

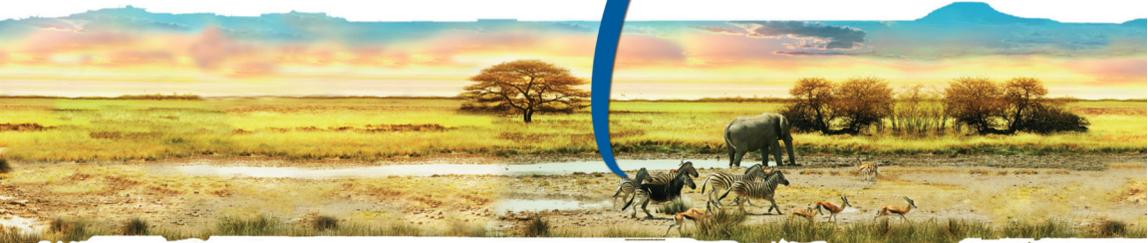


OUT OF AFRICA - BOOK 8



OUT OF

Options



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



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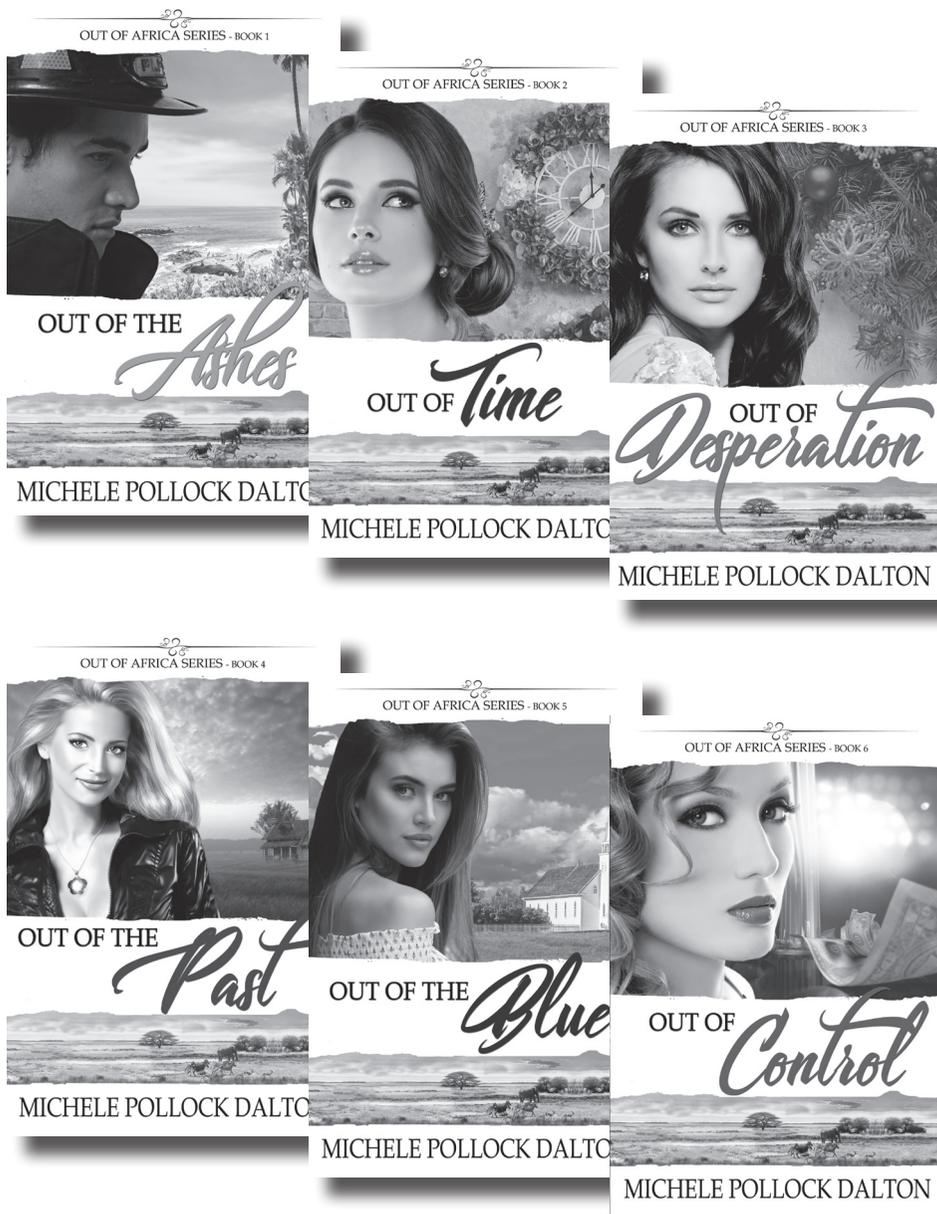
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Published in the United States of America
April 2019

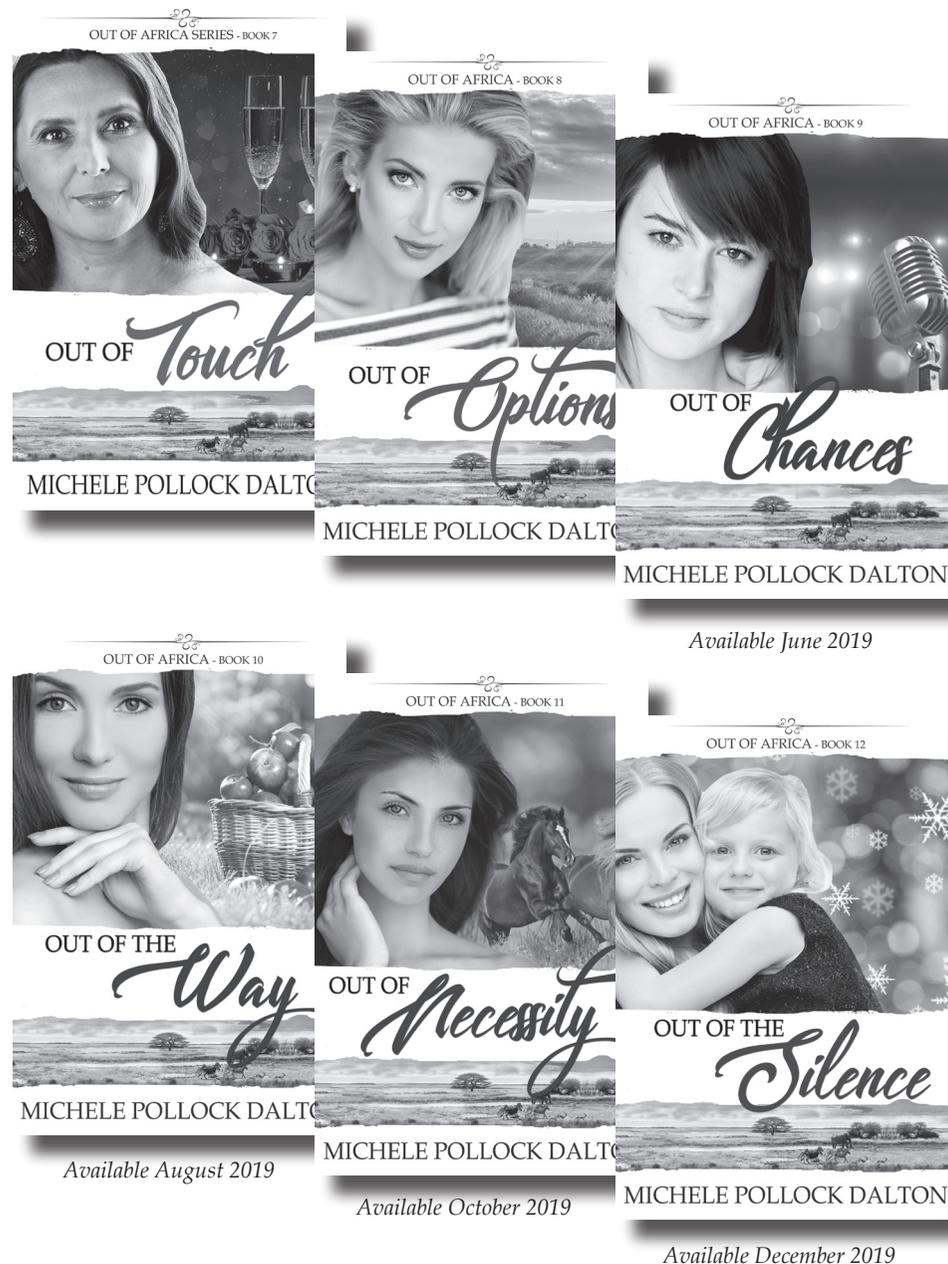
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Set in California during the late 1970s, the Out of Africa series covers the lives of John and Catherine Brandt along with a host of family and friends. Meeting the challenges of life with faith, hope, and love, this dynamic couple faces every day 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 eighth book in the *Out of Africa* series; and, it should be read in sequence as many of the characters and events are a continuation of previous storylines. Please be advised: there is warm sensuality and rare, mild profanity.

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. Like life itself, there are moments of great despair and others that evoke profound joy. Either way, the message is the same: God is not absent or deaf to your pleas. His heart and mercy do not change. So, if you are feeling alone or overwhelmed, then my desire is that you will find comfort in the Prince of Peace.

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. In Chapter 18, I'm testing out a new idea this time; and, I have included active links to my Pinterest page. By clicking on the links, you can see the source image for the item I am describing in the text (digital version only). Please let me know how you

like this feature! If you enjoy these interactive elements, I will include them more often in the future.

And finally, I want to share a special acknowledgment: My mother has been a wonderful encouragement to me through this process, often giving her time and energy to proofread or reminisce. So, thanks Mom, for answering all of my silly questions, even when you are feeling under the weather! Love ya bunches!

Keep the Son Shining!

Michele

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

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

Genesis “Gen” Lorraine Brandt: Married to Billy Brandt (Jr/III). Living in Vacaville, California with Maggie Thompson’s family.

Johann Wilhelm “Wild Bill” Brandt Jr.: Son of Johann & Lily Brandt. Often called “Billy” by his wife and mother. Previously estranged husband of Winona Brandt and absentee father to John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Sues. Also father to Billy, Willie, Billy “the kid,” Lily, Camille, Violet, Iris, and Jake.

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

Susannah “Suess” Brandt: Youngest daughter of Winona Brandt. Paternity unknown; but, considered Wild Bill Brandt’s daughter.

Winona “Noni” Brandt: Property Manager for the Baumgartner estate in Sonoma, California. 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. Married to Sandy Brandt Thompson. Father to triplets Jamie, Jon-Jon, and Jay.

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.

Sandra “Sandy” Brandt Thompson: Middle daughter of Wild Bill & Winona Brandt. Married to James Thompson. Mother to triplets Jamie, Jon-Jon, and Jay.

* * * * *

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

James “Jimmy” Jackson: Fireman 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 on Catalina Island – Avalon, California.

Shaughnessy Forsythe: Legal counsel for Maude Baumgartner. Formerly engaged to Winona Brandt. A resident of Sonoma, California.

Angela Marshall: Friend of Catherine Brandt and counselor hired for the Thompson girls. Mother to Katherine “Kitty” Monique Marshall.

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.



PROLOGUE

Wednesday, December 21, 1977

“There’s no reason to put it off. We have a whole week to enjoy ourselves while the family is gone,” Ben Graham reasoned.

Flabbergasted, Maggie stared at the big cop incredulously. “Put it off? We haven’t even talked about it!” she stammered. “Besides, there are still too many things we can’t agree on.”

Ben shrugged off the woman’s concerns and pointed to the luggage at his feet. “Vegas is waiting. What do you say, babe?”

“Whose bags are those?” she mumbled. “How long have you been planning this?”

Grinning like a mad man, Ben waggled his eyebrows. “Might have had Genesis pack some things for you before she left on Saturday. So, are we going to get married, or what?”

“You are crazy!”

“Crazy like a fox,” Ben snorted. “We have been doing those ‘exercises’ the doctor gave you to get things ready for me down there,” he whispered in Maggie’s ear. “Now, it’s time to reap the rewards. Never figured I’d have a ‘recycled virgin’ on my wedding night; but, this waiting is gonna kill me!”

“That’s not funny,” she grumbled. The trauma her body endured during an attack and a subsequent surgical repair left Maggie with a healthy fear of intimacy. Especially with a man like Ben. His ‘equipment’ had been primarily responsible for the second surgery.

"I have two weeks of vacation time, Maggie. And, I don't want to spend that whole time standing here arguing with you. Our plane is boarding. Are we going or not?"

Resolutely, Maggie Thompson nodded. "Don't make me regret this," she jested, only half teasing as they raced for the gate.

* * * * *

"You been mighty quiet," Ben whispered in Maggie's ear.

Turning away from the tiny window that looked over the great beyond, Maggie leveled her cerulean eyes on the man beside her and sighed.

"Having second thoughts?" he quietly asked, mindful of the eavesdropping passenger to his right.

"Twenty-second and twenty-third thoughts," Maggie reluctantly answered.

Leaning in, Ben captured Maggie's chin. "Change your mind?"

"Still here, aren't I?"

Chuckling, Ben's amber eyes looked past his nervous girlfriend to the white puffy clouds outside the window. "Not much choice is there?" he joked.

"It's a leap of faith either way," Maggie intoned, still wondering where she'd left her mind that morning. Ben's soft peck on her cheek was an electrifying reminder of her reason for considering his proposal. The man's intensity and blatant sensuality left Maggie's nerves tingling in riotous anticipation.

"Together, babe," he said as he linked hands with the petite blonde dynamo. "We'll take that leap together."

When they touched down twenty minutes later, Maggie grasped Ben's hand like a lifeline as they descended on to the tarmac in the bright sunshine. "Now what?" she softly questioned.

Ben shrugged broad shoulders and winked. "Hotel or wedding chapel?"

Gesturing to the jeans and off the shoulder sweater she was wearing, Maggie grunted, "Hotel! Before I melt."

Ben winked again and snagged Maggie's hand as he set a rapid pace toward the luggage carousel.

Jogging along to keep up with the brawny man's long stride, Maggie was out of breath by the time they squeezed into the hotel shuttle fifteen minutes later. "I'm short," she reminded the giant man when he slanted a questioning look her way. "And, you walk too fast."

A smirk crinkled Ben's face; and, he planted a mushy kiss on his tiny woman's lips. "Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation," he quipped when Maggie playfully shoved him away. Chuckles from the other passengers reminded Ben to reign in his passion; but, the chemistry between him and his little bride-to-be wasn't easy to contain.

"Genesis will be green with envy when she hears about this place," Maggie whispered as they cruised down the Vegas strip. Rubbernecking, she tried to take it all in so she could share the glorious details with her best friend. "Where are we staying?"

"The Flamingo," Ben answered as he pulled a brochure from his carry-on. Handing the colorful advertising to the excited woman, Ben gestured to the literature he received from the travel agent. "This is the wedding chapel the woman at the booking agency recommended."

Maggie snorted and shoved the brochure back at the persistent man. "I may be from the country; but, I'm not getting married at a place called 'The Hitching Post.'"

"Sorry for listening in," one of the older ladies apologized. "But, I'd recommend the Gretna Green Wedding Chapel. My husband and I were married there thirty years ago when it first opened. It's a lovely little place."

The shuttle driver piped up. "Not the Gretna Green anymore, folks. Got renamed for none other than the King of Rock n'Roll after he died. It's the Graceland Wedding Chapel now."

"What do you think, babe? Want to 'Love Me Tender?'" Ben whispered provocatively in Maggie's ear.

"I think I'm 'All Shook Up'" she retorted with a goofy grin.

"Don't Be Cruel," Ben pouted, sending the other passengers into gales of laughter.

"It's Now or Never,' folks," their driver proclaimed as the van pulled

up under the hotel's awning. "Last stop."

In good spirits, Ben took the other riders good-natured ribbing and well wishes as they all angled toward the check-in counter. Once they were safely behind closed doors in their hotel room, Ben lifted Maggie into his arms. "Well, babe. What's it going to be? A wedding or just some good loving?"

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Maggie anchored herself against Ben's chest. "I don't have anything to wear," she grumbled. "When I married Jay, it might not have been fancy. But at least I had a dress."

"Not sure what Genesis packed for you; but, it wouldn't hurt to look and see if there is something suitable," Ben suggested before kissing a path down her neck and across the creamy expanse of shoulder peeking out her sweater.

With a wiggle and shimmy, Maggie worked her way loose and slid down Ben's long frame until her tippy toes landed on the shag carpeting. "I can't check my suitcase unless you let me go," she reminded as two hands began to knead her backside.

"Give me a minute," Ben mumbled from under the curtain of Maggie's hair. "This is my first vacation; and, I want to enjoy every second of it."

A frisson of energy slid up Maggie's spine along with Ben's hands. "Easy there, big boy. If you want a recycled virgin on your wedding night, you best not get carried away now."

Huffing out a sigh of discontent, Ben set the dainty woman free and stretched out on the king size bed. "We need one of these beds, Mags!"

Sifting through the small suitcase, Maggie searched the contents for a suitable dress. "Ah, hah!" she exclaimed, holding up a very wrinkled strapless sundress with a wide eyelet ruffle at the top. "This must be one of Gen's dresses," Maggie giggled as she laid it against her chest. "I'm not sure I've got enough stuffing to hold this thing up."

With his hands behind his head, Ben shifted slightly and popped an eye open. "Babe, if you had any more stuffing on top you'd tip over."

Plopping down on the edge of the bed, Maggie slid a hand up Ben's thigh and teased the seam of his jeans where the two halves joined. "You want to get married, Benji?" she asked, her voice husky.

"One way or another," he rasped. "But you may be walking down the aisle a little funny if you don't ease off woman."

"You sure about this?"

"Definitely sure about you walking funny if you want a little lovin' first. But, I'll carry you down the aisle if I have to," he groaned, snagging Maggie's hand and launching her petite form up into his waiting embrace.

Clasped securely against his body, Maggie relished the feel of Ben's hands and lips. "Mercy," she called before they could get any more carried away.

"Errr. You don't play fair," Ben groaned when Maggie squirmed away.

* * * * *

The lightbulb flash blinded him; and, Maggie swayed slightly against him. "Well, babe, you are officially Margaret Graham. Ready to celebrate?"

Drawing Ben's face down, Maggie went to tiptoe and brushed her lips against his before settling back into the place next to his heart. With the extraordinary variation in their heights, even the four-inch heels Maggie was wearing made little difference. Ben still towered more than a foot over her; but, at that moment all their differences mattered little. "For better or worse."

"Mags, I may not be perfect. But I don't take commitments like this lightly."

As they walked back down the aisle, Maggie tightly grasped the small bouquet of lavender and baby's breath. Nervous energy made her hands tremble; and, Maggie's stomach was dancing the can-can. The short taxi ride back to their hotel passed in silence and Maggie clung to Ben's hand as they made their way inside.

"Relax, babe," he consoled as they boarded the elevator. "We'll make it a night to remember."

* * * * *

Thursday, December 22, 1977

"I don't want to do this," Maggie mumbled, sneaking a look into the private ballroom crawling with people.

"Stop being a coward, Maggie Graham. We need to do this if you want to be a family," Ben challenged.

"You promised me a honeymoon," she whined.

Chuckling, Ben pulled the antsy woman into his arms. With a not-so-subtle move, he pressed his hips into her backside. "I'll still be taking care of the honeymoon," he whispered with promise. Their first night together had been slightly awkward and nerve-wracking; but, he'd managed to finagle his way past Maggie's reservations. And, in the end, both were supremely satisfied, Ben mused with a smirk of pride.

Shoring up her nerve, Maggie squeaked, "Mind if we join you two?"

"Maggie!" Genesis enthused, surprised to find her friend lurking in the shadows.

"SSSSH!" the woman admonished. "I'm trying to blend in."

"I thought you weren't coming," Gen quietly commented.

Pointing behind her, Maggie grumbled, "I was hijacked."

Billy spotted the big detective through the doorway. Gesturing the dark giant forward, Billy swept a hand towards the empty chairs. "Glad to see you."

The rustle of chiffon and satin was the only warning Maggie received. When she turned, the scrawny woman who'd been a bane in her life was waiting to welcome her with a radiant smile.

"I am glad you are here, Maggie," Catherine warmly greeted.

With a curt nod, Maggie acknowledged the woman. "That's some dress." The black velvet bodice was fitted; and, the abundance of white chiffon below the waist gave the illusion of fullness to Catherine's tiny form.

"You're here!" Aaron shouted with glee, approaching his mother with a renewed sense of hope. "They are taking family photos after dinner! We can all be in one together," he proposed, unwilling to take 'no' for an answer.

Maggie would have bolted if Ben's firm hand hadn't landed on her

waist. "It is time," he quietly demanded. Without taking his eyes off of the woman beside him, he addressed Catherine. "Dr. Brandt, can you point us to the correct table? Maggie would like to say 'hello' to her girls."

"I believe I saw Mandie sitting with Anthony and Evan on the other side of the fountain. Cassie and Rosie are with their grandparents in the far right corner near the other exit," Catherine replied, laying an encouraging hand on Maggie's arm. "The Wilshire Ballroom is reserved for our group if you need a private place to spend some time together."

Nodding absently, Maggie searched the room for the location of her daughters. "They've gotten so big," she whispered, unable to keep the moisture from pooling in her eyes. Gripping Ben's hand, Maggie allowed herself to be guided to the table where Mandie was sitting with her older brothers.

Anthony spotted his mother coming and pointed. "Someone has come to see you, squirt."

When Mandie lifted her head and spotted the woman her heart had been craving, she instantly went silent. Her lip began to tremble; and, liquid grief slipped down her cheeks.

Dropping to her knees, Maggie gathered the emotional child into her arms and hugged her fiercely. "I missed you, Amanda."

"Mama," Mandie sobbed. "Mama, I missed you so much!"

Stroking the blonde head, Maggie slipped her hands down, so they framed her daughter's face. Reverently, she dropped a kiss on the little girl's forehead. "You remind me so much of your daddy," Maggie cried, her mascara leaving black tracks down her face.

"Catherine has some private space for us," her former mother-in-law prompted from behind them. "Bear has taken Cassie and Rosie over if you would like to join us."

Nodding, Maggie accepted the proffered tissue and tried to mop up the mess on her face. With Mandie clinging to her side like a burr, she escaped to the powder room before meeting the Thompson's in the Wilshire Ballroom. "She's walking, Ben," Maggie stammered as her eyes followed Rosie.

"Looks more like running to me," he observed, the hint of wry humor in his voice lightening the moment.

"She won't know me," Maggie sighed, the waterworks beginning again.

Tugging on her mother's hand, Mandie pulled the group forward. "I'll tell Rosie who you are, Mama," she said with determination, snagging her baby sister as she went past. With her hand extended, Mandie put her thumb to her chin and then pointed to Maggie. "Mama!" she vocalized to her sister.

Imitating the action, Rosie smiled and then scampered away.

"What was that?" Ben asked in confusion.

"It's how Rosie talks," Mandie answered, chagrined that a grown-up wouldn't know something so obvious.

"She's learning to sign?" Maggie asked in awe.

Wrinkling her brow in consternation, Mandie declared. "Well of course she is!" Shaking her head in disbelief at the extent of the adult's ignorance, Mandie dragged them towards the boys that were watching from a distance. After making the introductions, Mandie lifted an eyebrow at the funny smiles she was receiving.

"Kid, we already know who Maggie is," Anthony teased.

Little hands on tiny hips, Mandie glared at the older boy. "It's not nice to make fun of me, Tony," she decreed with defiance.

Anthony laughed in the face of Mandie's indignant expression. "She's our mom too, squirt. Didn't you know that?"

Confused, Mandie looked between the boys and her mother, completely flummoxed.

Andrew reached out to pat his little sister's head. "Mandie, brothers and sisters have at least one of the same parents. We are your brothers because your mom is our mom."

"But, you don't call her Mama," Mandie spluttered, hopelessly befuddled.

"I call her 'Mom,'" Aaron corrected. "Those two think they are too old," he commented, a hint of disgust coloring his voice.

"You are not too old to call her Mama!" Mandie shrilled, tiny blue eyes drilling into the familiar counterparts of her brothers. Crossing her arms over her chest, Mandie waited to have her decree obeyed.

Chuckles went up around the room; and, Anthony raised his arms in surrender. "Fine! I'll call her 'Mom.'"

"No argument here," Andrew replied in response to his sister's scowling face.

Satisfied with the wholesale capitulation, Mandie grabbed her mother's hand and marched away. Skating to a stop in front of her grandparents, she poked her sister in the arm. "Aren't you going to give Mama a hug?"

Cassie burrowed into her grandfather's chest when Maggie approached. "Do you remember me, Cassandra Sue?"

Shaking her head vehemently, Cassie snuggled into the safe expanse of her grandfather's arms. "I want Pop."

"Grandpop is very lucky to have such a sweet girl to give him hugs," Maggie observed, her eyes softening. Jay had been a mix of his parents; but, he'd inherited his father's eyes. Eyes that were looking at her with something akin to pity right now. "My pretty girl," she softly sighed, tenderly touching the child's bent head. "We'd better go back and eat our dinner before it gets cold," Maggie declared, stepping back.

"Anyone seen Evan?" Ben asked.

"He's waiting at the table," Andrew interjected. "He figured this was just for family."

"E'bam is my family," Cassie corrected. "He 'alongs to me!"

"That is exactly right, little miss," Maggie agreed. "Now, let's make sure he knows it."

* * * * *

Sitting across from her deceased husband's parents, Maggie tried to contain her nervousness. With Mandie clinging to her side, there was little opportunity to discuss the "elephant in the room." Instead, she watched James with his three baby boys. "What are their names again?"

Showing off the fellow in his lap, James helped the baby stand and pointed him in Maggie's direction. "This is your Auntie Mags, Jay," he said to the bouncing baby.

“Jay?” she squeaked.

“Yep,” James acknowledged. “Jay Bernard, named for the Thompson men.”

Annoyed at being ignored, Mandie tugged at her mother’s hand. “Mama, I go to school now,” she announced self-importantly. “I know all my colors; and, I can sing the ‘ABC’ song – even the L, M, N, O, P part!”

Brushing her daughter’s blonde hair back, Maggie laid another kiss on her forehead. “You are a smart girl, Amanda Lynn.”

Cassie eyed her mother warily. The pretty lady was familiar; but, the extra-large man next to her was not. Ben had picked her up when it was time to have their pictures taken; and, Cassie thought her mother’s friend smelled nice. Still, Cassie was more interested in wearing her special dress and seeing her Daddy. “Nana, when will Daddy come?”

Irene wrangled her granddaughter back into her chair. “Daddy John will be here tomorrow, Cassie.” Preempting the discussion about the flower girl dress, Irene held up a pair of fingers. “Two days. Then you can wear your new outfit.”

Cocking her head, Cassie considered the unbearable wait. “One, two,” she counted. “Then I can throw flowers, right?”

“Exactly,” Irene confirmed. “Now eat your dinner, or you will miss out on the fun Cat has planned.”

Obediently, Cassie and Mandie made quick work of their meals before scampering away to join the other children.

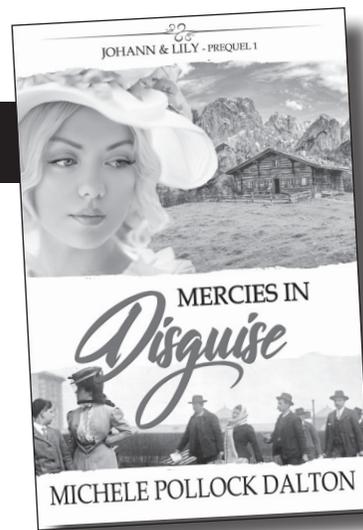
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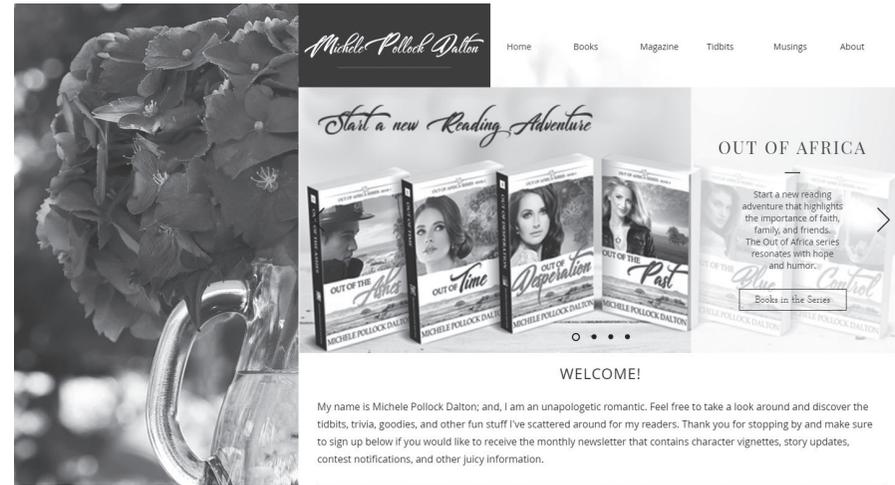
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