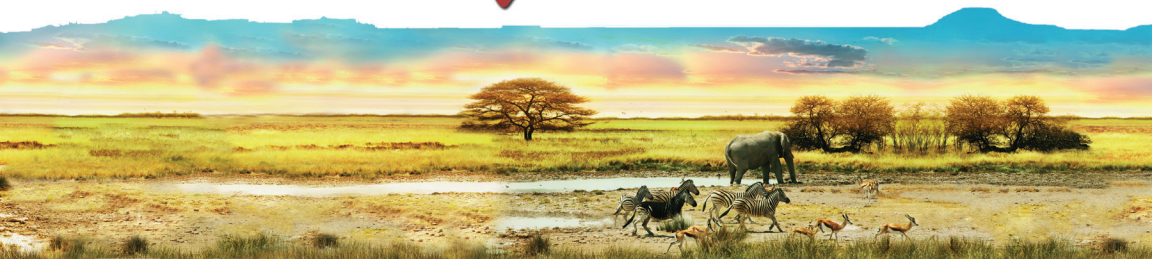


OUT OF AFRICA SERIES - BOOK 7



OUT OF *Touch*



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



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Published in the United States of America
February 2019

*To every prodigal:
Love is the light that leads us home.*

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



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Friend,

I am so pleased that you've decided to spend a little of your time with me here! This is the seventh book in the "Out of Africa" series; and, while it can be read as a stand-alone novel, I highly recommend that you start with book one – "Out of the Ashes."

If you have already read the previous books in this series, then you know that this is *not your typical Christian romance novel*. The storyline is not "G Rated"; and, the individuals and gamut of personalities represented inside of this fictional universe face the same difficulties as their flesh and blood counterparts. Why? Because God's grace and mercy are not needed in a sterile vacuum of perfection! Life is messy and ugly. But, those dark moments are where divine love shines the brightest.

There is some time overlap in this book; still, it was worth revisiting a bit of the previous story to share the fullness of Winona and Shaughnessy's relationship – a growing relationship among mature adults with plenty of baggage.

As a side note, I will mention the reference numbers that you find in the text. Often these numbers are a link to performances of the songs mentioned. (Live links are active in the digital version of the book). At other times, the numbers point to explanations or scripture references that are addressed in the Source Index.

And finally, I want to share a special acknowledgement: My mother is a wonderful sounding board and source of historical information. Thanks Mom, for answering all of my silly questions! Love ya bunches!

Keep the Son Shining!

Michele



CAST OF CHARACTERS

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

Genesis “Gen” Roberts Brandt: Married to Billy Brandt (Jr/III). Living in Vacaville, California after her marriage to Billy.

Johann Wilhelm “Wild Bill” Brandt Jr.: Son of Johann & Lily Brandt. Often called “Billy” by his wife and mother. Estranged husband of Winona Brandt and absentee father to John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

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

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 he would be a “third” like his half-brother, John. Surrendered to an orphanage in Joplin, Missouri as an infant.

Lily “Lil” Brandt: Matriarch of the Brandt clan. Widow of Johann Wilhelm Brandt. Grandmother to Billy (the younger), John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

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

Sharon “Ronnie” Brandt: Oldest daughter of Winona Brandt; sibling to Billy, John, Sandy, and Suess. Estranged from the family. Living in Reno, Nevada.

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

Winona “Noni” Brandt: Housekeeper at the Double B Ranch near Pleasant Grove, California. Estranged from her husband, “Wild Bill” Brandt Jr.(sometimes referred to as “Billy”). Mother of John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

* * * * *

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.

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 Dorthea Bakker.

* * * * *

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

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 Los Angeles, California.

Shaughnessy Forsythe: Legal counsel for Maude Baumgartner. 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 Thomas: Pastor of Valley Community Church in Sonoma, California. Married to Gloria. Father to 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 boys – Dallas and Nathan “Nate”.



CHAPTER 1

Monday, May 16, 1977

“Mrs. Brandt,” Shaughnessy Forsythe greeted with a genial smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you. How can I be of assistance?”

Swiveling from the whispered conference with her mother-in-law, Winona sized up the silver-haired gentleman with a slight scowl. Dressed in casual clothing, the attorney was not what she’d been expecting. The head full of salt and pepper hair was in keeping with her version of a stuffy old lawyer; but, the man in front of her was debonair with a warm twinkle in his chocolatey-brown eyes and a sexy smile that did funny things to Noni’s insides. “I need to emancipate my daughter,” Winona declared, the breathy sound of her voice shocking her. Waving to the shy girl, Noni steadied her voice and explained: “She is taking a job with the Phillips family here in Sonoma while she finishes high school. So, I’d like to get the paperwork she needs to live independently until she turns eighteen.”

Shaw smiled at the flustered woman and the shy girl. “I can certainly help with the documents you require, ma’am. Please follow me,” he directed, leading the group into his office. Gesturing to the conference table in the corner, Shaw questioned, “Would anyone care for coffee?” Nods from the older women sent him sauntering back into the reception area. When he returned with the coffee tray and two glasses of water, Shaw tried to dissipate the tension in the room with a light conversation.

"I have friends by the name of Brandt. Would you know John and Catherine?"

With a proud nod, Lily Brandt spoke up. "That would be my grandson and his sassy wife."

"Sassy?" Shaughnessy chortled. "Yes, I can see that designation. But, Catherine is quite a remarkable young woman – one that I'm pleased to call 'friend.'" The undercurrent of emotion seemed to intensify; so, Shaw set aside the small talk and focused on the task at hand. "Your daughter will be working for Lloyd and Mavis?"

"Yes," Noni answered, gesturing toward the beautiful young lady. "This is Sandy, and she will be taking care of the Phillips' children. They have offered her a place to stay over their garage as part of her wages."

Turning to the bashful girl, Shaughnessy extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, young lady. The Phillips are good people; and, I'm sure they will be happy to have an extra set of hands to help with Larry and Mary-Cate." Stepping away from the table, Shaw gathered a legal notepad and began to jot notes. When all of his questions were answered, he escorted the family back to the waiting area. "I will have the secretary type this up. If you would like to join me for a late lunch, everything should be ready for necessary signatures by the time we get back."

Surprised and pleased with the attorney's offer, Winona tipped her head in agreement. His touch at the small of her back as he ushered them toward the front door of his office set Noni's nerves to tingling; and, she wrestled with a case of the jitters.

A short walk to a nearby bistro was accomplished in near silence; but once Lily was seated at the outdoor patio table, she questioned: "You do work for my Johann?"

After assisting each of the ladies into their chairs, Shaughnessy drew up his seat and faced the three generations of women. "Technically speaking, I work for the Baumgartner estate," he answered. Lightly touching the back of Winona's hand, he commented, "You have a remarkable son, Mrs. Brandt."

Flushing, Noni ignored the reference to her oldest child and focused on the passing foot traffic. "Have you lived in this area long?" she asked, for lack of a better question.

Stomping down his attraction to the dark-haired lady with world-weary eyes, Shaw made a concerted effort to keep the conversation rolling without focusing all of his attention on Winona. "I moved to the area about fifteen years ago," he answered. "I grew up in the backwoods outside of Knoxville, Tennessee; but, Sonoma has been home to me for a long time now," he informed the women after the waitress took their order. Shaw was mesmerized when the spring breeze lifted Winona's long, black hair and sent tendrils his direction.

* * * * *

Struggling to focus on the task at hand, Shaughnessy dropped his glasses to the blotter and stared off into the distance. The short afternoon with Winona Brandt had been nothing out of the ordinary in terms of his workload; but, the subtle tug of attraction had not dissipated. The chemistry between him and the feisty lady was off the charts; and, Shaw wondered about the quiet request Winona had made of him before leaving the office. Pulling the yellow legal pad close, Shaughnessy looked at the vital statistics of Johann William "Billy" Brandt, Jr. – absentee father and runaway husband. The beautiful woman had struggled to withhold the tremor in her voice when Winona quietly asked Shaw about the possibility of terminating her marriage to the wayward cowboy. Before he could fathom the sad lady's request, a knock sounded on the door.

"Your four o'clock appointment is here, Mr. Forsythe," his secretary called.

Chuckling, Shaw pushed the messy trail of papers on his desk into a stack. "Send him in," he hollered back good-naturedly. His standing appointment with the pastor was always a source of laughter and camaraderie, hence Shaughnessy's casual wardrobe for the day.

"I've got worms," Jerry Thomas proclaimed as he walked through the door, his long stride bringing him to a stop in front of the attorney's desk in a split-second.

"Sounds like you need medical attention, not legal advice," Shaw quipped as he finished shuffling his paperwork.

"HA! Get moving. I don't want someone else to beat us to our fishing hole," the pastor quibbled.

“Always in a hurry!”

“I promised Gloria fish for tomorrow night’s supper,” Jerry intoned as he tapped his foot impatiently. It wasn’t often he had a free evening to himself. The short, Monday afternoon sessions were generally a time of sharing and prayer. Today, Jerry was looking forward to an outdoor excursion to take the edge off a load of responsibility.

“Met John Brandt’s mother today,” Shaw commented as they piled into the minister’s station wagon. “Quite a lady.”

Slanting a sideways look at his friend and confidant, Jerry lifted a questioning brow. “Want to elaborate?”

“There isn’t much to say. Winona was providing her daughter with emancipation papers. John’s grandmother is an energetic live-wire who plans to stay in Sonoma as well. You might want to make a call and invite them to Sunday morning worship.”

“The young woman would be receptive? My understanding is that she is alone and expecting.”

“If memory serves correctly, pastor, Sandy is the little lady who went forward at the service about a month ago. And, there is no doubt that her grandmother is a woman of faith,” Shaw disclosed. “Either way, we’re not offering them a country club membership. We are inviting them to meet the King of the Universe.”

Abashed, Jerry patted his friend on the shoulder. “Correct you are, counselor,” he admitted with a cryptic grin. “It’s been a tough week in the Thomas household; and, I’m feeling jaded.”

“Anything you want me to pray with you about?”

A grimace appeared on Jerry’s face, twisting his usually jovial countenance into a mask of discontentment. “Let me just say that it’s not wise to ask the Lord for patience when you have children. He goes out of his way to provide situational practice when there are teenagers in the house.”

Snickering, Shaughnessy tried to hide his amusement but failed miserably.

“Just wait!” Jerry grouched. “One day you will know what I mean,” the grumpy father of four threatened.

“I hope so,” Shaw admitted, unwilling to say much more. The days

for raising a family were long gone – a whole aspect of life he had missed out on - he realized with growing dismay as the years rolled past. Shaking loose from the unfulfilled longing, Shaughnessy’s thoughts drifted to the vibrant woman he’d shared a few hours with earlier in the day. “A ready-made family,” he mused to himself, his mind taking to the idea like a duck to water. Thrilled with the prospect, Shaughnessy felt his mouth tipping up in delighted anticipation of the possibility.

* * * * *

“Baby, we’ve gotta get this out of here! What if there was a fire or something? We’d be responsible for all of that,” John groaned, as he pointed to the random stacks of cash spread all over the coffee table and floor.

Catherine nodded her head in agreement; but, the only thought she’d come up with was the purchase of a large safe. It would take a good many safety-deposit boxes to contain their eccentric employer’s accumulated stash of money, plus it was likely to raise eyebrows. “I wonder if Mr. Forsythe would have any ideas?” she ventured.

“Give him a call,” John directed. “This mess has to go somewhere; or, I’ll never sleep another wink!”

“Me either,” Catherine mumbled. “Let’s get it put away; then I can call Shaughnessy.”

“Good thing we didn’t sell the snare drum,” John grouched, as he tried to get the lid closed over the stacks of cash.

With a chuckle, Catherine handed her husband the last pile of greenbacks and wandered into their bedroom to make her call. “Hello, Mr. Forsythe! How are you today?” she greeted lightly.

“Doing very well,” he replied. “Met a special lady today – someone, you might know,” Shaw teased. “A Miss Sandra Brandt and her lovely mother.”

“What on earth?” Catherine questioned. “Where did you meet Sandy and Noni?”

Mr. Forsythe chuckled. “Mrs. Brandt signed an emancipation order for her daughter. Truly a delightful lady. I have a hard time believing

that she is old enough to be John's mother."

Now, Catherine chuckled. "Shaughnessy, are you angling to be my father-in-law?" she teased. A lingering silence met her question; and, Catherine laughed again. "Maybe I should let you speak with John. I am sure he will want to know that your intentions are honorable."

"Ahem," John complained from the doorway. "Who do I need to punch?" When his wife handed him the phone, he growled, "Who is this?"

Shaughnessy cleared his throat and carefully answered, "Hello, John."

Perplexed, John pulled the receiver away from his ear and stared at it intently. "Mr. Forsythe?" he finally questioned. "What's this about my mother?" John crabbled.

Giving a soft sigh, Shaughnessy knew he was caught in his own net. "I was telling your wife that I met your mother today; and, I simply mentioned to Catherine that I found Winona to be a captivating woman."

Wordlessly, John handed the receiver to his wife and fell backward on the bed.

"Ah, I think John will have to get back to you on that," Catherine mumbled lightheartedly. "But, before I forget, I need some help with another of Maude's messes. We have started cleaning out the house here; and, there is an extraordinary amount of loose cash hidden. Maude hates banks; and, I can't keep the money here. Aside from a private safe, or bank boxes, can you think of another secure storage option?"

"Where did you say that money is located?" Shaw asked.

"In Maude's house. She used newspapers and magazines to hide her money. It is everywhere!"

"Catherine, have you and John read the contract that you signed - in its entirety?" he asked.

"Of course. It was a simple purchase contract. Maude sold us some property for the sum of ten dollars. In return, we will serve as guardians for her care during the remainder of her natural life."

"And, the sum of one thousand dollars a month for her personal use," Shaughnessy reminded.

"Yes, I put the money in her account at the rehabilitation facility

on the first of each month," Catherine replied. "Maude also requested special meals and fresh flowers each day. Those have been taken care of as well. We are still trying to find her a private aide since she does not like the staff at the rehabilitation center. Thankfully, she has the additional money at the house, because her original balance is almost exhausted."

Shaw heaved a shuddering sigh and explained as plainly as he could: "The purchase agreement is vague in the sense that it does not list the properties that you were purchasing one by one; but, it does indicate that you are purchasing all properties 'as is, where is.' Do you remember?"

"Yes," Catherine said slowly.

"All properties," he reiterated.

"I have read all the attachments you sent, Shaughnessy, so stop hedging and spit it out," Catherine grumbled.

"Et al," he explained. "Meaning there are others - more than we could list in a single legal document; hence, the need for the attachments. Each physical property, intellectual copyright, and business venture transferred to you will be provided in a separate attachment. It is going to take years to dig it all out unless the attorney in Los Angeles can be convinced to turn over his records. I have three specialists working on the title searches now; but, the rest is going to take time."

"There is more than the original thirty-two properties?" Catherine asked dumbfounded.

"Yes, significantly more. And, that brings us back around to the houses in Sonoma and Los Angeles. You will receive those attachments by the end of next week. The transfer of the winery is proving to be a little more involved because of the original leasehold; but, I'll get that worked out; so, you won't need to delay the start of construction on the wine-tasting room."

"Wait!" Catherine demanded. "The houses?"

"Yes, Catherine," he explained patiently. "Let me say this as clearly as I can: Maude sold you everything she owns, including the contents of all the homes and businesses. That can be presumed by the phrase 'as is, where is.' But, to avoid any misinterpretation, you will also find a specific clarification in each attachment where personal property is referenced. Maude did not withhold a single thing in the sale of her estate. Even her

wedding rings are included. She only asks to keep possession of them until her passing."

"I . . . what . . . oh, boy!" Catherine stammered.

"You may want to consider incorporating. That way you can stack all of the business interests under one banner. I would also recommend finding an accountant and an investment counselor. In regards to the cash and bank accounts, you will need to decide what works best."

"Oh, Maude," she moaned forlornly. "Why would you do this?"

Shaughnessy gave the woman a minute to collect herself. He had expected excitement and jubilation. Instead, he heard sadness in the young woman's voice. "I can answer that for you, Catherine - you remind Maude of her cousin, Christabella. Apparently, the two were placed in the same orphanage during their early years. Christabella was the older of the two; and, she protected Maude. They remained close until Christabella and her children died in the pandemic after World War I. Mrs. Baumgartner feels that you are the reincarnation of her well-loved cousin; and, she has given everything to your care."

The clamoring in Catherine's head was deafening! Finally, she directed, "Set-up a trust for Maude, so she can rest assured that her needs will be met first. Then we need to establish a charitable foundation that will make the best use of this money. If you can, please call Dr. Reynolds at the World Mission Society in Santa Ana; and, find out what they need for the refugee relief efforts in Ethiopia. Oh, and can you get me some recommendations for the professional support staff that you mentioned? Beyond that we will have to play it by ear," Catherine advised. "And, Shaughnessy, no more surprises; I don't think my heart can handle any more of Maude's mischief!"

"Well, I'd say my work for the day is done. Tell my future step-son, 'good-bye' from dear old dad," Shaw answered with a chuckle.

With a snort of laughter, Catherine declined. "Not on your life. He is still in shock from his first conversation with you."

"I heard that," John muttered from under the arm he had dropped across his face.

After hanging up the phone, Catherine fell backward on the bed next to her husband.

"I don't want to know," John growled when Catherine turned to her side and dropped a hand over his waist.

"Okay, but you will need to have your tuxedo fitted sooner or later. You can't be best man in cowboy boots and blue jeans," his wife joked.

"Woman, that's not funny!" he exclaimed.

* * * * *

Shaughnessy jotted some notes on Catherine's directives before he picked up the phone again. Taking a deep breath to settle his nerves he dialed the number Winona had provided.

"Double B," a gravelly male voice answered.

"Winona Brandt, please." Background noises raked at Shaw's already jangling nerves while he waited for the lady who'd been wandering through his thoughts all day.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Brandt? This is Shaughnessy Forsythe. Is now a bad time?"

Separating herself from the chaotic noise in the ranch house, Noni stretched the telephone cord and stepped out the back door. "Thanks for calling," Winona stammered, anxious to hear the attorney's advice on her failed marriage. "I'm hoping you've got some good news for me."

"I do have more questions, if now is a good time."

Sighing, Noni tried to curb her annoyance. Nothing about Billy Brandt had ever been easy, and even divorcing him was proving to be a chore. "Mr. Forsythe, I'll answer all your questions; but, before I do, we'd better talk about your fees."

"Please call me Shaughnessy, or Shaw if you prefer."

"That's fine and dandy. Now about those fees," Noni reminded, positive that her tiny nest egg was about to be busted wide open. After hearing the man's spiel about court costs and other up-front filing fees, Winona's hope died. Her savings would barely be enough to cover the court charges. A ragged sigh broke from her lips; and, the man on the other end stuttered to a stop. "You can stop there," Noni harshly advised. "Even without going into your wages, I can already see that this isn't going to work out."

"If you would permit me a minute more," Shaughnessy hurriedly requested. "There is not any leeway in the costs assessed by the court; but, I would be willing to waive some of my fees. If it will help, I would be willing to accept payments on the remainder."

"Why would you do that?" Winona harangued.

"For the sake of my friendship with your son. And, for the simple reason that I feel compelled to help you out of this challenging situation."

Softening, Noni recalled the genuine smile of the gentleman and his easy disposition as they'd talked that afternoon. "You don't know me," she flatly stated, hope warring with practicality. "You sure you want to trust a stranger for those payments?"

"If I may be so bold, Mrs. Brandt. I am afraid I have an ulterior motive," Shaughnessy stated clearly, doing his best to remain calm. "I am hoping to get to know you and your family better, ma'am."

Swallowing hard, Noni stammered, "How much better are we talking here?"

"That remains to be seen," he suggested. "But, whatever you decide, ma'am, you can rest assured that I will help you with your case against Mr. Brandt. In past conversations with your son, John has made it clear that his father abandoned your family early on, so your case against your husband should be very cut and dry."

With her heart pummeling her rib cage, Winona made a croak of assent and searched the reflection in the dark window before her. Fine lines fanned out around her eyes; and, her face was fuller now than it had been in her youth. The black hair she pulled back in a braid had a smattering of gray that be-spoke her age all too clearly; but, underneath Winona recognized the young girl that had fallen in love with the wrong man. Was it possible that something good could still come out of that shot-gun wedding from thirty years ago? "I would like your help, Mr. Forsythe; but, I can't promise you anything else. You still willing to take my case?"

"Of course! Now, let's get to those questions!"



CHAPTER 2

Thursday, May 19, 1977

"Winona!" Bartholomew Briggs roared when he discovered the crumpled front bumper of his new pick-up truck. "Did you see what that girl of yours did now?!"

"You are the one who spoils her rotten, Bart! I told you not to get her a car for her sixteenth birthday," Winona snarled at the man who'd been more than her employer for nearly twenty years. Although the companionship portion of their arrangement had died off many moons ago, Noni still cared for the man and his spread like it was her own.

Stomping away, Bart bellowed for his son – giving directives for the immediate "impounding" of one cherry red Camaro.

Snatching the jangling phone from the kitchen wall, Winona barked, "Hello?"

Startled by the rude greeting, Shaughnessy cleared his throat and calmly asked for Mrs. Brandt.

"Speaking," Winona huffed on a sigh, exasperated to be caught in a fit of temper by the genial attorney.

"Is this a bad time?"

"No, Mr. Forsythe. You got news?"

"I have finished drafting your divorce papers; but, I did have a question about your husband's support of the children."

With a humorless laugh, Winona grunted, "Support? Billy Brandt has never done much to support his children. When he was working in the oil

fields, he'd bring a little something with him when he visited; but, most of his wages went toward women and drink. Without my grandfather and Billy's parents, my son and I would have been homeless."

Grimly, Shaughnessy made notes while Winona explained. "Has Mr. Brandt offered any support since he left in, uh, 1958?"

Dropping heavily into a chair, Winona gnawed on her cuticle for a moment before answering. "Billy rode for the Double B for a couple of years after that, so Bart, ah, the owner here, made sure I got his wages. But once Billy took off for good and started riding under his own sponsorship, I never saw another penny."

"Would you remember the last time you had any contact or support from Mr. Brandt, Winona?"

Ruefully, Winona answered. "Oh, yeah. I remember. We started working for Mr. Briggs in January 1957, right after my oldest daughter was born. Billy rode out on the circuit for the first time in July of that year; and, he was only gone for a couple of months. He worked as a ranch hand through the end of the year and then went back out on the circuit for most of '58. He didn't come around; but, I was still getting some of his winnings through Mr. Briggs until 1960 rolled around. Then he signed on with a different outfit; and, the money stopped coming. That would have been around Valentine's Day. The last time I laid eyes on him was April 1, 1960. And, you can call me a fool for even meeting him in town that day. All he was interested in was rounding up enough money to buy a new horse. Never mind the daughter he'd never met."

Struggling to contain the animosity he felt toward the poor excuse of a man, Shaw waited until he could speak evenly. "Your last contact was seventeen years ago then?"

Winona nodded and then realized that the lawyer wouldn't perceive her answer. "Yeah," she admitted, hoping the man didn't probe any further.

"One last question, then. Did you try to contact Mr. Brandt any time after April of 1960?"

Frustrated by the lingering sense of failure, Noni couldn't help but growl, "I have no idea where the man went! How could I contact him?"

Determined to do his best by Winona and her family, Shaughnessy

comforted, "I know this is difficult for you. And, please be assured, I am only asking to save you some time and money. To satisfy the court, we must attempt to give the process server a last known address."

"Send whatever you've got to 'Wild Bill Brandt,' in care of the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association, Mr. Forsythe. That was his last known address."

* * * * *

"It was an accident!" Suess screeched when B.J. wrestled the keys from her hand. "I'm telling Bartie!" she yelled while her favorite person in the whole world just grinned. The dark-haired man towered over her and his muscular body said that he put in a hard day's work every day of his life; but, Suess counted on her protector staying wrapped around her little finger long enough to get her car keys back. "Beeee-Jaaay," she wailed as he strolled across the yard whistling a jaunty tune.

Chuckling, B.J. called, "Sorry, little minx. But, you've done it this time. The old man is fit to be tied." He jammed the keys into the front pocket of his jeans as Suess barreled into his back. Her frantic hands grasping at his pocket met with much more sensitive territory; and, B.J.'s breath hissed out when Suess began to stroke him through his zipper.

"Please, B.J.," she coaxed, letting her touch say more than words ever could.

"Holy heaven! What do you think you're doin', Susannah?" B.J. stuttered before capturing the hand that was sending his libido into overdrive.

"I know you love me," Suess whispered against the broad back where she rested her cheek. "Please don't be mean," she cajoled, letting her other hand stroke the firm abdominal muscles above B.J.'s Championship belt buckle.

"Kid! I love you like a pain-in-the-backside little sister. Now get your hands off my family jewels."

Crestfallen, Suess stepped back and let the cowboy loose. "You don't mean that, B.J. I know you don't," she whimpered.

Pivoting on a well-worn boot heel, the towering rancher gathered

the petite teenager with the dangerous curves into his arms. "Ah, little minx. What am I supposed to do with you?" he grumbled, stroking the girl's back. The ink on his divorce papers was barely dry; his illegitimate son was only three years younger than the young woman in his arms; and, in all likelihood, Suess was also his half-sister, if the rumors were to be believed. "You know these feelings can't go anywhere," B.J. finally murmured.

"Why not?!" Suess demanded. "I can tell how turned on you are, so you can't deny it!"

Taking a step back, B.J. held the strong-willed kid at arm's length. "Stop talking like that," he grunted under his breath.

"Fine!" Suess shrilled, drawing the stares of several ranch hands passing by. Dropping her voice, Suess glared at the rugged man. "If you don't want me, there are plenty more who do, Bartholomew Briggs the third!" Her pretty face turned into a scowling, ugly mask, Suess stormed away toward the horse barns.

* * * * *

Sunday, May 22, 1977

The afternoon meal passed in stilted silence with heated glares passed around more often than the mashed potatoes; and, Suess broke away just as soon as she was able.

Two new foals in the stables had captured her attention a week ago; and at the moment, they were the only friendly faces around. The golden palomino with the white diamond blaze was a spritely soul that nudged her hand repeatedly for attention. And, the spotted fellow looked like an overgrown Dalmatian with black patches all over his white coat; but, it was his black mane and blue eyes that made the colt extraordinary.

Quietly observing her interaction with the paint, B.J. waited patiently. "Dad said you could name them," he advised when Suess looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "As long as you don't call them 'Pecker,'" he teased.

Scowling at the mention of a childhood joke, Suess returned her

attention to the playful foal and ignored the overbearing man. As the wind and rain picked up outside the horses became more skittish; and, the mare was less inclined to tolerate a two-legged animal near her baby. Resigned, Suess gave the now anxious foal a consoling pat and left the stall.

"Enough pouting," B.J. admonished, falling into step with the angry girl. "You know Dad will ease up when you least expect it. Until then, there is no use in keeping everyone riled."

Whirling, Suess exclaimed. "He's not my Dad! I don't have a father. And, I'm sick of everyone treating me like a little girl. See these?" she hollered, lifting her T-shirt to reveal a simple white bra. "Wooo-mann," Suess drawled, over-enunciating each consonant and vowel. With quick efficiency, Suess shed her shirt and jeans and sauntered over to the gaping man. "The day you sent Lorraine away was the happiest day of my life, B.J. I don't know how you ever got yourself hooked up to such a conniving, catty woman; but, I promise you – you'll never have to worry about me treatin' you that way," Suess declared, heart in her eyes.

The supple young body pressed against him drained all the blood in B.J.'s brain and sent it to the area south of his waistband. Without a conscious thought, B.J.'s hands cupped the firm globes of Susannah's backside and traced the edges of the bikini underpants she was wearing. Warm lips pressed to his throat stole his last bit of reason. It wasn't until a small hand unzipped his pants and slid inside that the alarm bells in B.J.'s head finally cut through the erotic fog. With an agonized groan, B.J. released the young woman he'd watched grow up; and, he stepped back. Dropping his cowboy hat over his exposed genitals, B.J. tried to calm his racing heart and steel himself against the reproachful look in Suess' eyes. "We can't do this," he mumbled.

"We are doing this!" Suess exclaimed, marching forward while throwing off the last of her clothing.

"Enough!!" he croaked, backing away. His body was overriding the frantic messages from his brain; and, B.J. helplessly stared at the full breasts, the rounded hips, and the soft mound that promised paradise. Grasping onto the last bit of his sanity, B.J. cleared his throat and commanded, "Get dressed, Susannah." Then he turned and fled.

Friday, May 27, 1977

Furious once again, Suess stomped out of the house – the screen door slamming behind her. When she spotted a couple of the new hands on their way in from a long day of mending fences, Suess put aside her pique and approached. “Rough day, fellas?”

The rather homely blonde men swapped looks and then gave the feisty, raven-haired beauty a thorough once over. A bright yellow halter top filled to the brim left an exposed swatch of belly, before a pair of form-fitting denim short-shorts covered the bare necessities below.

Wiping two long fingers across her forehead, Suess flicked off the imaginary sweat of her brow and winked at one of the twins. She smiled a “come-hither” smile. “Ever been to the creek bottom? There’s a wide spot in the creek that makes a good swimming hole if you’re up for a little more time in the saddle.”

“Goin’ for a ride sounds like fun,” the stockier of the duo commented with bawdy innuendo.

A fissure of unease slid through Suess’ belly; but, she bit back the nervous tremor and responded: “Give me a hand up.”

“I’m Timmy and that’s Tommy,” the other rider mentioned with a wave at the man in front of Suess.

“You guys must be pretty new. I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Hired on last week,” Tommy grunted, drawing the hands clamped around his waist closer to his crotch.

Unwilling to back down from her plan to make B.J. jealous, Suess left her hands where the randy cowhand had placed them. There certainly wasn’t anything intimidating about the small lump under her palm.

When they arrived at the swimming hole, Suess didn’t flinch when the men suggested skinny dipping. That suited her just fine; but, she had a hard time keeping a straight face when the burly men proudly stripped down. “You guys go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute,” she explained as she pulled off her boots. Surreptitiously she looked over at the haphazard

pile of clothing and footwear the men left behind. “It figures,” she mused, taking note of the boots that weren’t much larger than her own.

Splashing into the cool water a moment later, Suess smirked at the two anxious men and lazily swam to the opposite end of the pond. With a wicked sense of her womanly wiles, she led tiny Tim and his brother on a merry chase around the swimming hole with her playful antics and last-minute dodging about. So, when they finally cornered her, Suess laughed merrily and let herself be captured. Flung over one beefy shoulder, she admired the rear view of her captor. At least the poor guy had something going for him.

Stretched out moments later on a grassy knoll, Suess’ apprehension began to grow. Although neither man was endowed with much more than a “toy pistol,” the idea of being with two men at once was an intimidating prospect – one that became more frightening as their demands grew. “Stop!!” she shrieked when a finger probed her backside. When her demand wasn’t met, Suess began to thrash around. “Let me go!”

“You came out here with both of us, doll,” Tommy groaned. “And we both expect to have a little fun.”

“Fun is over!!” she yelled, pushing at the men. Tears began welling in Suess’ eyes when Timmy positioned himself over her. “GET OFF ME!” she screeched.

“Settle down!” Tommy demanded, clamping a hand over Suess’ mouth. “No one is hurting you. We just want what you promised.”

“I changed my mind,” Suess cried as she frantically pushed at Timmy’s chest.

“Stop being a tease! You owe us something after dragging us out here,” Tommy advised, nodding at his brother to continue.

The pressure at her entrance made Suess wail like a savage; and, she bit the hand over her mouth. Tommy’s roar of pain was silenced by the not-so-subtle snick of a gun being cocked.

“You have exactly one-hour to collect your last paycheck and get off my land,” B.J. shouted, waving the men away with the rifle. “After that, you’ll be shot on sight.”

In an instant, Suess was free to scramble to her feet and back away

from the ornery ranch hands.

As soon as the men had gathered their clothing and galloped away towards the bunkhouse, B.J. spared a glance for the trembling girl. "You hurt?" he roughly asked, still focusing his attention on the retreating pair. It wouldn't be unheard of for the two men to double back once they realized it wouldn't be hard to overpower a lone man.

Sobbing, Suess dropped to the fragrant green carpet under her feet and curled up into the fetal position.

Giving one last look in the distance to make sure that they were alone, B.J. dropped from his horse and softly commanded, "Get dressed, Susannah. When we get back to the house, I'll call the Sheriff and tell him to pick those no-accounts up."

"Don't you even care what they tried to do to me?" she wailed.

"Course I care," B.J. comforted, dropping on the grass next to the scared girl. "But, what's to stop them from turning around and coming back? I need to get you to the house where you'll be safe; and, I can call the law." He helped Suess stand; but, when he looked around for her clothing, there was nothing to be found. "What did they do with your stuff?"

Peeking out from the solid chest where she'd been resting her cheek, Suess looked around. "They must have grabbed it up when they were leaving. It was all piled over there," she quietly answered, pointing to the bare earth where they'd disrobed less than an hour earlier.

Shrugging out of his shirt, B.J. draped it around the subdued young woman and brushed the tangle of hair back from her face. "What am I gonna do with you, Susannah?" he mumbled under his breath.

"Marry me," Suess implored.

"You know that can't happen. You're too young," he consoled, gently stroking her hair.

"Maureen was only fifteen when you got her pregnant with Billy the kid. I want to have your babies, B.J.!"

Sighing, he drew back and captured the hands that were teasing through the hair on his chest. "Princess, you don't know what you're saying! Maureen and I were both young and stupid; and, you see how that ended. She ran out on her baby and left Billy floating around with

relatives until I finally got legal custody."

"Don't you love me at all?" Suess whimpered, pressing herself tightly against the confused man.

Trying to reason with the head-strong girl, B.J. pointed out, "I'm more than twice your age, Susannah."

"You are just making excuses! I've known you all my life Bartholomew Jackson Briggs the third; and, I've wanted you nearly as long. When I was a little girl, and my sisters and I would play dress-up, I was always dressing up to be your bride. I don't want anyone but you! Please, B.J.!"

With a groan of defeat, B.J. dipped his head and kissed the demanding girl who made his heart hammer and his head spin. He was a fool of the grandest design; but, there was no denying the chemistry between them. In seconds their bodies were stretched out on the plush grass, limbs and lips intertwined as they marched into madness.

* * * * *

The amber colored liquid taunted Noni. She reached for the familiar bottle and paused for a second before grasping the alcohol that would take the edge off of her panic. Her salvation in the moment of weakness came from the shrill jangling of the telephone; and, Winona dropped the liquor bottle like it was a coiled rattler. "Double B," she rasped into the handset.

"Mrs. Brandt? This is Shaughnessy Forsythe."

Shoving the vile liquid away, Noni took a deep breath and steadied her nerves the best she was able. "What can I do for you, counselor?"

The tremor in the woman's voice called to every protective instinct he possessed. Cautiously, Shaw questioned, "Is everything okay, Mrs. Brandt?"

"We been over this," Winona sighed. "I'm just Winona. Mrs. Brandt is my mother-in-law."

"As you like," Shaughnessy agreed, before pressing his point. "You sound upset, Winona. Is there something I can do?"

Puffing out her cheeks, Noni considered the bottle of Jack Daniels sitting on the table. "I'm thinking about fallin' off the wagon. Got any

legal advice for that?" she grumbled.

"How long has it been since your last drink?" Shaw questioned, increasingly more sensitive to the turmoil in the woman's voice.

Winona propped her head in her hand and whispered, "Almost nine years."

"I have been where you are," Shaughnessy confessed. "It has been fifteen years since I took my last drink; but, it's mighty hard to tamp down that thirst some days, isn't it?"

"Yeah. And, today has been a doozy!"

"It must have been to think of giving up nine years of sobriety."

Heaving out a pent-up breath, Noni tipped her head back and stared up at the tongue and groove ceiling overhead. "My kid had a nasty run-in with two of the new ranch hands this afternoon. The owner's son got there in time to keep them off her; but, it seems she went out riding with them willingly. Maybe she didn't realize what would happen . . . I don't know," Winona ended with a growl. She'd sent her half-naked daughter to her room an hour ago; and, the ranting had just died down.

"Is it something you can change?" Shaw carefully responded, referencing the serenity prayer every recovering alcoholic knew by heart.

Grief sat like a heavy stone in her stomach. "No, it is not something I can change; but, I can make sure it never happens again," Noni answered, her voice rough as sandpaper. "She may hate me every day for the rest of her life; but, if I have to send Susannah to live with her brother then that is what I'll do! All I know is, she can't stay here anymore. Mr. Briggs made it clear that if I can't find a place for Suess, then she will be sent to an all-girls school in Virginia."

While the prospect of a private education seemed like an excellent solution to him, the idea obviously bothered the girl's mother. "Perhaps I could make another suggestion."

"I am all ears," Winona hopelessly uttered, the untenable thought of being left entirely alone was a bitter pill to swallow.

"The family your older daughter is working for is hiring summer help. Susannah could live with her grandmother and sister for the summer while working on her independence. When it is time for her to return to you in the fall, maybe some of the fuss will have died down;

and, things can go back to normal."

"I'm not sure 'normal' is a good thing around here," Noni muttered; but, the idea had merit. "You think those folks would give Suess a job?"

"We will never know unless we ask," Shaw lightly offered, hoping to ease the tension.

"If you think it might work, I'd be willing to give it a try."

"And, whatever is in the bottle in front of you will get tossed away?" Shaughnessy prompted.

Rolling her neck to release the tightness in the muscles there, Noni gave the Jack Daniels one last, longing look. "Yeah, Mr. Forsythe. I'll put the bottle away."

* * * END OF SAMPLE * * *

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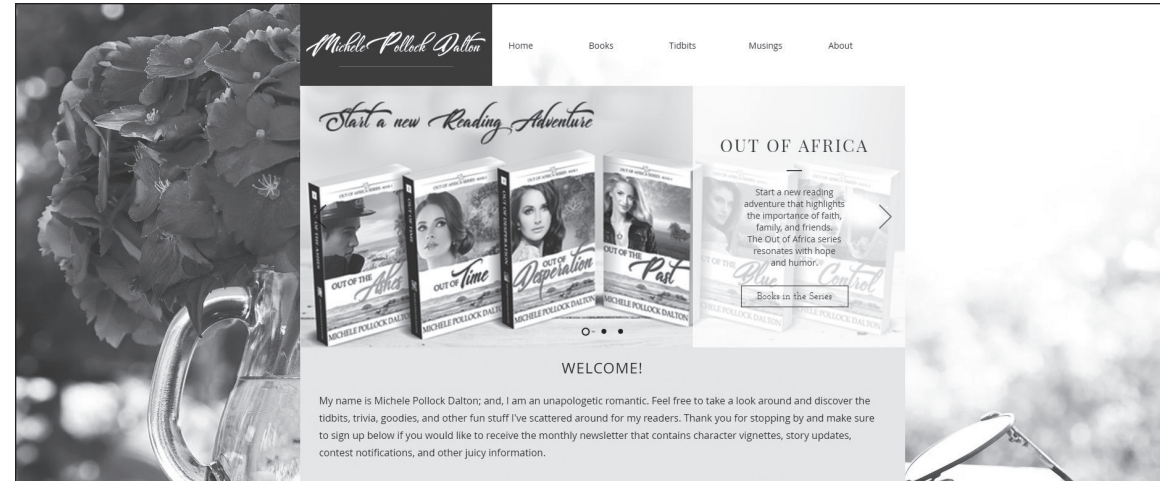
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