OUT OF AFRICA SERIES - BOOK 2



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



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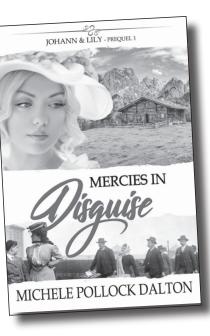
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I look forward to sharing Johann & Lily's story with you!

But of Africa



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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

This is not your typical Christian romance novel. As I began writing this story, I could not gloss over the hard, ugly truth about what happens in our world. So, 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 are going through a struggle and need a sense of hope, perhaps you will find some encouragement here. The power of God at work in the world is so much more potent than the darkest moments of our human existence.

Some scenes depict the complexities of marital love and the development of 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.

I sincerely hope you enjoy the continuing tale of John and Catherine's love affair and their dependence on God during a difficult season. These characters are precious to me for many reasons, but most of all, because they allow me to share the goodness of God's love – even when the future looks bleak, and hope is in short supply.

Finally, I want to offer a special acknowledgment and thanks for the insight my mother provided relating to the era of the 1970s and her proofreading efforts. Thanks, mom =)

Keep the Son Shining!



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Catherine Kavanagh-DuBois: A pediatrician, currently on a medical leave. Engaged to John Brandt. Residing in Long Beach, California.

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

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Amanda Lynn "Mandie" Thompson: Four-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with her grandparents, Lester and Dorthea Bakker in Vacaville, California.

Cassandra Sue "Cassie" Thompson: Two-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with her grandparents, Lester and Dorthea Bakker in Vacaville, California.

Margaret "Maggie" Thompson: Widow of Jay Thompson; mother of Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Currently hospitalized in Los Angeles, California.

Rosalee Ann "Rosie" Thompson: Infant daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with her grandparents, Lester and Dorthea Bakker in Vacaville, California.



Tuesday, October 19, 1976

John Brandt smiled as he pulled the old sleeping bag from the back of the truck. It smelled strongly of gym socks and needed a proper washing; but, it was a sweet talisman of his first date with the lady who had captured his heart. Whistling an out-of-tune melody while he worked, John rolled the bag up and stacked it next to his tackle box and fishing poles.

A horn sounded as John was loading up his right arm with stuff from the back of the Rover. His friend and partner, Dave Baldwin, waved him over from the passenger side window.

"Hey man, how you feelin'?" John called.

"Like someone took a sledgehammer to my head," Dave answered, climbing from the Jeep. "Want some help?"

"Yeah, man. Trying to clean out the back of the truck with one arm is like fishing without a pole," John said with a lopsided grin, happy to still be breathing after a cave-in that had nearly cost him his life.

"You remember Barbie?" Dave asked, gesturing to the woman emerging from the driver's side.

Rolling his eyes, John answered, "Course I do. I'm not the one who had a building fall on his head." The woman waved to him when he nodded in greeting.

"So, what are we doing with all this?" Dave questioned, pointing to the stuff piled around the tailgate of the Rover when they were finished cleaning the vehicle out.

"Taking it up to the spare room, I guess," John answered, picking up the sleeping bag and the fishing poles. Dave and Barbie each grabbed a handful of the miscellaneous sporting equipment and followed him to the apartment.

"You look like crap," Dave observed, indicating the three-day beard growth and red-rimmed eyes. "How long did Doc Washington say you'd be out?"

Lowering himself into the brown plaid recliner, John waved Barbie and Dave in the direction of the couch. "He'll take a look at the shoulder when I go back to get the stitches out of my forearm. Guess the soonest would be October 28th. What about you?"

"Going back on Friday. Heard they got the guys from the other two shifts pulling extra half shifts until we get back."

"Any word on Gus?" John asked. "I haven't been up to see him since I left the hospital on Sunday."

"They took the trach tube out, and they'll probably move him out of the ICU tonight or tomorrow." Barbie flagged her hand up in the air and began to wave it around. When John sent a questioning look her way she asked, "Do you have a little girls room?"

"Ah, yeah. Right around the corner."

"Groovy," she tittered, sashaying her way past.

While the woman was out of the room, John leaned over as far as he could and pointed over his shoulder at the bathroom door. "I thought you were going to try and work things out with Cherie. What's she still doin' hanging around?" he muttered in a whisper.

"Cherie wouldn't even bring the boys to see me while I was in the hospital," Dave growled. "I needed a ride home."

"Sorry to hear that man," Johnny replied sincerely.

"Yeah, well don't worry about it."

"Hey, Pooh Bear, are ya ready to split?" Barbie asked in her high, squeaky voice.

Dave's ears turned red, and he ambled to his feet. "Need anything before we go, Johnny?" he asked.

"Nah, Pooh Bear, I'm good," John answered, with a gleeful twinkle in his eyes and a wide smirk on his face.

* * * * *

Catherine sat up on the side of the bed when she heard John rustling around in the kitchen. As cupboard doors started

thumping open, she decided it was time to investigate. With a hand pressed against her sore rib cage, she eased herself into a standing position. What was that man doing in her kitchen?

Peeking around the kitchen doorway, Catherine was surprised to see corrugated boxes lining the countertop. Sneaking up behind him, she slid an arm around his waist and kissed his sore shoulder. "What are you doing with my dishes?" she asked.

"Sorry, Sweetheart. I didn't mean to wake you," he answered, taking his fiancée's hand in his and pulling her around to face him. Planting a soft kiss on each of the bruises that ran along her cheekbone and temple, he asked, "Did you have a good nap?"

"I sleep better when you are next to me," she replied with a shy smile.

John pushed the dark tangle of hair away from her neck and placed a kiss there. "You never have to sleep alone again," he promised in a husky voice.

Catherine ran her hand up his back and touched his neck. "Agnes is spying on us," she said with a giggle.

Turning, John caught the old woman peeking through the kitchen window at them. "Argh!" he mumbled under his breath.

With a wave, Catherine gestured for the elderly lady to come inside. Pulling away from John, she met the neighbor woman in the living room.

"Well, let me see!" Agnes demanded excitedly.

Perplexed, Catherine questioned, "See?"

"Yes! Yes," she declared impatiently. "The ring. Let me see the ring!"

Shooting a concerned glance at John, Catherine held out her hand where the beautiful sterling silver engagement ring had recently taken up occupancy. "So much for keeping our engagement a secret."

Agnes gave Catherine a glowing smile and then squeezed her hand. "Don't worry, 'mum' is the word; but, I just had to see for myself." As an afterthought, she addressed John, "Young man, people are waiting for you outside."

"Thanks, Agnes," John replied, on his way past the elderly woman. He came to a screeching halt as the frail little lady pulled him into a bear hug as he walked past.

"Congratulations, young man! You will make a fine husband," Agnes crowed with glee. "A fine husband!"

John and Catherine watched Agnes practically dance her way out of the apartment. "Don't worry," John joked when he caught Catherine's glance. "I swore her to secrecy."

"Not to doubt her promise; but, don't you think the little jig she's doing down the hallway might make people a little bit curious?" Catherine questioned wryly.

"It will be fine. You'll see," he answered with an encouraging smile. Wrapping his right arm around Catherine's waist, he led

her to the door. When she held back, John gave her a questioning look.

Running a hand through her hair and gesturing to the peach satin lounge set that she was wearing, she stuttered, "I can't go out there looking like this."

John poked his head out the screen door and called to the waiting couple, "Be right there." Turning back to Catherine, he kissed her forehead and said, "Baby, you're gorgeous. And the outfit is classy. Now, let's see if we can sell the bedroom set!"

"At least let me brush my hair first," she mumbled in protest, as she shooed him out the door.

"You folks see the flyer about the bedroom set at the grocery store?" John asked as he approached the young couple.

"Sure did," the lanky, towering red-head said, with a friendly southern drawl. "This here's my wife, Daisy, and I'm Harley. Pleasure to meet you."

After introducing himself, John invited the couple into his apartment. "Excuse the mess," he muttered with a hint of embarrassment. "The set is through here," he continued, leading the way to the master bedroom.

"Nice place," Daisy commented, broadly gesturing to the layout of the apartment. "Know if there are any openings here?"

John grinned and gestured to his banged-up left shoulder. "The apartment next door will be available as soon as I can get some help moving the bedroom set I bought."

"Think we could take a look at the place?" Harley asked excitedly. Hooking a thumb towards John's bedroom furniture, he continued, "We been lookin' for weeks; and, we'll need a place to be puttin' our new bed."

"Come on," John replied happily. "I'll introduce you to the lady next door."

When the trio appeared at Catherine's door, she was sitting in the rocking chair trying to work a brush through the riot of sable-colored curls.

"Can we come in?" John asked, with a twinkle in his whiskeycolored eyes.

"Sure," Catherine answered hesitantly. Struggling to her feet, she held out a hand to the young couple who were looking curiously around.

John made the introductions, then added, "They're looking for an apartment. I told them this one would be available as soon I can get the furniture moved out."

Catherine's eyes went wide. "Oh," she stuttered. "Feel free to look around."

When the couple wandered off to poke around the apartment, Catherine pulled John aside and whispered, "Shouldn't we let the apartment manager handle this?"

"They'll have to check with Rollie; but, I don't think he'll mind since you are vacating on such short notice," he whispered in her ear. Then he planted a sneaky kiss on her neck while no one was looking.

"Behave," Catherine admonished with a smile when she saw the prospective renters returning

The couple re-appeared from the bedroom, grinning from ear to ear. "We'll take it y'all!" Daisy twanged happily.

"Great!" John answered, shaking Harley's hand. "I'll take you down to meet the building superintendent."

Daisy hung back when the men left and gestured to Catherine's hair. "Ya gonna' need some help with that?"

"Oh! That would be nice," Catherine answered with delight.

"My regular hairdresser is out of commission right now."



"What a roller coaster this day has been," John thought, as Catherine helped him into a clean T-shirt and sweatpants. The debilitating anger he had woken up with this morning was gone; but, a dull knife was slicing his gut into shreds over Catherine's condition. On the flip side of his grief was the wild exuberance he felt when he considered making this woman his wife. The throbbing pain in his damaged shoulder reminded him that he had tried doing too much; but, he was thankful that God was working things out for them, too. "What did Daisy call this hairstyle?" he asked, tugging on one of Catherine's braids.

Carefully moving John's damaged shoulder back into the sling, she replied absently, "A French braid."

"Hm, I like French things," he murmured softly.

"Like French fries?" Catherine asked with a smile.

"And French kissing," he answered huskily, sliding his good arm around her waist and splaying his hand over her backside. "Want to make out?"

Her face flamed; but, she nodded her head and traced the line of his lips with her finger.

John stood and carefully backed her up against the door to

his closet. Dipping his head to her neck, he began to place tiny little kisses in the sensitive area behind her ear. Her sweet sigh encouraged him to tease a line of kisses along her jaw until he arrived at her mouth. He stopped to brush a kiss across her lips; then, he continued trailing a line of kisses around her jaw until he found the sweet spot behind her other ear.

After the repugnance and horror of a childhood attack, Catherine was always amazed at how sweet loving could be in John's arms. Tracing a line gently up his spine, she tickled the back of his neck and let her fingers trail through the soft waves of his black hair. When John's hand cupped her fanny and pulled her hips into tight contact with his, she could feel the evidence of his growing excitement. Opening her eyes, she worked to tame the subtle bite of panic that was sneaking up on her.

Feeling Catherine tense when he pulled her too close, John loosened his hold on her derriere and began tracing small circles up her spine until he reached her shoulder blades. Dropping his lips from her ear to the hollow of her neck, John started to lathe little rings along her collarbone until he ran into the fabric of her pajama top. Kissing his way back up her neck, John finally captured her lips in the long-awaited kiss. "His little monkey," he thought with amusement. She always tasted like bananas.

After a few breathless moments, John came up for air and began nuzzling her neck again. Gently, he moved his hand to

her injured side. He could feel the stiff fabric binding her ribs through the satin of the pajamas. Tenderly splaying his hand over her rib cage, he began tracing a line up and down with his thumb. "So tiny," he murmured against her neck before moving his lips back to hers. Sliding his hand cautiously up her rib cage until he was able to cup her breast made John feel like an intrepid explorer.

Catherine murmured against his lips when she felt his hand come to rest on her bosom; but, all rational thought fled when Johns' thumb began to trace a lazy path over the most sensitive part of her chest. When he began to nuzzle behind her ear again, she whispered softly, "Ani l'dodi v'dodi li."

"My beloved," he answered huskily, kissing a line down her neck to her collarbone. Moving the neckline of her top aside, he continued his leisurely exploration of her collarbone, until he came to the scar on her shoulder. With the gentlest of kisses and a light touch around the perimeter of the wound, John vowed that no one would ever hurt her again. Snaking a path back to her mouth, John traced his thumb over her lips before tasting them again. With finesse, he slid his hand under the edge of her pajama top. Cradling her breast through nothing but the fabric of the tank top left him eager for further exploration. Dropping his mouth to her chest, he began to trail kisses along the neckline of the skewed top.

"Oh!" Catherine jumped when he began to nuzzle her breast

through her tank top. With a gentle hand, she pulled his face toward hers. "You are making me . . . squirmy," she declared in a rush of air.

"You've been making me 'squirmy' since you wiggled your way into my sleeping bag," he answered with a lopsided grin.

Catherine smiled bashfully through a yawn. "You were a perfect gentleman," she reminisced softly.

"Did I ever tell you that the cop who stopped to help that morning wanted to run me in?"

With a perplexed frown, Catherine asked, "What on earth for? I don't think running out of gas is against the law."

"For corrupting a minor," John lamented mischievously, as he nuzzled behind her ear. "I had a hard time convincing him that you were over eighteen."

"So that is why he was giving us the evil eye," she said in a huff. Swatting at the naughty hand that was trying to sneak back under her shirt, Catherine admonished lightly, "Behave."

"I promise not to bite," John answered with a lopsided grin. Noticing the shadow of pain that passed across her face, he asked, "You okay, Sweetheart?"

With a forced cheerfulness, she replied. "Just feeling the days' adventures."

"Come on," he said, pulling her backward with him to the bed. "We both over did it today. We'll get some sleep and start fresh in the morning." John turned the bedside lamp off and settled on his right side so she could snuggle up beside him. When they had both found a comfortable way to settle that would accommodate their injuries, John kissed the top of her head. "Night, Baby."

"Good night, Love," she answered softly.

"You sound sad."

"I missed spending time with Maggie's girls today," she answered quietly. "They will leave tomorrow; and, I am back to being useless again."

"You're not useless, Sweetheart – you're hurt," he consoled. "And, we'll see the girls again. Sonoma is only about an hour from Vacaville. We can go visit."

"John, you are hurt too; and, you still managed to get a lot done today," she replied. "Please promise you will let the other guys do all the heavy lifting tomorrow."

"Don't worry. I'm an old man now. Those two young guys can have all the fun," John answered with a chuckle. "I'll supervise."

Catherine giggled as the phone began to ring.

It took a few rings before John was able to get himself untangled, and in a position to reach the phone on the bedside table. He listened for a minute and replied, "Be down in a minute."

"Guess you get your wish, Baby," he said, turning on the lamp. "That was Esther; and, she could use your help getting

the girls settled for the night."

Shocked, Catherine scooted to the edge of the bed as quickly as she could. "It is after 10:00 p.m.! They should have been in bed a long time ago."

"Well, let's see if we can get the munchkin patrol to sleep" he answered, taking her hand.

When the couple arrived downstairs, the noise level was just short of deafening. The baby was crying; the toddler was jumping on the sofa - singing at the top of her voice; and, the preschooler was hopping around the infamous coffee table.

"What is going on down here?" Catherine questioned in her sternest voice.

"Cat!" Cassie yelled, spring boarding from the couch to the coffee table.

Mandie made a wide-berth around John and approached Catherine. "Where have you been?" she demanded indignantly.

With a warning in his voice, John scolded the little girl. "Amanda, that's no way to talk to Catherine."

Sporting a mutinous look, Mandie flounced away and plopped on the sofa.

Taking the squalling baby from Esther, Catherine suggested, "You get some sleep. I can stay with the girls tonight." Turning to the children, she said, "Let's see what we can find for a bedtime snack."

John handed out graham crackers and poured glasses of

milk, while Catherine prepared some rice cereal and a bottle for the baby. Sitting at the table a few minutes later, with the girls happily munching on their treat, John caught Catherine's contented smile. "This," he observed gesturing to the little girls, "is what you were made for, huh?"

Nodding, Catherine watched the baby wiggle excitedly as she approached her mouth with another spoonful of cereal.

When Cassie and Mandie finished their late-night snack, Catherine handed John the baby with her bottle. Then she helped the older girls wash their faces, brush their teeth and put on their nightgowns.

After a final trip to the bathroom for the girls and a diaper change for Rosie, they all gathered on the bottom bunk with the storybook. Catherine cuddled the baby into her uninjured side and draped a blanket over the two of them so that Rosie could suckle. John tucked Mandie and Cassie in together before beginning the bedtime story. Halfway through the book, Mandie and Cassie were sound asleep.

Assisting Catherine to her feet, John led her to the sofa and helped her get resettled, before sitting down beside her. Pulling the blanket away from her shoulder earned him a withering look; but, he wanted to watch her with the baby. Rosie's tiny hand laid against Catherine's' breast and the drowsy infant would suckle for a moment, then stop before beginning again. It was truly a beautiful sight – one he was likely to miss out on

entirely if the doctors were right about his fiancées' prognosis. Taking her hand in his, he pleaded softly, "Please God, give us a baby to call our own."

The moisture in his eyes shot a hole through her heart. "He will miss so much," she thought in despair. "I am selfish," she murmured in an undertone.

"Hmm?" he questioned, tenderly caressing Rosie's cheek.

"I am exchanging your happiness for my own," she answered miserably. "It is not right. You should not have to miss out on a family because of me!"

"There is no family without you, Sweetheart," he said, placing a kiss on the back of her hand. "We said we were going to pray; and, that's what we will do."

Catherine clung to his hand in desperation. If only it could be! "I am not sure God hands out miracles like that anymore," she choked out.

"Of course, He does; or, I wouldn't be sitting here!" John answered fervently. "He sent a whole battalion of angels to protect me. They made a path through the fire. If He can do that, then He can do anything!"

Shocked, she whispered, "Angels?"

"Yeah," John confessed, with a flustered smile. "Guess I never told you about that, did I?" Wrapping his right arm around her shoulder, he continued. "The Big Guy was there too. Wanted to know if I'd give him my life."



Awe-struck, Catherine turned to face him. "You saw the Savior? In the fire?"

John nodded. "I thought He was there to rescue us at first. Dave and Gus were already down; and, I figured I was living out my last few seconds."

"Three of you in the fire?" she interrupted with amazement on her face. "And, Christ was the fourth man in the fire?"

"Yeah," John answered, not understanding the look on her face or the tone of her voice.

"I woke up Saturday night a little after eleven; and, I could not go back to sleep – I had to pray." She paused to catch her breath. "I had to pray for you!"

"You sent them?" he said with a look of wonder on his face. "You sent the angels!"

"I prayed that God would protect you . . . that He would give His angels charge over you," she gasped through her tears. Then she demanded, "What time were you rescued?"

"Not sure. But, we got to the hospital around 4:00 a.m.," John answered, perplexed by the question.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all

circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,"³ she murmured softly.

Utterly confused, he could only manage, "What?"

"Those are the verses that started me praying for you Saturday night," she revealed.

"Thank you," he said earnestly in her ear. "Thank you for praying for me."

After sitting quietly for a few minutes, Catherine tipped her head back against his arm and closed her eyes. "Rejoice always . . . give thanks in all circumstances," she uttered. "I have not been doing that. I have been feeling sorry for myself."

John nuzzled her ear and kissed her temple. "You've been through a lot, Sweetheart."

"Still, look what God has done for us in just two weeks," she replied. "I have not been rejoicing over the friends He has brought into my life. I certainly wasn't giving 'thanks' this morning when you walked out that door." Popping her eyes open, she looked up at him with overwhelming love. "But, here we are! You are safe and newly committed to a walk with God. I have someone to share my life with now. Extraordinary answers to prayer! Amazing gifts!"

"Does that mean you'll help me pray for another miracle?" John questioned, quietly hopeful.

"It means I am going to be grateful for every day we have together, whether it is twenty or twenty thousand," she answered tenderly. "And, yes, I will pray that God will grant all the desires of your heart and make your plans succeed."⁴

"What about the desires of your heart?" he whispered.

Stretching up to meet his lips, she kissed him with a fierce passion. "I have the desire of my heart," she professed softly against his lips.

* * * * *

A resounding knock woke them a little while later. John untangled himself and ambled to the door. Catherine quickly adjusted the neckline of her clothing where the baby had been suckling and nodded for him to answer when everything was back in place.

A mature woman with a booming voice was waiting outside. "We're here for the children."

"Ah, Mrs. Bakker?" Catherine asked quietly from the couch.
"Yes," she answered loudly. "Do you have the children ready?"

John gestured the stern woman inside and replied, "We weren't expecting you until late tomorrow."

"We have a farm to run. There's no time for leisurely vacations," Mrs. Bakker commented brusquely. "Get the children. My husband is waiting in the car."

Stunned, Catherine answered, "Ma'am, it will take a little

while. We still need to pack their clothes and toys."

"No time for that. We need to be back in time to milk cows in the morning. Just bring the children out to the car."

John and Catherine cast worried glances at each other; but, they moved into the girls' bedroom and began to wrap the children in warm blankets. When Cassie and Maggie were bundled up, Catherine handed John the baby. She packed the diaper bag as quickly as she could and made some bottles for Rosie. Within ten minutes the girls were loaded and gone.

Standing on the front sidewalk, John and Catherine watched the tail lights disappear. "They will be so scared when they wake up," Catherine moaned despondently.

"I know, Baby. But Maggie will be there in three or four days," John replied tenderly. "Let's go home."

When they reached the top of the stairs, Catherine stopped. "Can we sleep in our bed?" she asked carefully, gesturing to her apartment.

"It's a lot more comfortable on sore muscles, isn't it?" John teased.

She nodded but wouldn't meet his eyes.

After getting settled under the satin duvet, John whispered in her ear, "What's wrong?"

Catherine was tempted to prevaricate but finally decided to address her true feelings. "This is our bed," she declared, emphasizing the word "our."

John didn't understand; but, he kissed the back of her head. "Yup. Just you and me, kid." As he was falling asleep, the light finally went on. His bed had gotten quite the workout before he met Catherine; and, she wasn't comfortable sleeping where other women had been before she arrived.

* * * * *

Wednesday, October 20, 1976

The morning was hectic; but, with help from the new neighbors, the bedroom furniture switched apartments. Then, the remaining items from Catherine's house were packed into John's truck. While they were eating lunch, a frantic call from Maggie changed their departure plans.

A tow behind trailer appeared behind the Rover; and, all of the neighbors spent the afternoon sorting and packing the items from Maggie's apartment. Harley and Daisy were happy to help in exchange for furniture and housewares. Agnes, Oma, and Esther pulled together all of the children's clothing and toys, along with the family memorabilia. With Opa directing traffic, the men loaded the bedroom furniture, rocking chair, television, and stereo from Maggie's apartment.

Catherine kept everyone hydrated with endless rounds of ice water and fresh coffee. For supper, she set up an impromptu

picnic in the courtyard.

John rolled the kinks out of his neck and massaged his sore shoulder as he sat on the edge of the planter. "We got it done," he said with a tired grin as Catherine handed him a plate.

She dropped a kiss on his head, then took plates into Oma and Opa. Agnes, Esther, and Oskar filled their plates with barbecue sandwiches, baked beans, fresh fruit salad and oatmeal raisin cookies.

Agnes pulled up a chair next to John. Under her breath, she asked, "Where is her ring?"

Patting his pocket, John whispered back, "It kept falling off. I'll have to find a chain to put them on so she can wear them around her neck."

With a disappointed sigh, Agnes quietly replied, "I guess it can't be helped. At least she'll get some use out of the negligees."

Gulping a mouth full of food, John mumbled "Negligees?"

With a wink, Agnes said sotto voce, "Married life has its perks you know!"

* * * * *

Thursday, October 21, 1976

When the alarm went off at 4:00 a.m., John wondered precisely why he thought beginning the trip north at such an ungodly

hour was a good idea. He reached for Catherine; but, her side of the bed was already cold. With a frown, he rolled out of bed and went looking for her. "Hey, Baby. What are you doing out here?" he asked when he found her sitting in the recliner.

Catherine peeked an eye open and pointed to her left side. The heating pad he had used on his shoulder the night before peeked out from behind her.

Kneeling beside the chair, he asked, "Do you want one of my pain pills?"

She shook her head and mumbled, "They will make me sick." "Baby, let's wait until you feel better," he suggested.

With another shake of her head, Catherine switched off the heating pad and struggled to get the foot rest down on the recliner.

Concerned, John leaned over to help her and questioned, "Are you sure?"

"The girls need their things; and, we have already lost a day of travel," she answered with a grumpy frown.

* * * * *

"Sorry for being crabby with you this morning," she apologized once they were underway.

She had been more than crabby; but as a sensible man, John knew better than to comment. So, he took the hand laying on her

lap and planted a kiss on her palm. "S'alright," he answered. By the time they turned north on the I-5, she was already sleeping.

"Good nap?" John questioned when she woke several hours later.

"Mm-hm," she mumbled groggily. "Where are we?"

"We'll be stopping outside Hanford for gas," he answered. "Hungry?"

"A little," she said with a grimace. "How is your shoulder holding up?"

"Could be a lot worse," he answered with a grin. "It's healing; and, it works – thanks to the Big Guy."

That made her smile. "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good." 5

"Oh, that reminds me - the Captain would like you to do a full-size drawing of the fireman kneeling in the shadow of the cross. He wants to hang it at the station."

"Was he in a hurry for it; or, can I work on it once we get settled somewhere?"

"No rush," he replied as they pulled into the service station. "Do you want anything while we are here?"

"Could you help me down?" she groaned.

Concerned, he made a quick decision. "No more traveling today," he stated as he helped Catherine from the truck. "I'll ask the station attendant if there is a hotel nearby."

Catherine nodded her head in agreement and then made her

way slowly towards the restroom.

With directions from the gas jockey, John located a small motel a short distance away and got Catherine settled in before going in search of a late breakfast. When he returned, John found her snuggled under the covers with the heating pad. "Banana delivery," he lightly called when he sat down on the bed next to her.

"Thanks, Love. Did you get something to eat?"

John nodded and laid his hand on her left side. "Heating pad helping at all?"

"A little." Gesturing to his shoulder, she questioned, "Where is your sling?"

"Took it off while I was driving," he answered, rolling his shoulder. "It is stiff and sore; but, doing better than I'd hoped. Course till the Big Guy touched it, I figured I'd never use it again." At Catherine's questioning look, he continued. "When we fell through the floor, I was holding the hose. I felt the muscles give way when my momentum was suspended; but, the bruising came from a falling piece of floor joist above us. A piece of debris caught me across the shoulder and dropped me flat. When the joist fell, it was a direct, crushing impact on my chest. I heard the bones crack; and, I suppose it's a wonder that I survived the blow. Then, when the Big Guy showed up, he put his hand on my shoulder and 'poof!' I could breathe again; and, the pain was gone."

Awe-struck once again, Catherine could only gape at him. Eventually, she pointed to his shoulder, "So, what happened after that?"

"Gus and Dave need to lose some weight," John quipped with his trademark grin. "I had to carry them out - guess it made the muscle pull act up again."

Catherine sat up and gathered him into a hug. "You truly are a walking, talking miracle. I have always believed that prayer can change things; but, you are a living example of what God does in the lives of people."

"So, if you believe He can do these things for me, why do you find it so hard to believe He will do them for you?"

She was quiet for a long time. Laying back, she burrowed under the covers and re-adjusted the heating pad. When John laid down on his side next to her, she finally met his eye and lifelessly said, "I don't deserve it."

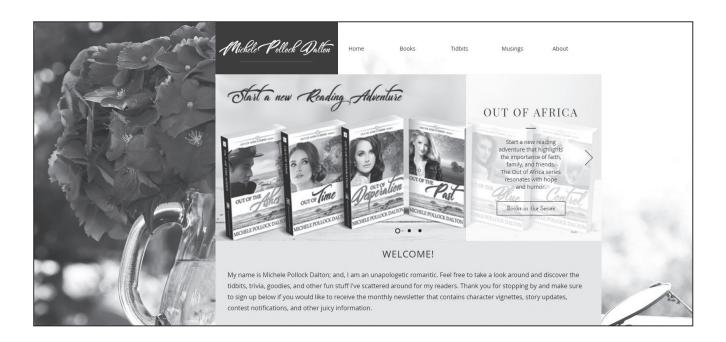
Incredulous, John stared at her for a full minute before he could even begin to formulate a response. "Sweetheart, you are the kindest, most gentle, generous person I've ever met. Why would you think that?"

"There is just too much hate in me," she answered in a monotone. "I cannot forgive the people who hurt my kids . . . who hurt me. God will not bless me while I choose to hold on to my anger."

Aghast, John could not believe that this woman, who drew him into the presence of the Savior, was on the "outs" with the God she spoke of so personally.

* * * END OF SAMPLE * * *

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