff with my readers, so stop by regularly to see what is new. And, rest assured, I will not share your information or bombard your inbox with advertising.



I look forward to meeting you there!

Michele

www.MichelePollockDalton.com