

OUT OF AFRICA SERIES - BOOK 3



OUT OF
Desperation



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



*To everyone stuck in a valley of despair -
There is hope!*

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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.



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

Out of Africa



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing to spend time inside these pages. I hope you will find a bit of humor and inspiration for your day.

If you have already read the previous books in this series, then you know that this is *not your typical Christian romance novel*. While most romance writers focus specifically on falling in love, I have chosen to write about people staying in love. 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.

It is also my duty to mention that this is not a "G Rated" storyline. You will find scenes and themes in this story that are graphic. If real life makes you uncomfortable, please put this book down – I do not want to offend anyone's sensibilities. But, if you have ever been stuck "between a rock and a hard place," then maybe you will find some encouragement here.

And finally, I want to offer a heartfelt thanks for the insight my mother provided relating to the era of the 1970s and for her proofreading efforts. Thanks, mom!

Keep the Son Shining!

Michele



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Catherine Kavanagh Brandt: A pediatrician, currently on a medical leave. Married to John Brandt. Residing in Sonoma, California.

John Brandt: A fireman/paramedic on leave of absence from the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Married to Catherine Kavanagh Brandt. Residing in Sonoma, California.

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Amanda Lynn “Mandie” Thompson: Four-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with her grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Glen Ellen, California.

Bernard “Bear” Thompson: A retired dairy farmer from Vacaville, California. Married to Irene Thompson; father to Jay and James Thompson; and, grandfather to Mandie, Cassie and Rosie Thompson. Current resident of Glen Ellen, California.

Cassandra Sue “Cassie” Thompson: Two-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with her grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Glen Ellen, California.

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Irene Thompson: Married to Bernard Thompson; mother to Jay and James Thompson; and, grandmother to Mandie, Cassie and Rosie Thompson. Current resident of Glen Ellen, California.

Margaret “Maggie” Thompson: Widow of Jay Thompson; mother of Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Currently staying in the hospital with her infant daughter, Rosie

Rosalee Ann “Rosie” Thompson: Infant daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently hospitalized in Fairfield, California.

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Maude Baumgartner: Wealthy owner of the cottage that John and Catherine Brandt are renting in Sonoma, California.

Lloyd & Mavis Phillips: Owners of Phillips Antique Emporium and the newly opened Bygone Days Inn in Sonoma, California.

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



CHAPTER 1

Saturday, November 27, 1976

Maggie Thompson stared dismally through the metal bars that imprisoned her daughter. The fretting infant was inconsolable; and, Maggie was at the end of her rope. Standing abruptly, she pushed through the swinging doors of the children’s ward and headed for the exit.

“Mrs. Thompson, wait!” a dark-haired man in uniform called from the nurse’s station. “I need to speak with you.”

Her stomach flip-flopped when Maggie turned and saw the police officer approaching.

“Are you Margaret Thompson?” Officer Ben Graham asked the startled woman.

Fighting the extreme nausea that had plagued her entire pregnancy, Maggie nodded her head and excused herself hastily. When she emerged from the restroom, the big policeman was waiting in the corridor outside.

“Mrs. Thompson, I need to speak with you privately,” Officer Graham said lowly, gesturing to a private office nearby. “Please, follow me.”

Swallowing convulsively, Maggie could only imagine what this visit from the police must mean. Her parent’s harsh discipline of their grandchildren was the reason her infant daughter may never hear again; but, the abuse accusations were being investigated by Child Protective Services, not the police.

After gently escorting the frightened woman into the privacy of the small office, Ben asked her to be seated and then propped himself on the corner of the desk across from her. "Ma'am, I'm afraid I need to inform you that your father has been injured during an attack at his home. He was taken to the Sacramento Medical Center."

"Who attacked him?" Maggie asked in confusion.

"The Vacaville Police Department did not pass that information along to us; but, I can try to find out for you if you would like."

"Ah . . . yes, please. Did the police say what was wrong with him?"

Shaking his head in the negative, Officer Graham consider the woman's calm questioning and the fact that she hadn't asked after her mother. "I'm very sorry to have to bring you bad news," he comforted, before standing to leave. "I'll see if I can get any more information for you. Where is the best place to reach you?"

Maggie waved at the room around her. "Right here," she replied. "My daughter is in the children's ward."

* * * * *

John's belief in a positive outcome for Catherine's medical condition had been badly shaken during the morning dialysis session; and, his agitation was apparent. But, Catherine knew he just needed a little quiet time to sort things out before he would be ready to discuss their meeting with the doctor.

When they pulled into their driveway, Catherine took in the progress of the teenage work crew busily re-painting the trim on the stone cottage. The elderly woman who owned the property insisted that the white paint they used during their renovations be replaced by red paint. "I can supervise things here if you want to take a drive or something," Catherine offered.

"You sure? That's a whole lot of teenage testosterone out there!" John muttered as he watched the boys scramble around the house in an attempt to look busy.

With a snort of laughter, Catherine patted her husband's hand reassuringly. "I will bribe them with homemade pizza and the soda-pop

you picked up at the grocery store yesterday."

John hopped out of the vehicle to help Catherine down. "I won't be gone long," he promised, before dropping a quick kiss on her lips.

Catherine watched him drive away before whispering a short prayer on John's behalf.

"Mrs. Brandt, do you want to see what we've finished?" the pastor's oldest son asked.

Turning towards the eager adolescent, Catherine gave him a brief smile and replied, "Of course, Troy. Let's see what you guys have been up to while we were gone." Catherine surveyed the work and encouraged the young men to keep up their efforts before wandering into the house to begin work on the homemade pizza.

When the first pizza came out of the oven, Catherine called the rambunctious teenage boys into the house and set out the soft drinks. She tried to hide her amusement at their antics but quickly concluded that young men were the same on every continent. Their jesting and jousting reminded her of the boys that had lived in the missionary village in Ethiopia – each one trying to outdo the other.

Food also seemed to be a common denominator in taming the unruly male masses – feed them; and, they became as docile as lambs. Catherine looked around three pizzas later and chuckled. Adolescent boys were sprawled out all over the yard; and, most seemed ready for an afternoon siesta in the shade.

"Mrs. Brandt," Troy Thomas called as he burst through the front door. "The guy from up on the hill says he needs your help right away!"

Startled, Catherine followed the pastor's son into the yard, where the liveried chauffeur from the adjoining estate was pacing frantically. The blood-covered man bolted to Catherine's side when he saw her and exclaimed, "Come quickly! Mrs. Baumgartner is injured!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No! No," the man declared in a panic. "Hurry! There is blood everywhere; and, Mrs. Norris can't get the bleeding to stop."

Turning to the ashen-faced teenager, Catherine directed, "Please tell John where I have gone when he gets home."

* * * * *

"She what!?" John demanded furiously of the frazzled young man.

"Someone is hurt," Troy stuttered. "Mrs. Brandt went up there to help."

Muttering under his breath, John rolled up his car window and slammed the Rover into reverse. The tires spit gravel as he rapidly accelerated down the driveway. That crazy wife of his couldn't sit still. He was going to hog-tie her to the bed once he got her home!

John screeched to a halt in front of the grand country house ninety seconds later and jumped from the vehicle. In aggravation, he pounded the heavy wrought iron knocker on the massive oak door unrelentingly, until the housekeeper, Mrs. Norris, answered. Out of breath, the matronly woman waved him inside.

"This way," Agatha Norris panted. "They are in the morning room."

The sound of breaking glass sent Mrs. Norris scurrying towards the back of the house. John followed close behind and prayed he would find his wife in one piece when the crashing and thrashing noises became louder. "Whoa!" he demanded as the elderly owner of the manor barreled into him at full-speed. "What's goin' on here?!?"

"An ambulance is on the way," Catherine explained breathlessly. "We just need to hold her still so I can keep pressure on those wounds until transportation arrives."

Struggling to keep the feisty old woman calm, John took in the chaos. Nodding to the driver, John grunted: "Take an arm and let's see if we can get her into a chair."

"Maude?" Catherine called softly to the woman. "Do you remember my husband, John? You visited us at the cottage last week. Remember?"

Swinging her gaze toward the graceful young woman, Maude Baumgartner's confused mind took in the long dark hair and vibrant blue eyes. "Christabella?" she questioned in a quavering voice. "Es-tu venu m'aider, Bella?"¹

Approaching cautiously, Catherine held out her hand. "I want to help you, Maude. Will you let me help you?"

Taking the fragile hand, Maude pulled away from the men who were

holding her and flung herself into the woman's arms. "Bella," she cried. "Ne me quitte pas s'il te plaît!"²

"I will not leave you," Catherine promised as she patted the perturbed woman's back gently. "Sit here. John is going to look at your arms and see if he can stop the bleeding. When the ambulance comes, I will ride with you to the hospital. There is nothing to fear – all will be well."

"Easy," John soothed, as he examined each of Maude's arms. Addressing Catherine, he reported, "She has deep lacerations on both arms. Did they say when the ambulance should arrive?"

Mrs. Norris muttered, "We'll be lucky if they show up. They don't like coming out here."

Perplexed by the animosity in the housekeeper's voice, Catherine sent her a questioning look; but, the matter was dropped when the faint sound of a siren made the conversation irrelevant.

* * * * *

"Sweetheart, let's go home. She's so out of it now; she won't know you're gone," John whispered.

Catherine shook her head. "I want to stay, John. The poor woman is so disoriented and scared. If she wakes up here alone, I don't think the nurses will ever get her calmed back down."

Exasperated, John took his wife's hands and gently pulled her from the chair. "Mrs. Baumgartner is heavily sedated; and, she will stay that way until you change the orders, doctor. So, we are going home – now!"

With a vexed sigh, Catherine allowed herself to be escorted from the hospital room. "Are you always going to be so bossy?" she huffed when her groom lifted her into the Rover.

"Yes. Get used to it!" John grumbled, before closing the door firmly.

Catherine glared at her husband when he slipped into the driver's seat. "I am quite capable of self-determination," she declared unequivocally.

"And, you are smart enough to know that you need something to eat and a good night's sleep; so, stop being stubborn," he admonished. After riding in stifling silence for a few minutes, John tried to appease his angry wife. "The nursing staff will call if you are needed."

"That is not the point, John. I made a promise to a patient; and, you have made me choose between keeping the peace or becoming a liar."

"Wrong," John proclaimed, hotly. "I made you choose between your deteriorating health and that of a crazy old woman. When I promised to love and protect you, I wasn't just spouting off idle nonsense. If you refuse to take care of yourself, then I've got no choice. There's no way I'm gonna let you sacrifice your well-being for a stranger."

"Do you know how absurd that sounds coming from you?!? You rush into burning buildings, hang off of cliffs and jump headlong into all sorts of trouble every time you go out on a rescue. Being a fireman and a paramedic is who you are – it is as much a part of your genetic code as the color of your eyes.³ But, you have the nerve to discount that same trait in me. So, tell me, John – are you willing to give up your career? Will you listen when I tell you that you cannot do your job to the best of your ability?!?"

Tight-lipped, John made a right turn and backtracked to the hospital. "Happy?" he growled through clenched teeth when they pulled up to the front entrance.

Peevishly, Catherine looked at the hospital. "No," she admitted. "I am tired and hungry; but, I don't like being told what to do like a child without a bit of common sense."

After a brief moment of disbelief, John dropped his head into his hands and dug his palms into his eyes. He tried counting to ten, then he took a big breath and exhaled forcefully. Shooting a hard look at his wife's angry profile, John put an end to the power struggle and pulled away from the curb.

When they arrived home, Catherine hopped down out of Rover and marched into the house without a backward glance. Slamming the heavy front door was a satisfying way to release some of her frustration.

"Everything okay, Mrs. Brandt?" Troy mumbled through a mouthful of cold pizza.

"Aaaah!" Catherine yelled in surprise. "You scared me half to death," she stuttered at the lanky boy propped against her kitchen doorway.

Embarrassed, Troy looked at his feet and muttered, "I wasn't sure if I should leave the house unlocked."

Catherine jumped again when the door banged open behind her.

"What's wrong?!?" John yelled in panic. Then he noticed Troy and sent the kid a quizzical glance. "What are you still doing here?"

"Ah . . . just cleaning up," he stammered. "I'll head out now."

Sending the poor boy an encouraging smile, Catherine said, "Thanks for all of your hard work. We really appreciate your help. Did you need John to run you home?"

Troy risked a glance at the irritable man hovering in the doorway. "No, that's okay. I can walk."

With a shake of his head, John gestured to the teenager. "Come on, kid; I'll give you a lift. It's too late to be wandering down dark country roads."

When the front door closed behind John, Catherine took a deep breath and stumbled into the bedroom. She kicked off the heavy boots and sighed in relief, before pulling her favorite satin pajamas from the armoire. After staring at the dresser for a few moments, she put aside her pique and pulled John's sweatpants and a clean undershirt from the second drawer as well.

Catherine stopped short when she stepped through the doorway from the living room to the kitchen. In addition to the pizza mess from lunch, red paint was splattered all over her sink and kitchen countertop. The dish towels were covered in filthy handprints and wadded up in crumpled heaps on the stove. Painting paraphernalia was scattered across every available surface; and, crushed soda cans littered the floor around the garbage bag. "Oh, brother," she muttered under her breath as she surveyed the mess.

John slipped the front door open quietly when he arrived home, hoping to find Catherine in a more agreeable mood; but, the banging and clanking in the kitchen quickly disabused him of that notion. Cautiously approaching the doorway to the kitchen, John was surprised to see the top half of the exterior Dutch door flung open to the cold evening air, until he caught the scent of gasoline. "What are you doing?" he uttered in confusion.

"Cleaning up the paint mess."

"Here," John demanded. "Let me do that! You shouldn't be breathing

those fumes.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of clean-up work to keep us both busy,” she grouched.

“Come on, Baby. Let me do that,” John cajoled. “Go get out of those bloody clothes . . . take a bubble bath . . . drink one of those nutritional shakes . . . relax - do whatever. I’ll take care of this.”

Heaving a deep sigh, Catherine moved aside and let John take over the paint mess. “If you can finish this up, then I can get started on the rest of this disaster.”

Looking around, John observed, “Kind of looks like a frat house the day after a big party.”

“Smells like one too,” Catherine grimaced, wiggling her nose comically.



CHAPTER 2

Sunday, November 28, 1976

“Go back to sleep, Baby. God will understand if you miss one Sunday.”

Catherine pried her eyelids open again and blinked groggily at her husband. “What time did you say it was?”

“Almost 9:30 a.m.”

Bolting up in bed, she exclaimed, “Why did you let me sleep so long? We are going to be late!” In haste, Catherine pulled a mulberry-colored, draped crepe de chine dress from the wardrobe.

John hid his smile as his tiny wife dashed about the room like an overactive hummingbird. He gave a low whistle when she tugged her pajamas off and tossed them on the bed. Patting the mattress next to him, John quipped, “Sweetheart, I think you should just crawl back in here; and, we’ll forget about church this morning.”

“Hmpf!” she grunted before handing him the hairbrush. “Can you help with my hair? I can wear the ‘get well’ hairpin from Lloyd again.”

“Woman, hold still,” John admonished, as Catherine tried tugging on her thigh-high silk stockings while he was brushing her hair. “Now, what are you doing?” he demanded, when she hopped up and pulled her slip and dress over her head. John groaned when she shimmed the silky fabric over her hips and fanny. “Baby, you’re killing me,” he grunted.

Catherine arched an eyebrow at her husband and plopped back down on the bed. “Okay, go ahead,” she directed. “I wish we had a second

phone extension in the bedroom. Then I could call the hospital and check on Mrs. Baumgartner before we leave."

When John had tamed the curly, nearly black hair that reached past her waist, he slid off the bed. "Well, come on. I can do the braid in the kitchen while you make your phone call."

* * * * *

"What's the verdict, Baby?" John questioned when Catherine emerged from her patient's hospital room.

"Maude's blood pressure is coming down; but, I need to get a better medical history from her physician in Los Angeles before we do much more. The housekeeper, Mrs. Norris, insists that Mrs. Baumgarnter has never been on any medications; and, I find that extremely odd considering Maude's age and physical condition. There are missing pieces to this puzzle; and, I have a feeling we are dealing with more than a hypertensive emergency."

Sheepishly, John waved towards the nurses' station and observed, "If we're done here, I think we need to stop by the Inn and set Mavis straight on a few things. I've heard 'congratulations' more times than I care to count since we've been here."

"Oh, good grief! I forgot all about that mess," she exclaimed. That woman's fascination with her reproductive status was going to be Catherine's undoing! "It is going to have to wait though; I need a cat nap before I face Mavis," Catherine mumbled.

Stretching widely and exaggerating a yawn, John gave his wife a sultry grin and confessed, "I think I could use a 'nap' too. Can you do that little shimmy in reverse when you take your dress off?"

Catherine flushed at his teasing, but leaned in and whispered, "I will never know unless I try; but, I do need a nap first, Love."

With a hang-dog look, John took her hand and led his wife to the truck. "So much for the physical part of making-up," he grouched to himself.

When they arrived home, Catherine carefully hung up her dress and John's suit before crawling under the covers next to the gorgeous man

she had been given. Cuddling close, she whispered, "Give me a half hour or forty-five minutes to re-charge my batteries. That should give you plenty of time to map out your invasion."

"Nah," John mumbled. "It's no fun starting the party alone. Once you're asleep, I'll get a couple of phone calls out of the way." He waited a moment for Catherine to reply, but quickly realized she was already sleeping. Quietly, John slipped from the bed ten minutes later and wandered into the kitchen. Yanking the refrigerator open, he spotted the last of the leftovers from Thanksgiving dinner and decided a turkey sandwich would appease his stomach for the moment. His wife seemed to forget critical things, like food, when her mind was preoccupied.

The afternoon shadows were lengthening by the time John finished with his phone calls. Amazed that Catherine was still sleeping, he snuck into the bedroom and watched her for a few moments before quietly pulling on his work clothes.

Once outside, he took in the remains of yesterday's painting party with a resigned glance. John was convinced that it would have required less energy to do the painting himself; but, at least the project was complete. When the messy yard was finally picked up, he decided it was time to see if the ancient reel mower by the back door was in any condition to take on the overgrown lawn. At dark, he gave up and rolled the creaky old mower back into its' space at the back of the house. He'd only managed to finish half of the front yard; but, the results were satisfying. The top half of the Dutch door was open again; and, the smells wafting outside had his mouth watering before he even stepped inside. "Baby, I don't know what you're making; but, I hope it's ready soon!"

"Everything should be ready in about ten minutes," she informed her sweaty husband, before bending to pull the pineapple upside-down cake from the oven. "That should give you enough time to wash up if you want."

"Okay, be right back," he exclaimed before dashing pell-mell into the bathroom. "I talked to my buddy, Kent, in Pasadena. He's the one helping me fix up the Thunderbird," John called from the bathroom a few minutes later. He gave his hair a final rinse before stepping out of the tub and drying off. "Brrrr!" he complained when he walked back through

the kitchen. "Can we close that door now?"

Catherine chuckled and gave the towel John was holding around his waist a pointed glance. "Šelami wibi,"⁴ she teased.

John shoved the door closed and turned to his wife. "English, Sweetheart. Speak English!"

With an audacious wink, Catherine replied, "It is much more fun to keep you guessing, Love." Deftly balancing two plates, she loaded the pan-roasted salmon, sautéed baby red potatoes, and garlic parmesan green beans onto the dishes. When John slid an arm around her waist and peeked over her shoulder, Catherine leaned back into him for a moment and shimmed her hips against the damp towel. Tipping her head back, she jested, "Is clothing optional at the dinner table?"

"Ah . . . " How was he supposed to answer that question?!? His stomach was doing the can-can at the prospect of a decent meal; but, his lovely little bride was wiggling her fanny against him for all she was worth. "Eat quick," he demanded hoarsely.

Giggling gleefully at John's predicament, Catherine handed him his plate and brushed her lips lightly across his in teasing anticipation of the evening's recreation. "You might want to reconsider opening the door if it is getting too warm in the kitchen."

"I'm a fireman - I like things hot," John breathed into her ear, before letting her go. "Uh, Baby," he mumbled, when he got a better look at what she was wearing. "Did you forget the Sunday evening church services are canceled until after Christmas?"

"No, I didn't forget; but, I was hoping that you would drive me back into town to check on Maude. Then, if we have time, I believe we need to set Mavis straight on a couple of things before half of California hears the news."

"Ergh," he grumbled. "Those don't sound like 'clothing optional' activities to me."

* * * * *

"My goodness, would you look at that!" Catherine exclaimed as they pulled into the driveway of the Bygone Days Inn. "There must be

hundreds of lights on the house."

John admired the festive Christmas lights and the evergreen garland that festooned the railing of the front porch. A wreath decorated with red bows was placed at each crest in the greenery; and, a large wreath was placed on each side of the double entry doors. "When I talked to Lloyd this afternoon, he said that he'd been helping Mavis decorate for the holidays. Guess we know what he's been up to!"

"Literally," she replied, awe-struck by the abundance of multi-colored lights. "They even have lights on the eaves and around the second and third story windows."

"Well, let's get this fiasco put to rest," John decreed, as he slid from the truck. Before he could get around to Catherine's door, Lloyd poked his head out the door and gave a friendly wave.

"Just the people we were talking about!" Lloyd proclaimed jovially, before turning back into the house to holler, "Mavis, hang up the phone. The kids just pulled in!"

"The kids?" Catherine mouthed to John when he helped her down from the truck.

Shrugging helplessly, John grinned. "Guess I ended up with two sets of in-laws after all. Just go with it."

"Uh-oh! Incoming!" Catherine urgently whispered as Mavis bolted down the front steps of the grand Victorian home.

"My sweet girl! We were just talking about you. I'm all aflutter with the good news. Now, don't you worry! Lloyd and I have everything all arranged; so, all you need to do is relax and enjoy your little miracle. We will have a baby shower in the rose garden after all!"

Catherine rubbed the bridge of her nose to dissipate the tension headache she felt coming on like a freight train. "Now, Mavis. We have talked about this!"

"But, dear," Mavis interrupted. "I heard it straight from the nurses who are caring for you. It's a miracle - just like we've been praying for!"

John held up his hand for silence. "Mavis, the nurses misunderstood a private conversation. Catherine is not expecting; and, she's already explained why all this gossip bothers her so much. With her health like it is, pregnancy isn't possible - so, no more baby rumors - okay? And,

cancel all the catering, flowers and whatever else you've been planning."

Lloyd patted John on the shoulder. "Of course. We'll take care of all that tomorrow just as soon as everyone opens up; but, Catie-girl, we're not going to give up praying for this thing to turn around. Mavis and I are quite convinced that one day there'll be little ones for us to spoil! Now, you kids come on in the house. Mavis made her first batch of Christmas cookies today; and, she needs some taste-testers."

"Oh, dear one, don't cry. Everything will come out right," Mavis blubbered, before pulling Catherine into a bear hug. "We'll have our girls weekend while these two run off to Los Angeles. Maybe we can even work in some Christmas shopping!"

Brushing the tears from her eyes, Catherine looked at Mavis in confusion. "Girls weekend?" she questioned.

"Ah, Baby. I forgot to tell you at supper," John stuttered. "Lloyd asked me to ride along on a quick antique scouting trip to L.A. I thought I could check on things at the apartment in Long Beach and take care of selling the motorcycle while I'm down there."

"You are leaving . . . again?"

"It's only for a couple of days - four, maybe five - max!" When his wife burst into tears, John could only watch in uncomfortable silence as Mavis patted her back and led her into the house. "Oh man, I wasn't expecting her to take it like that," he confessed sheepishly to Lloyd. "I'll call my buddy back and see if he can finish up the car on his own. Maybe I can even get him to bring it part of the way, so we'll only need to be gone one day."

"I wouldn't worry about Catie - she'll come around. Mavis will keep her so busy that she won't have a chance to miss you," Lloyd chuckled happily. "And, Mavis will be amazed when her Christmas gift shows up a few weeks early!"

After casting a worried glance at the house, John nodded. "I'll be happy to clear the debt for Catherine's educational expenses with her folks when the car and cycle are sold; but, I sure didn't think she'd be this agitated about the trip. Guess, I'd better see if she's calmed down yet. Maybe once I explain things better, she won't be so upset."

"Don't spill the beans in front of Mavis. That woman can pick up

on the scent of a secret better than any bloodhound!" Lloyd joked. "If I can pull this off, it will be the first time I've surprised her in more than twenty years of marriage."

* * * * *

"Sweetheart, don't cry," John pleaded on the way home. "It's just a short trip to finish up the paint job on that Thunderbird. Lloyd is going to buy it for Mavis and surprise her with an early Christmas gift. And, once the car and cycle are sold, we can get the money to your parents. That should make things easier for them, right?"

Catherine sniffled. "My mother will be happy to have the money before she has to move out of the house; but, why am I the last one to know about all this? Mavis has the entire weekend planned; and, no one even asked me if I wanted to stay at the Inn while you are gone."

"Lloyd and I are taking their Winnebago and the pull-behind trailer; so, Mavis can keep the station wagon to drive you back and forth to the hospital. She knows you need to be there for dialysis every morning at 7:00 a.m.; and, that you will want to go back for evening rounds as long as Maude is under your care. Other than that, you can relax and do your own thing. If you want to stay home, then stay home."

"Oh, please, John. You know how Mavis is - by the time you get back, she will have hatched another magnificent plan that has me stuck in smelly, itchy old clothes or trying to keep my lunch down."

John nearly choked on his laughter. The disgruntled look on his wife's face was priceless. "Just say, 'no,' Baby. Whatever she suggests, just say, 'no.'"

After shooting a crabby look at her husband, Catherine crossed her arms tightly across her chest and stared out the window. "Hmpf!" she finally muttered in disgust.



CHAPTER 3

Wednesday, December 1, 1976

"Ma'am," the doctor consoled, "we have done everything that we can for Rosalee. Unfortunately, the hearing loss is permanent."

"So, what do I do now?" Maggie questioned in despair. "Do I need to send her to an institution?"

"Take her home. Love her like you would any other child. When she is older, there is a special school she can attend for the deaf," the physician advised.

Dejectedly, Maggie asked, "When do we have to leave?"

"By the end of the week. Whatever day works best for you. Just let the nurses know what you decide; and, I'll get her discharge orders ready."

Looking around the room that had been her home for the last month, Maggie gave a ragged sigh. Gathering her courage, she found the payphone in the lobby and made a collect call to Jay's parents. "Mother Thompson?"

"Maggie! We've been trying to reach you! Has the nursing staff passed along our messages?" Irene Thompson questioned.

Slowly, Maggie responded, "Yes. Yes, they have; but, there has been so much to deal with here. I am sorry that I didn't call sooner."

Aggravated with her daughter-in-law's disregard for Cassie and Mandie, Irene demanded, "Have the police been there yet?"

"Yes. How did you know about that?"

"They have arrested James! Did they tell you that?" Mrs. Thompson

demanded. "Have they explained the new charges against Lester?"

Perplexed, Maggie could only stutter, "What?"

"After he heard what your father had done to Cassie and Mandie, James attacked Lester. The police have filed additional charges against your parents; and, if your father survives, he will be held at the county jail without bail until he's fit for trial." Irene Thompson paused before grating out, "If Lester dies, they will charge James with manslaughter; and, I will have lost both of my sons!"

Fearfully, Maggie whimpered, "I don't understand. What happened? Why would James go after my father?"

"You know how much James loves his nieces. They are the only part of his big brother he has left. Jay was his hero. We should have known he would find out about the accusations against Lester. It's hard to keep a secret in a small town."

"Irene, I still don't understand. I've tried calling my mother to find out what happened to father; but, there is no answer at the farm. The police officer who came to inform me about the attack couldn't provide much information. And, now the doctor's are kicking us out of the hospital. They say there's nothing else to be done for Rosie. The hearing loss is permanent. She will turn her head at loud noises on the right; but, there's no reaction to sound on the left. I don't know what to do," Maggie sobbed.

"So much heartache," Mrs. Thompson groaned. "We'll just have to get through it somehow, I guess." After a moment of silence, Irene cautiously advised, "It might be time to put aside hard feelings and give your friends in Sonoma a call. The lady doctor thought she could teach us to use sign language with Rosalee."

Puzzled, the tired young mother mumbled, "What doctor? I don't know any doctors."

"The young lady - the pediatrician. Ah, Brandt . . . Dr. Catherine Brandt was her name."

"Brandt?!?" Maggie screeched. "They're married?!?"

* * * * *

"I have the most extraordinary idea!" Mavis gushed as she rushed into Catherine's hospital room. Speaking more loudly than usual so that she could be heard over the "thump, thump" of the dialysis machine, Mavis explained, "We have mailed our brochures to the travel agents in San Francisco and Sacramento. Plus, Lloyd is hand delivering our brochures to the travel agents in Los Angeles while he is there. Everyone has received an invitation to our open house next week. Now, wouldn't it be a marvelous touch to have you act as our hostess? We found an exquisite velvet opera dress at an estate sale on our last trip. It is the deepest color of scarlet you can imagine - Grecian inspired with a crisscross bodice and styled Watteau train. With your coloring, it will be absolutely magnificent!"

Groggily, Catherine blinked at the exuberant woman and tried to shake the cobwebs from her brain. John's early morning departure after a late night of goodbyes left her feeling more sleep deprived than ever. "Ah, no. I don't think so," she mumbled through a jaw-splitting yawn.

"Oh, but you haven't heard the best part yet. The piano tuner is coming this afternoon so that everything will be perfect for your rehearsals. If you were to play during the cocktail hour each evening, it would provide a wonderfully festive atmosphere, don't you think? And, I certainly don't think John would complain about you earning a little Christmas spending money, do you?"

"I am sorry, Mavis; but, I don't think I can manage any more commitments right now. Between my dialysis appointments and taking care of Mrs. Baumgartner, I am utterly exhausted already."

"My poor, sweet girl. Of course, you will want to rest," the energetic woman observed. "And perhaps it will ease your mind to know that the church has agreed to apply the proceeds from this year's cakewalk and craft booth towards your medical bills. I know that will relieve John's mind."

Uncertain about her husband's reaction to such an idea, Catherine could only shake her head slowly from side to side. "I don't think John will be comfortable accepting charity."

Interrupting, Mavis exclaimed, "Nonsense! He'll come around."

Catherine waited until the nurse finished unhooking her from the

dialysis machine before refuting Mavis' argument. "I am not comfortable accepting money from the church. John and I have some savings; and, we both have the earning capability to take care of our financial responsibilities. So, please, just put the idea aside."

"Now, dear, there is no shame in accepting help when it is needed," Mavis advised.

With a deep sigh and another shake of the head, Catherine tried to decline politely; but, the stubborn expression on the older woman's face suggested the battle could not be won. "Certainly, there is another family who has a more desperate need. The funds should be used to help someone who has no other means of support." After the nurse left the room, Catherine crawled off the bed wearily. Tucking the trio of ports from the tunneled catheter back into her tank top, she pulled her sweatshirt on and zipped it up.

Unnerved by Catherine's silence, Mavis piped up, "It is already settled - the Ladies Auxiliary has decided! So, there is nothing else to be done; but, accept the gift graciously."

An instant flash of inspiration provided Catherine with a viable alternative to the situation. Smiling widely, she approached the big-hearted woman. "Would you be willing to consider a compromise?"

Mavis gave a doubtful shrug before commenting, "Maybe."

"You have met John's goddaughters, Mandie and Cassie. They have a baby sister in the hospital at Fairfield; and, the family is going through a very difficult time right now. Unfortunately, their mother has some hard feelings towards John and me. She will not allow us to help directly; but, perhaps she will permit a local ladies group to provide some much-needed assistance. As I understand it, the few things we were able to bring from Long Beach for the family have been carelessly destroyed; and, the girls desperately need clothing. I have been working on some outfits for them; but, hand sewing takes a good deal of time. Do you think the auxiliary could be persuaded to help Maggie and her family instead? It would be a great relief to John and I if we knew they were being cared for."

"This would mean more to you than having the money applied to your hospital bills?" Mavis questioned dubiously.

"Most definitely! Could it be arranged?"

"I'll speak to the pastor's wife this afternoon. But, first, let's get some lunch. There is a bistro a few doors down from the Emporium that has fabulous soups and freshly baked bread this time of year," Mavis chirped.

"You go ahead; I can walk over after I check on Mrs. Baumgartner. A brisk walk in the fresh air and sunshine is just what I need to wake up!"

"That will not do! John was adamant in his directions – you must rest! I will wait in the lobby until you are finished with your patient," Mavis declared as they parted ways.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Thompson?"

"Yes?" Maggie asked suspiciously. She did not know the two middle-aged women approaching her; and, she was in no mood for more bad news.

"I am Gloria Thomas; my husband is pastor of the Valley Community Church. And, this is Mavis Phillips. A member of our congregation thought you might appreciate a visit."

With a bright smile, Mavis thrust a book bag at the sad looking young mother. "We've put together a little care package with some magazines and treats for you. Plus, there's a little something in there for your baby girl."

"Oh!" Maggie cried. She tried unsuccessfully to blink back the tears. The exuberant woman with the book bag quickly approached and began patting her on the back. The simple, caring gesture was Maggie's undoing; and, she sobbed in abandon.

"There, there," Mavis crooned in consolation. "You just let it all out."

Maggie felt like an utter fool for crying on a stranger's shoulder; but, the portly woman didn't seem to mind. When the tempest was passed, Maggie dashed away her tears and mumbled, "Sorry, there's been a lot of really crappy stuff going on lately; and, I guess it all just caught up with me."

Stepping forward, Gloria handed the overwrought woman a handful of tissue. "We all need a friend now and then."

"Thank you," Maggie stuttered in appreciation.

"Well, then, onto the business at hand," Mavis decreed. "Our Ladies Auxillary will be hosting a fundraiser this weekend; and, we intend to see that you and your children have what you need for the holidays. So, let's start with clothing sizes."

Wide-eyed, Maggie glanced from one woman to the other. "Why would you do that? You don't even know me!"

"As I said earlier – a member of our congregation made us aware of your situation," Gloria replied softly. "And, we would like to help however we can. What does your family need?"

Swallowing hard, Maggie considered the women before her. "A place to stay . . . I need a place to stay. And, a job. I need to find someone who will hire me like this," she said, gesturing to the growing mound under her shirt.

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Catherine looked up from her sketchpad when Mavis and Gloria burst excitedly through the back door. "Well?"

"It went marvelously, dear one! Just marvelously. The doctors are releasing the baby by the end of the week. We found a furnished studio apartment near the hospital that Margaret can afford without looking for a part-time job. Isn't that wonderful?" Mavis cried. "Gloria and I are going back over tomorrow after we've had a chance to gather up some clothes for little Rosalee."

Gloria Thomas interrupted, "And, I will see if any women are willing to lend some of their maternity clothes for your friend."

"Don't forget the crib! We have a crib in the storeroom. So, that covers everything! Are you happy dear one? All will be well now; and, you can quit worrying so much!" Mavis proclaimed with a self-satisfied smile.

"What about Cassie and Mandie? Do you think we can find beds and clothing for them as well?" Catherine asked.

"Margaret assures us that the older children are well taken care of by their grandparents. So, put your mind to rest." Mavis gushed. "Now, tell me, did you get a chance to try out the piano after the technician finished his work?"

Catherine shook her head softly. "I have been reading the medical

books Dr. Lewis let me borrow from his library; and, I think I may have found the missing piece of my diagnostic puzzle. Now, I need to figure out how to approach Mrs. Baumgartner."

"Oh, dear one! You don't know how proud Lloyd and I are of you. To think my sweet girl is a doctor!! Who would think someone so young, could have accomplished so much already!" Mavis grabbed Catherine's hand and pulled her from the chair excitedly. "Now, let's go! I've been waiting all week to hear you play again!"

Resignedly, Catherine let herself be shuffled along to the front hallway where the gorgeous Steinway grand piano sat tucked into the bay window. "I had the technician help me turn it so the sound will not echo off the windows."

Gloria Thomas gave the frail young woman a look of amazement. "You helped move the piano?"

Chuckling, Catherine pointed to the casters. "I think they did most of the work – I just steered. So, what do you two want to hear? Gospel or classical?" When Mavis and Gloria just looked at each other and shrugged, Catherine sat down and began to play her scales exuberantly.

"Oh, do stop teasing," Mavis proclaimed. "Play something festive!"

"Hmm . . . how about something from 'The Nutcracker?'" Catherine asked before beginning to play the first familiar notes of the "Nutcracker March." "Wait! I know!" she declared before she started to trill light notes along the keys softly and sing tenderly:

"O, Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth."⁵

"Would you consider singing that for our concert at the church on December 19th?" Gloria softly asked when Catherine had finished playing.

Vehemently, the young woman shook her head "no."

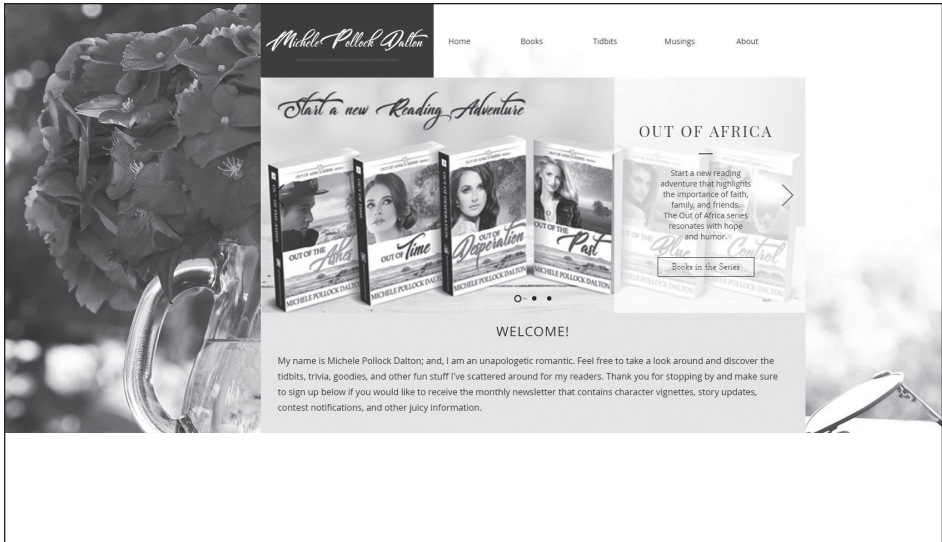
"You must, Catherine!" Mavis cried. "Such a remarkable talent is a gift that must be shared."

Turning a rather sickly shade of green at the thought of performing for an audience, Catherine mumbled, "I really can't!" Bolting from the piano

bench, she dashed down the hall and locked herself in the washroom. She tried to breathe deeply; but, the bile rising in her throat was not so easily appeased. "No . . . just say 'no,'" she reminded herself.

*** END OF SAMPLE ***

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