

OUT OF AFRICA - BOOK 5



OUT OF THE *Blue*



AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON

For everyone facing overwhelming odds.

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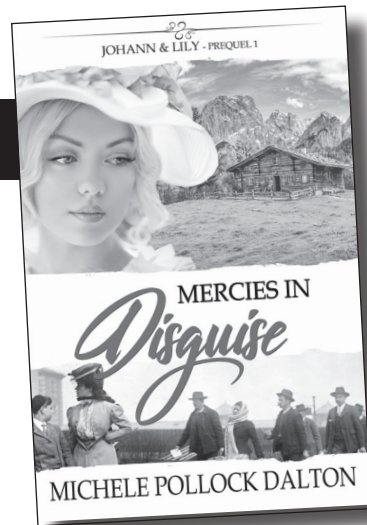
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I look forward to sharing Johann & Lily's story with you!



Out of Africa Series - Part I



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Friend,

Thank you for choosing to spend time inside these pages. As always, I hope you will find a bit of humor and inspiration for your day. It brings me great joy to share these characters and their stories with you.

If you have already read the previous books in this series, then you know that this is *not your typical Christian romance novel*. Some scenes depict the complexities of marital love and a healthy sexual relationship within the bounds of marriage. While these passages may be more provocative than you are used to seeing in Christian fiction, they exist to tell the fantastic story of human love as it was meant to be under God's fabulous design. In contrast, you will also find the distorted view of sexuality that is so prevalent in our culture today. Bear with me as the story develops, these views will not be left unchallenged. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that God's plan for our pleasure is so much greater than anything we can invent or misconstrue with our warped minds.

I also will mention that this is not a "G Rated" storyline. You will find scenes and themes in this story that are graphic. The individuals and gamut of personalities represented inside of this fictional universe face the same difficulties as their flesh and blood counterparts. And, I do not shy away from tackling difficult situations. Instead, it is my

fervent desire to infuse the reality of God's unchanging mercy and grace to everyone who seeks Him.

And as always, I want to offer a special acknowledgment and thanks for the insight my mother provided relating to the era of the 1970s. Her proofreading efforts are also greatly appreciated! She spends lots of time reliving the "good old days" with me and always takes the time to answer my goofy questions. Thanks, mom =)

Keep the Son Shining!

Michele

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Billy Brandt (the 3rd): A long-haul trucker based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Dr. Catherine Kavanagh Brandt: A pediatrician, currently working as a private physician to Maude Baumgartner. Married to John Brandt. Residing in Long Beach, California.

John Brandt: A fireman/paramedic for the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Married to Catherine Kavanagh Brandt. Residing in Long Beach, California.

Lily "Lil" Brandt: Matriarch of the Brandt clan. Grandmother to John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

Sandra "Sandy" Brandt: Middle daughter of Winona Brandt; sibling to John, Ronnie, and Suess.

Susannah "Suess" Brandt: Youngest daughter of Winona Brandt; sibling to John, Ronnie, and Sandy.

Winona "Noni" Brandt: Housekeeper at the Double B Ranch near Pleasant Grove, California. Estranged from her husband, Billy Brandt Jr. Mother of John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

* * * * *

Benjamin “Ben” Graham: Police detective with the Fairfield City Police Department. Guardian of younger brother, Evan Graham.

Evan Graham: Sixteen-year-old brother of Ben Graham. Currently living with Maggie Thompson and her sons on their farm near Vacaville, California.

* * * * *

Aaron (Cassidy) Bakker: Thirteen-year-old son of Maggie Thompson from a previous relationship.

Andrew (Cassidy) Bakker: Almost fifteen-year-old son of Maggie Thompson from a previous relationship.

Anthony (Cassidy) Bakker: Fourteen-year-old son of Maggie Thompson from a previous relationship.

Amanda Lynn “Mandie” Thompson: Five-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

Bernard “Bear” Thompson: A dairy farmer from Vacaville, California. Married to Irene Thompson; father to Jay (deceased) and James Thompson; and, grandfather to Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson.

Cassandra Sue “Cassie” Thompson: Three-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

Irene Thompson: Married to Bernard “Bear” Thompson; mother to Jay (deceased) and James Thompson; and, grandmother to Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Currently living on the family farm near Vacaville, California and raising her granddaughters.

James Thompson: Farming near Vacaville, California. The youngest son of Bear and Irene Thompson.

Margaret “Maggie” Thompson: Farming near Vacaville, California. Widow of Jay Thompson; mother of Andrew, Anthony, and Aaron Bakker in addition to Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Birthmother of Larry and Mary-Cate Phillips. Daughter of Lester and Dortha Bakker.

Rosalee Ann “Rosie” Thompson: Infant daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

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Dave Baldwin: Fireman/paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Partner of John Brandt.

Captain Charles “Chuck” Harris: Captain 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.

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Maude Baumgartner: Wealthy widow employing Dr. Catherine Brandt. Currently living in a rehabilitation facility in Los Angeles, California.

Shaughnessy Forsythe: Attorney handling Maude Baumgartner's legal matters. A resident of Sonoma, California.

Lloyd & Mavis Phillips: Owners of Phillips Antique Emporium and the Bygone Days Inn in Sonoma, California. Adoptive parents of Larry and Mary-Cate.

Jerry & Gloria Thomas: Pastoral couple of Valley Community Church in Sonoma, California. Parents of Troy, Travis, Tarah, and Tabitha.

Clarence & Callie Simm: Part of the household staff at Maude's Los Angeles estate. Clarence functions as the driver and Callie as the housekeeper. Parents of two teenage boys – Dallas and Denver.



CHAPTER 1

Friday, June 17, 1977

Dr. Catherine Brandt tipped a wry grin in her husband's direction when the tired man gave a jaw-splitting yawn. "Sleepy, Love?" she teased.

"Woman, it's been one hell of a day," he commented.

"Give me the car keys and go stretch out in the back of the Caddy. I will ask Clarence to drive us home."

John Brandt tried to shake himself awake; but, it truly was a hopeless cause. After working a busy twenty-four-hour shift the day before, he was dead on his feet. "What about the Jeep?" he questioned drowsily.

"No worries, Love. I will take care of it. Catch a cat nap. I will be back in a few minutes," Catherine answered as she slid away from his embrace to go in search of the driver.

* * * * *

"Time to wake up," Catherine gently urged when they pulled up at a private hangar.

"Where are we?" her husband questioned in a daze.

"Airport," she advised with a mysterious smile and an impish glint in her eye. "I thought we should check on all the liquor stock that was

transported this week."

John blinked in confusion and looked around. "Baby, what mischief do you have planned?"

"Come on. I will explain once we take off. The pilot is waiting."

"Catherine!"

"We are going on a short 'business trip,' John," she explained. "I need to speak with Shaughnessy about Maude's property on Catalina Island; and, you need to check on the wines we sent to Sonoma for the new tasting room. The fact that we will be on hand to witness the family reunion between Gran and Billy is just a happy coincidence."

Instantly awake, John barreled out of the car and reached back in for his wife's hand. "Hurry up! The pilot is waiting." After they were settled inside and cleared for take-off, John turned an amazed glance to his wife. "Why aren't we flying commercially?"

"Mr. Baumgartner kept a private plane for his many business trips. This is a 1970 Gulfstream II; but, it hasn't logged any flight time since it was delivered well after Mr. Baumgartner passed away. I had planned to sell it; but, as Mr. Forsythe began to unearth more of Maude's holdings, I decided it was probably best to hold onto the plane and crew for now," his wife absently answered as she fiddled with her safety belt. Catherine tipped her head toward John and whispered nervously, "I am not sure I like the idea of flying around in a little plane like this one."

"Sweetheart, this is not a 'little' plane by any standard."

"It has been gone over with a fine-tooth comb by the mechanics since it has been sitting for so long; but, the idea of taking it up for the first time still makes me uneasy," she confessed.

"Understandable," John replied as the aircraft began to taxi out to the runway. He took his wife's hand and muttered a quick prayer for safe travel as the Gulfstream rocketed towards lift-off. Once they were up and away, Catherine relaxed her death grip on his hand; and, John breathed a sigh of relief when restored circulation chased away the numbness in his fingertips.

Snuggling into her husband's side, Catherine rested her head on his shoulder. "We may as well catch a little shut-eye while we are in the air," she suggested.

John dropped a kiss on his wife's head. "Maude may drive me crazy most of the time; but, knowin' that old woman has some perks," he teased as he laid his head back against the leather seat.

"Um-hm," she mumbled. "Hopefully Dacia was able to get ahold of everyone; or, we'll be walking when we get there."

"Who is Dacia, Sweetheart?"

"One of the ladies from Callie's church. She's helping with some of the secretarial work," Catherine explained sleepily. "Oh, can you put this in your wallet?" she asked before reaching into the neckline of her dress and withdrawing a handful of cash.

"You're just full of surprises today," John joked before pulling back the neckline of her dress and peeking down the front. "Anything else in there I should know about?"

* * * * *

"Shaughnessy!" Catherine greeted when they entered the terminal at Sonoma. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"My secretary called me at home and said some VIP's were coming in this afternoon who demanded an immediate meeting," he jested. "Lucky for you, I am a reasonable man."

John shook the attorney's hand and muttered, "And, it's lucky for you that I can say the same thing."

Catherine swatted her husband's backside lightly. "Behave," she admonished playfully. "That is no way to talk to your father." Shaughnessy grinned; and, John grumbled.

"Come on, you two. Since you're not carrying any luggage, I will presume that you'll need to stop and pick up some necessities before the drug store closes," the older man directed in good humor. "I may not be

part of the family yet; but, I enjoy practicing for my new role."

"I still can't see it," John bellyached. "You're a nice guy. What do you want with a caustic, spiteful woman?"

The attorney withheld his answer until they were safely ensconced in his car. Turning to his friend, Shaughnessy commented, "You see your mother with a different set of eyes than I do, John. Where you see caustic and spiteful, I see a woman who has had her heart broken one too many times. That hard shell Winona carries around protects a sensitive soul."

"If you say so," John allowed before turning his attention to the scenery outside his window.

"So why the mad dash to Sonoma?" Shaughnessy questioned.

Shrugging and grinning like a naughty child, Catherine replied blithely, "Business, important business."

"When are you going back?" the confused attorney asked.

"Tomorrow evening. John has to work on Sunday," Catherine commented. "We are here to check on the wine shipments and find out what is happening with Maude's house on Catalina."

"Ah, well, the news is not good, I'm afraid," Shaughnessy explained. "Mr. Pearce has purchased a substantial amount of Maude's former property from the county tax assessor's office; and, we have over two dozen more properties that are slated for auction. My secretary is compiling a list for you as we speak; and, I've notified the tax assessor that there are new owners. He is going to give you a small window of opportunity to redeem the properties."

"This all sounds hinky to me," John growled. "Is this guy trying to rob Maude of her estate?"

"That seems to be the sum of it," Shaughnessy conceded. "Between the faulty service of the tax attorney and the mishandling of Mrs. Baumgartner's business interests here, the Pearce family has acquired many millions of dollars worth of property. From private homes to large residential and commercial complexes, Maude's estate is being drained dry."

"What can we do?" Catherine anxiously asked. "And, more

importantly, is this a local phenomenon or are the international properties involved as well."

"This is the first I've heard of any international properties," Shaughnessy said in surprise. "What have you found?"

Catherine took a deep breath and tried to recall what Callie had shared about the different wineries. "There are properties in England, France, Germany, and Italy. The housekeeper doesn't know much about where they are or how many there are; but, if we break into some of the crates of wine we had shipped up here, then we might be able to pinpoint them."

John swiveled around in his seat and fixed a dumbfounded gaze on his wife. "What!?"

"Callie said that they received yearly shipments from the wineries in France, Germany, and Italy. There were also quarterly shipments of vodka and caviar from the Soviet Union until about a year ago. I cannot believe that the Baumgartner's hold property inside a communist country; but, there is a tie there somehow. The furniture which I had incinerated this morning, came from the 18th-century Russian empress, Catherine the Great."

"Catherine!! Why is this the first I'm hearing about all of this?" John demanded.

"Let's come back to this," Shaughnessy suggested as they pulled up in front of the drug store. "You two go grab what you need; and, I'll swing past my office for the list of properties you should look into."

After re-grouping, the trio traveled to the manor house in silence. John and Catherine took turns perusing the list of properties that were in immediate danger of being put on the block at the next tax sale.

"Baby, is there enough money to cover all this?" John questioned in dismay.

Catherine flipped back through the pages of property and made a quick tally on the amount of back taxes. "The money isn't the problem. I am more worried about the condition of the properties. Ike and his crew will need to make a quick check on all of these to make sure that they are

worth redeeming.”

The housekeeper, Mrs. Norris, was bustling about in a happy dither when John and Catherine arrived. “Oh, welcome home!” she declared. “I’ve prepared the Rose room for you.”

“Now, Agatha, you didn’t need to go all that trouble. We will stay over the carriage house,” Catherine said.

Shaughnessy cleared his throat. “Winona has already started to move her things in up there,” he explained in embarrassment. “She comes over every Friday evening so we can spend the weekend together and attend church on Sundays. And, she has been bringing a carload of stuff with her each week.”

“My mother is going to be here?” John squeaked.

“Yes, in fact, I’m surprised that she’s not here yet. We usually have a late dinner at the Inn.”

“Oh, boy!” Catherine declared nervously. “We have John’s sisters and grandmother converging here tomorrow.”

Mrs. Norris looked from one dazed face to another. “Well, now, it can’t be all that bad. There’ll just be one more for dinner.”

“And lots of fireworks,” John grumbled under his breath. “What are we gonna do, Sweetheart? We can’t have Billy up here if Mom is going to be around.”

“What’s going on you two?” Shaughnessy asked suspiciously.

“I met my half-brother, Billy, this morning,” John began. “He is hauling the last load of wine up here; and, we are all meeting here tomorrow so that we can introduce him to Gran, Sandy, and Suess. If Mom finds out about him, there’s sure to be some nasty repercussions.”

Shock covered the attorney’s face; and, he tried to form a rational thought. “Your brother?”

“Yeah, he’s been looking for family; and, he came across us by accident,” John explained. “He was left at an orphanage in Missouri as an infant.”

“Are you sure?”

“There is no doubt that he’s a Brandt,” John informed the attorney.

“Gran has always said the Brandt men share more than a name. You’ll see what I mean when he gets here.”

Shaughnessy let out a pent-up breath. “What do you think Winona’s response will be?”

“It’s not going to be pretty,” the younger man advised.

Mrs. Norris pointed at the dust cloud being kicked up by a car approaching from the south. “Looks like you’d better figure things out quick.”

“I’ll help your mother unload the car and then bring her over for supper,” Shaughnessy decided on the spur of the moment. “You two get settled and figure out how to explain all of this.”



CHAPTER 2

"Baby, this is gonna get ugly," John said as he plopped down on the enormous bed in the Rose room.

"Do you suppose Shaughnessy can distract her while Billy is here tomorrow, or would that be dishonest?"

"I don't know about dishonest; but, it's not really something we'll be able to hide. Gran or one of the girls will bring it up. And, somehow, it's gonna end up being all my fault," he grumbled.

Catherine sat down next to John and took his hand. "Grab another forty winks before dinner. I will go speak with Noni."

"Uh, uh. I'm not dropping this in your lap!" John exclaimed.

"Love, she might take the news better from an outside party. And, if we tell her tonight, then she can decide if she wants to be here tomorrow when Billy shows up. You helped me take care of a difficult situation with my family. Will you let me do the same for you?"

Falling back on the bed, John covered his eyes with the back of one arm. "Couldn't we just hide out here and pretend it's our second honeymoon?"

"Coward," Catherine teased.

"Yup."

* * * * *

"Hello, Noni," Catherine quietly greeted when she found her mother-in-law lifting a box from the trunk. The woman's cheerful smile evaporated in a moment when she saw Catherine.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were back in Los Angeles."

"John and I are here to supervise some of Mrs. Baumgartner's business interests. Would you like some help unloading?"

"Where is my son?" Winona questioned querulously.

"Sneaking in a cat nap before dinner," Catherine answered as she pulled a box from the trunk. "He just came off a long shift this morning; and, it has caught up with him."

"So, he sent his sick wife out to help with the work? Nice," Noni carped.

Catherine shook her head. "No. I came out to help because I thought you might appreciate the gesture. If that is not the case, then I can go back inside."

Pushing around the young woman, Noni tried to tamp down the frustration she felt over the intrusion. She had planned this evening with Shaw carefully; and, nothing was falling into place. "That box is too heavy for you. Put it back in the trunk and go inside. I don't want you to hurt yourself," she said dismissively before pasting a smile on her face. "Shaw and I can handle it."

Catherine waved to Shaughnessy as he rounded the corner of the carriage house; and, she strolled towards the breezeway that connected the outbuilding to the main house. "Mrs. Norris said dinner would be ready in an hour; but, I don't think Noni is going to want to share you. If that is the case, we can catch up with our earlier business on Monday."

The older man nodded. He understood far more than Catherine was saying; and, it grieved him to know that there was such a divide in the family he hoped to be a part of one day soon.

* * * * *

"That is the last of it, my dear," Shaughnessy said with a tender smile. "Your home in Pleasant Grove must be nearly empty by now."

"Not by half," Noni complained. "I don't know how I'm going to fit everything in this small apartment. It sure seems like a wealthy woman could afford better accommodations for the hired help."

Shaughnessy laid aside the box he was carrying and slid an arm around Winona's waist. "John and Catherine have made their apartment available to you so that you could be close to your daughters and your grandchild. They did not have to provide you with a place to live; but, they care about you," he replied gently. "Can you accept their generosity or will you turn it aside?"

"What do you mean?" Noni demanded. "I took a job with the elderly woman who owns this place!"

"Sit down, dear," he directed softly. "There are some things I should have explained to you when I offered the job; but, your son felt that you would turn the position down if you knew why it was being made available to you."

Winona glared at the man that had become so important to her. "You lied to me!?"

"No one has lied to you, Winona. But, Catherine and John asked that I refrain from mentioning their involvement in making this available to you," he said gesturing to the apartment. "The night you returned home to an empty house, you called me in tears – lonely for the family that you'd left behind. So, I asked Catherine to hire you to manage the rental properties over here. I thought it would give you a chance to break away from the untenable situation at the Double B; and, also provide the opportunity for us to spend more time together."

"I thought I'd be working with you," she mumbled.

"You will be working in my office until you are trained to manage the rentals on your own. Once we have a larger space available for the legal team, then we may split the offices," Shaughnessy related to the downcast woman. "What I am trying to convey is that your son and daughter-in-law care a great deal for your happiness and well-being."

"So why are they living in the big house?"

"They are only here for the night. And, since you are moving into their apartment, they had no other place to stay," he mildly chided as he knelt in front of her. "Now, there is one more thing that has come up you need to know about. A man has presented himself to John and Catherine as one of Billy's children."

"WHAT?!" Noni bellowed.

"That is all I know," Shaw replied calmly. "Except that they plan to have a get-together here tomorrow so Lily can meet the man. If you would like to know more, then I suggest we join John and Catherine for dinner." Furiously, Winona jumped up from the chair, snagged her car keys from the kitchen counter, and fled down the steps. Shaughnessy watched from the living room window as the livid woman recklessly drove away.

"Shaughnessy?" Catherine called up the stairway a few minutes later. "Are you there?"

Subdued, he replied, "I'm here."

Peeking over the railing, Catherine surveyed the cluttered apartment with a wary eye. "Noni left?"

"Yes," he responded as he turned. "I've told her about the gentleman who will be visiting tomorrow and explained why I was able to offer the job and apartment here. As you can infer from her absence, she did not take the news well."

"Oh, Shaughnessy," Catherine stammered. "I am so sorry. I had hoped Noni would put aside her pique with John and me, if it meant she might be closer to you."

"It's a reasonable expectation," he observed. "Unfortunately, Noni has an unreasonable dislike for her only son. Lily has suggested it is because of John's resemblance to his father; but, it seems like an extreme reaction to something that cannot be helped."

Catherine laid a comforting hand on the miserable man's arm. "It may be something beyond a normal dislike, Shaughnessy. John has mentioned to me that Noni was a heavy drinker for many years. But,

if she's never dealt with the issues that started her on that path, then perhaps this illogical reaction to her son is based more on a misconception than reality. Have you ever heard the term 'dry drunk?'"

He nodded. "Not many people around here know this, Catherine; but, I am a recovering alcoholic. It is something that Winona and I share. I joined AA and quit drinking after a car accident caused the death of my fiancée. It took me years to achieve any level of sobriety. Noni, on the other hand, quit cold turkey when Child Protective Services threatened to take her daughters away."

Jolted by the revelation, Catherine could only stare at her friend in dismay. "I don't think John knows about that; or, I am sure he would have mentioned it. He carries a great deal of hurt over his mother's lifelong disregard and hostility; but, the potential loss of his sisters would have devastated him."

"There's nothing to do but put the matter in God's hands," Shaughnessy offered on a sigh. "I've been praying diligently; but, I would appreciate it if you and John would take up the mantle as well."

"Of course! And, this is the perfect time to start. Let me get John; and, we will meet you in the Great Room shortly."

* * * * *

John dropped his head into his hands and tried to calm his breathing. His mother's dislike for him was more profound than he could have ever imagined; and, it was a gut-wrenching realization. How was he supposed to pray for someone who despised him so thoroughly? He listened with half an ear as Catherine and Shaughnessy prayed for his mom. When his turn came, the silence stretched so long that Catherine finally said, "Amen."

She squeezed her husband's hand and whispered softly in his ear. "You prayed for my healing continuously, John. And, God answered your prayers. Do you believe that He will do any less if you ask Him for your mother's restoration?"

"It's not the same," he replied brokenly.

"Yes, it is," his wife assured him. "Noni's pain may not be physical; but, it is entirely within God's power to mend the ragged emotional wounds she carries. And, I am covering you with my prayers for the same reason," she consoled.

"I am sorry to interrupt," Agatha Norris said. "But, there is a phone call from a Mr. Simm for you ma'am."

John stood and helped Catherine to her feet. "We'll hold dinner for you," he promised as he moved towards the kitchen with Shaughnessy.

"Clarence?" she questioned when she picked up the extension.

"Yes, ma'am. We got a bit of trouble here," he rushed to say.

"What is it?" Catherine questioned, bracing herself for another debilitating blow.

"While the women were cleaning in the basement today, they found a hidden panel that conceals an underground passage. It leads from the sub-basement to a locked door. I think it's more'n likely that the tunnel ends up under the garage."

Snorting in disbelief, Catherine chuckled. "It is a bit late in the year for an April Fool's Day joke, Clarence."

"No joke, ma'am. Ike Jr. took a look at the tunnel and decided it was safe enough to explore; so, him and me took a gander. And, there is, sure enough, a locked door down there."

Catherine pinched the bridge of her nose to dissipate the tension building behind her eyes. "Is it a security risk?" she asked in exasperation.

"No, ma'am. No other way in that we could find," Clarence advised.

"Then close it back up and leave it alone," Catherine decided. "Whatever is down there can stay there indefinitely as far as I am concerned."

Surprised, Clarence stuttered, "Ain't you curious?"

"Not in the least," the beleaguered woman declared. "Is there anything else that can't wait until Monday?"

"No, ma'am. That'd be it," he chuckled. "Sure beats all though, don't ya think?"

"Yes, Clarence. It sure beats all. I will see you Monday," she concluded before hanging up.

"What catastrophe has befallen us now?" John irritably questioned when Catherine joined them at the kitchen table.

"No catastrophes at the moment. Just a bit of a mystery," she replied before explaining the discovery.

"Miss Maudie is quite the character," Shaughnessy observed with a chuckle.

"True," Catherine agreed. "And, a rather ornery one at the moment. I haven't told her about the problem with her home in Avalon; and, she is perturbed that I haven't made the arrangements for her to leave the rehabilitation facility. So, how do we proceed from here, Shaughnessy? Is there any recourse against the Pearce family?"

The attorney pondered the situation a moment before replying. "How lucid is Mrs. Baumgartner? Will she be able to comprehend the ramifications of the situation?"

"The stroke affected Maude's left side. It has reduced some of her physical capabilities; but, from what I can tell she is well aware of what is going on around her," Catherine responded.

Shaughnessy took the plate Mrs. Norris handed him before commenting, "Then it is time to inform her of the situation, Catherine. She is the injured party; and, she will need to decide if she wants to pursue a deeper investigation."

John grabbed another biscuit and rolled an idea around in his head before proposing, "What if we move Maude and her nurse into our apartment complex? The Klinkners old place is still available."

Catherine beamed at the suggestion. "Shaughnessy, have I ever told you what a brilliant man my husband is?" she said, before leaving her chair and wiggling her way into John's lap. Exuberantly she placed a big kiss on his mouth. "Absolutely brilliant!" she declared.

"Ahem," Mrs. Norris interrupted.

"What is it, Agatha?" Catherine asked.

"I been taking care of Miss Maudie for the past year; and, I'd like to

continue the job. You don't need me up here. There's plenty of folks who can check up on things when you're not around; but, Miss Maudie needs me," the housekeeper asserted.

Surprised by the woman's offer, Catherine could only stare for a moment. "I believe Mrs. Baumgartner would be exceptionally pleased with that arrangement. How soon could you take up the post?"

"I'll go with you when you leave," the housekeeper said with certainty.

John rearranged his wife in his lap so he could see Mrs. Norris. "We will be leaving tomorrow evening. Won't you need more time to pack and get organized? It's a big move."

"No, sir. I'll be ready to leave when you are."

Reaching out, Catherine took the older woman's hand and smiled graciously. "Thank you, Agatha. You go ahead and take care of your business. We will clean up here when we are finished. There is a good-sized cargo hold on the plane, so you have room to bring along several suitcases and boxes. Whatever you can't bring along now, put aside; and, we will make arrangements to have it transported."

"Don't worry, ma'am. I don't have much. All of the furniture and household provisions belong to Mrs. Baumgartner. But, I will mention that I think you should be talking to The General. He had an idea that things weren't going right for Miss Maudie before you folks came along. I only caught bits and pieces of their conversations; but, it seems to me he knows something. Of course, Miss Maudie was in no frame of mind then to latch on to what he was trying to tell her," Mrs. Norris explained. "In fact, you folks wait right here. I know of something that might help you get Miss Maudie's property back."

Startled gazes flew around the table; and, the trio waited impatiently for the housekeeper to reappear. When Mrs. Norris returned she handed Catherine a large black leather writing journal. "What is this?" Catherine questioned.

"That is Maude's 'little black book,'" Mrs. Norris advised. "Last fall when you asked me to contact Mrs. Baumgartner's sexual partner, these

are the individuals that I notified. But, several people in that book were suspicious to my way of thinking. One fellow was no more than thirty years old; and, he tried courting Miss Maudie right after she arrived up here. I think those fellas in Los Angeles sent him up here to marry the old girl. He disappeared mighty quick when Maude turned him down. And, it wasn't but a week later that all the money stopped coming in."

"Whoa!" John exclaimed when he started flipping through the pages of the address book. "Baby, there's gotta be close to a thousand entries in this thing."

Catherine sent a questioning look towards the housekeeper. "You contacted all of these people? Why?"

"Seems like that should be pretty obvious, ma'am. You wanted them to get tested for syphilis."

Blanching at the implication, Catherine could only stutter, "Everyone in this book was Maude's sexual partner during the last year?"

Mrs. Norris dropped her head in a subtle acknowledgment. "Miss Maudie liked to entertain; but, most those folks quit coming around after the harem fiasco on Labor Day weekend."

Holding up a hand, Catherine admonished, "Please, I don't want to know anymore. Just point out the individuals you believe were behaving suspiciously." Turning to the attorney, she asked, "Shaughnessy, do you believe we have enough information to certify a charge of wrong-doing by Mr. Pearce and his law firm?"

Shrugging, Shaughnessy replied, "On the surface, it looks like there were some very shady and underhanded manipulations of Maude's estate. Whether we can prove that beyond a reasonable shadow of a doubt remains to be seen. It is going to take an extraordinary amount of digging to unearth the full extent of the losses."

"Sweetheart, I don't know what you're thinking; but, I certainly think it would be worth hiring someone who can get to the bottom of this mess. Maude may not need the money; but, that isn't the point," John growled. "Someone has been takin' advantage of a sick old lady; and, they need to be held accountable!"

"I agree with John," Catherine commented. "How do we proceed, Shaughnessy?"

"If you are serious about this, then we are going to need a good deal more help to go through all the files that were sent over from the former law firm. Even with everything they sent; you can be sure that there is more that they did not provide. In addition, I would suggest a comprehensive search of court and real estate records. It seems their vehicle of choice for obtaining the properties is through tax sales. Hiring a private detective may expediate the process."

Catherine nodded in agreement. "But, we need to move very quickly. As soon as John and I begin redeeming the properties currently at stake, they will know that their fraudulent activities have been discovered. Can you direct this operation, Shaughnessy?"

"This is going to require a massive amount of manpower, Catherine. Two attorneys and two law clerks will not be able to dig through all of that information," the lawyer advised.

The wheels in Catherine's head began to spin quickly; and, she crawled out of John's lap. "Agatha, could you find me some paper, please?" When the housekeeper returned with a handful of loose-leaf paper, Catherine began to dash her notes across page after page.

Peering over his wife's shoulder, John asked, "What is that gobbelt-yook?"

"Shorthand," Catherine mumbled as she continued scratching the odd characters across the paper at a rapid pace. "It's how I took notes during college."

"Translation?" Shaughnessy requested when Catherine handed him a handful of the mysterious scribbles.

"Your secretary should be able to transcribe the details for you; but, the summary goes like this: First, hire however many people you need to get through those banker's boxes in the next four weeks. I want a summary and timeline of everything that is there. Secondly, Agatha will be staying here for the next week to help with the clearing of the house. When the house is empty, you may use it for office space until other

accommodations can be established. The third item on the agenda requires immediate title searches in all fifty states and the Canadian provinces. I want the search done at the county level, so nothing is missed. The searches need to cover from the time of Mr. Baumgartner's death in 1965 to the present; and, I want them complete before the end of the summer. Fourth, find me trustworthy representation in England, Germany, France and Italy to do the same thing. And, lastly, Shaughnessy, hire however many detectives it takes to track this thing down. They have four weeks to bring me the information we need to determine whether or not there is enough evidence of wrongdoing to go to the police. You said the tax assessor would give us until July 31st to redeem Maude's property. If we can't make a case before that time, then we will lose our element of surprise. And, once that happens you can bet that all of Maude's misappropriated holdings will be lost," Catherine concluded.

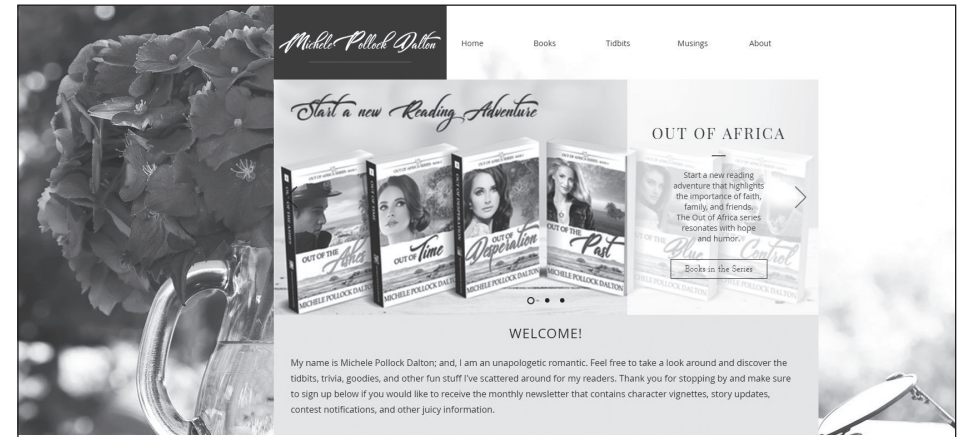
Bug-eyed, the lawyer stared at the directions he held in his hand. "Catherine, I'm just a small town attorney. I don't have the resources to handle all of this. You need a law firm . . ."

"A law firm like Pearce & Pearce," she interrupted. "I don't think so, Shaughnessy. A big law firm is what got us into this mess. I need an honest man to dig us out; and, I think you are just the guy for the job. When I get back to Long Beach, I will transfer a million dollars to the bank up here for the work you need to do. Now, tell me . . . can it be done?"

"Baby, is there that kind of money available? Maybe we should just re-group and go forward with what is left," John suggested.

Shaughnessy nodded in agreement. "This is a colossal undertaking, Catherine. I don't know if it can be done in the time frame you are giving. More importantly, I don't know if it will help us reclaim any of the lost property."

"We have to do our best," she said softly. "Maude has entrusted me with her well-being; and, I have to do my utmost to protect her interests. Perhaps, what is already gone will be lost forever; but, if we can save the rest, then it will be worth all of our efforts."



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