

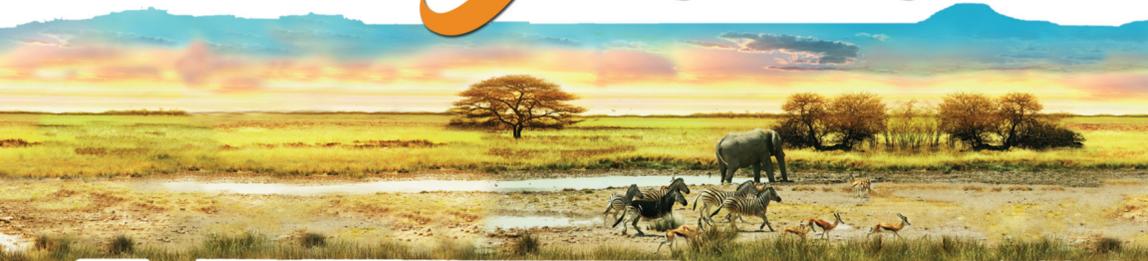


OUT OF AFRICA SERIES - BOOK 1



OUT OF THE

Ashes



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON

Out of Africa - Book 1



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON

*To the men and women who pulled us from the wreckage . . .
We may not know your names;
but, we will always remember what you did for us.*

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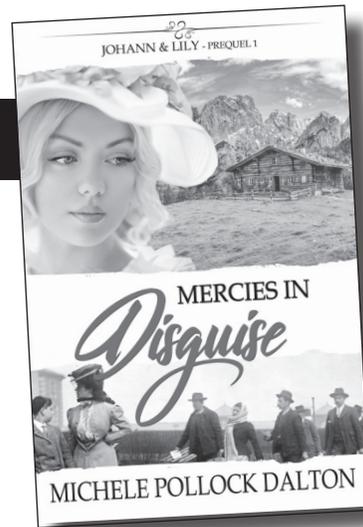
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Out of Africa



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I feel compelled to write you a warning. 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 that are graphic – as true to life as I can make them. If this jars you, then I apologize. But, the power of God at work in the world is so much more potent than the darkest moments of our human existence; and, the only way I can portray the truth of that vast power is to contrast it against brutal reality.

There are also scenes of romantic love. These moments are not included to be overly titillating. They exist to demonstrate the growth of trust, intimacy, and love as it was meant to be under God's fabulous design.

Let me also mention, that this is a work of fiction, and some liberty has been taken when portraying specific time frames in history, such as the famine in Ethiopia. Also, instead of bogging the story down, I have included a Source Index at the end of the book that explains references to Christian living and thought. In addition, you will find copyright information for specific elements. You will also find links to performances of the songs referenced in the book so that you can familiarize yourself with some well-loved music.

I hope you enjoy John's story of redemption and Catherine's tale of healing. 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 for all mankind – even through the darkest of valleys.

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



CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, October 5, 1976

“Hi.”

Startled, Catherine looked up to find her handsome next door neighbor. “Hello,” she said, with a shy smile.

“Are you locked out?” he questioned.

“No. Just enjoying the sunshine.”

Handing her a glass of ice water, John commented, “I thought you might need this.”

“Thank you,” she replied, accepting the glass.

Motioning to the step next to her, he inquired, “Do you mind if I sit down?”

She shook her head from side to side and took a quick drink of the cold water. John wondered how to break the ice as he sat down beside her on the top step. Then he noticed her drawing pad.

“Mind if I look?” he asked. Catherine shook her head and handed the sketchbook to him. He took a few seconds to leaf through the pages of drawings while she took a big drink of the water.

“These are really good!” he exclaimed, as he paused his page-turning at a drawing of the little girls who lived in an apartment on the lower level.

Catherine ducked her head in embarrassment and whispered, “Thank you.”

“I am John, by the way.”

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"It is nice to meet you, John. I am Catherine."

As he turned page after page of her artwork, John often stopped to examine a particularly good portrait or a bold landscape. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the young girl turn the water glass in her hands nervously.

Dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt, John imagined that she must be sweltering under the California sun. She had been sitting out on the steps for at least an hour; but, she didn't seem uncomfortable.

Catherine noticed John slyly glancing her way on occasion. Embarrassed by his subtle curiosity, she turned her head away to look at a little bird squawking from the top of a nearby tree.

John knew he had been caught sizing her up when she turned away nervously; but, something about the girl was nagging at him. She was tiny and pale. The young lady seemed shy; but, she had smiled when he said, "hello." When he noticed her in the courtyard earlier, she was visiting with the other residents of the apartment complex.

Handing the sketchbook back, he asked, "Did your family just move in?"

"No," Catherine replied, returning the empty water glass. "My family lives in Wisconsin."

"Wisconsin? That's a long way from here!"

She looked at him and smiled. "Yes, it is."

"Are you staying with family or friends?"

"No," she replied with a little shake of her head and a twinkle in her eye. Catherine paused a moment, then said more solemnly, "I live alone."

The unease in John's gut returned. It was like he feared - the kid was likely a run-away. But how to handle it?

"You seem a little young to be on your own," he observed with forced levity.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Catherine answered softly.

They sat quietly for a few moments, each contemplating their next move.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"A little," she replied. "Would you like a piece of fruit?" she

questioned, pulling her shabby rucksack out from its hiding spot next to her leg.

John shook his head. "She is alone in the world, with very little to her name. Still, she is willing to share whatever she has with me," he reflected. It was a sobering thought - quickly followed by the memory of her sharing her meager supply of fresh produce with the elderly residents and children earlier in the day.

"There's a hamburger place around the corner," John proclaimed. "My treat!" The young lady looked up at him and gave him a shy, Mona Lisa smile.

"No. Thank you," Catherine said. Then, she bent and tucked her bag back along the side of her leg.

"Now what?" he thought. He couldn't leave the kid sitting out here on the steps; but, he was out of ideas. He hated the thought of calling Child Protective Services on her; still, he had noticed bruises on the back of her hand when she tried to share a banana with him. What was going on with this sweet kid?!

Catherine noticed the worry playing out on the man's face when she looked up from replacing her rucksack. "Poor guy," she mused. Out of habit, she reached out and patted his arm in a comforting gesture.

"It is not what you think," she quietly commented when she noticed him looking at her hands.

Startled, John looked into her eyes - the biggest, bluest eyes he had ever seen - and noticed the compassion in her gaze.

"I am not a victim of abuse," she said softly. "And, I am not a child," Catherine stated gently, but firmly.

John looked at the damaged hand, laying softly on his arm - it was so small and fragile. On closer examination, deep puncture marks were visible inside of the ugly bruising that covered the back of her hand. He knew what those marks meant: intravenous needles, at multiple sites. The gold and green color of some of the bruises suggested older vein sticks. But, the vivid purple and blue bruising told of a recent need for fluids or medication. With a deep sigh, he gently placed his hand on top of hers.

Uncomfortable with his scrutiny, Catherine gently tugged her hand

free from his touch. Keeping her head down, she began packing away her drawing supplies. "It is always the same," she reflected. The pitying glances would come next. Followed by a flurry of questions or a stifling silence.

A nervous tremor sent her pencil box topsy-turvy, causing pencils of every hue to go cascading down the long, cement staircase. Some of the brightly colored writing utensils fell between the stair risers and made a sudden disappearance into the planter below.

"I'll get them," John said, as he descended the stairs in quick pursuit. When he reached the bottom of the staircase, he made a count of the pencils he found along the way. Then he called back up, "How many are there?"

"I am only missing nine," she called back, holding up the handful she had saved from the long descent. After tucking the surviving pencils into their case, Catherine stretched and moved to join the search for the missing members of her art kit in the greenery below.

"How many are we looking for?" she asked.

"Three," John replied with a lingering glance in her direction. Her height was the first thing he noticed. She was much taller than he expected – easily coming to his shoulder. The dark hair she so carelessly brushed out of her eyes was not nearly as black as his; but, the long braid that hung down her back suggested an abundance of hair that reached past her waist. As she left the protective shade of the canopy guarding the second-floor apartments, glinting auburn highlights danced under the bright sunlight. She was long-limbed, agile, and moved with aristocratic grace.

Burrowing into the foliage, John tried to avoid overtly staring at her as they searched for the missing pencils. He still saw the traces of childhood innocence that had formed his first impression; but, Catherine's manner and personality suggested a maturity that compelled him to believe her assertion that she was no longer a child.

Latching onto a vivid red, and then a pale-yellow pencil, John was surprised to hear a sweet giggle behind him. Turning, he spotted the two neighbor girls peering out of their screen door at him.

"Momma says not'a pick th'a posies," the littlest one declared in her

sternest voice. "I 'na 'na tell!"

"Shhh, Cassie. It's not nice to be a tattle-tale!" the older one whispered, looking behind her to see if her mother had caught onto the conversation.

With a mischievous glint in her eyes, Catherine smiled, winked at John, and stepped closer to the girls. In an urgent, but hushed tone, she said mysteriously, "I am looking for some missing friends!"

"Oh!" the girls exclaimed with glee. "Can we help?"

"You need to ask your mommy if you can come out to help." And, away they went - pigtails flying – in search of their mother.

"Quick!" Catherine said, turning to put her pencil back in its hiding place.

John jammed his pencils back into the heavy-headed petunias just as the girls reappeared in the doorway, towing their mother behind them.

"Maggie, may the girls help me search for my missing friends?" Catherine inquired of the tired young mother. The woman nodded her weary head and set the girls free in the quiet courtyard.

"I think it will take at least a half-hour to find them," Catherine said with an understanding glance at the woman in the doorway. "It might even take longer if that is okay with you."

"The baby will be awake in about an hour. Do you think they will have finished 'helping' by then?"

"Oh, yes," Catherine exclaimed with a conspiratorial wink. "An hour should do just fine!"

Maggie reached around the door, gave Catherine an awkward hug and softly whispered, "Thank you."

John watched as the girls danced a merry circle around Catherine. "Sssh. We must be very gentle with the flowers. And, very quiet. I don't want to scare my friends away," she said. Then crouching down in front of the girls, Catherine explained that she was looking for three skinny friends named Indigo, Buttercup, and Scarlet. "They have fallen into this flower bed; and, they must be very scared to be so far away from their family," she commented.

Gingerly, the girls began to search the flower bed for the long-lost friends. John bent his head to conceal his smile from the sweet duo looking so diligently for the missing pencils. Pretending to enter the

search, he joined Catherine, who was muttering convincingly, "Indigo, where could you have gone? Come out! Your family misses you."

Under his breath, John chuckled, leaned close to her ear and joked, "I think I can hear Maggie snoring already." A pair of sparkling sapphire eyes met his.

Staying in character, Catherine stage-whispered earnestly, "They must be here somewhere, John! They couldn't have gone far."

"Ew," yelled Mandie. "I found a worm! Is this your friend?" she asked disgustedly, as Cassie excitedly joined her to share in the discovery.

"No," Catherine answered, looking over Mandie's shoulder at a caterpillar. "This friend has too many legs and a fuzzy coat."

John snickered. Then he reached into the flowers and evacuated the "worm" to safety in another part of the flower bed. Turning back, he chuckled again at the blonde twosome; heads bent back to the search.

It wasn't long before the cry of "A bug! A bug! A big, big bug!" was heard from the opposite side of the large brick planter. Rounding the corner, John spotted the toddler's backside sticking up out of the flowers. With her nose bent to the ground, she looked like an Irish setter on point. There, not two inches from her nose, was a monstrous, capsized June bug, legs waving frantically in the air.

"That is a very ugly bug!" exclaimed Mandie, in her superior, four-year-old tone. This pronouncement brought a rolling laugh from John and an un-ladylike snort from Catherine.

"Let's help the poor fellow along," Catherine said, righting the clumsy creature and setting him on his way. "You girls keep looking. I will be right back."

When Catherine returned, she was carrying her rucksack and drawing pad. Opening her pencil box, she showed the girls what they were looking for, and sent them back to the search. Within a few minutes, the three missing pencils reappeared and joined their "family" back in the safety of the old cigar box.

"Those are just pencils, you know," declared Mandie, plopping disgustedly on the small avenue of lawn between the sidewalk and the planter. "How can they be your friends?"

Crossing her legs and dropping to the ground next to the little girl,

Catherine pulled her sketchbook over. John and Cassie joined them under the shade of the towering palm tree.

Opening her drawing pad to a clean page, Catherine selected a pencil and began to draw the hairy caterpillar the girls had found. "These pencils help me capture the beautiful things that I see in the world around me."

When the caterpillar's outline had appeared on the page, Catherine asked the girls if they remembered what color the caterpillar had been. Clattering through the box, Mandie soon came up with black and orange pencils. Quickly, Catherine filled in the banded color of the caterpillar. After showing the girls the completed drawing, she began to sketch again. Hoping to get a closer look, Cassie climbed into John's lap and draped herself over his arm, so she could see more closely what was appearing on the blank page. In short order, the nodding head of a white petunia appeared. Then, the beautifully drawn shape of a dainty monarch butterfly, wings spread, landed atop the sleepy flower.

Mandie pointed at the drawing and said, "But, we didn't see a butterfly."

"Yes, we did," Catherine commented quietly, noting Cassie's heavy eyes.

"No flutter-byes," Cassie announced definitively, before letting her head nod back off towards John's shoulder.

"When you see an ugly little caterpillar crawling along in the dirt, you do not realize that one day the tiny caterpillar will go to sleep. And, when it wakes up, it has turned into a beautiful butterfly that dances around in the sunshine."

"It does?" Mandy questioned in a slightly awed voice.

"It does," Catherine answered. "God creates something new out of that woolly little worm. He creates something beautiful."

A thoughtful moment passed before Mandie said, "I like butterflies."

"I like them too," Catherine replied. "What else did we find today?"

"A big, big bug," said Cassie sleepily from John's arms.

"What color was it?" Catherine asked.

After a short silence, John softly answered, "Green." Catherine thought he had dozed off with Cassie; but, he peeked an eye open and nodded at the groggy toddler with an indulgent smile on his face. Then

he winked and put his head back down.

Catherine selected a couple of green-toned pencils from the box and then stopped to ponder the man next to her for a moment.

When she had returned his dropped wallet to him in the courtyard this morning, he had seemed almost dazed by the lack of sleep. Several of the neighbors had mentioned he worked twenty-four-hour shifts, so Catherine could only imagine how tired he must feel. Still, here he was on a hot afternoon, spending his precious time off listening to silly stories and cradling a precocious toddler while she slept.

Noticing Mandie's impatience with the lack of activity, Catherine invited the little girl into her lap and placed the drawing pad in her hands. "Can you draw the big green bug from the garden?"

While Mandie worked with fervor on her bug, Catherine stole surreptitious glances at John's relaxed form. His blue-black hair brushed his collar in the back with soft waves. In the front, some had fallen across his eyes while he rested - giving him a boyish look. Insanely long lashes curved over his high cheekbones. His arms were lean but muscled. Long legs stretched in front of him, crossed at the ankle. John's relaxed manner with the rambunctious girls puzzled her. Catherine had never met a man who dealt with children so readily, or so easily.

John could tell when Mandie's wiggling and giggling took Catherine's attention off of him. He heard the young woman exclaim in delight over Mandie's drawing; and, he took a quick peek at the great green blob with little black squiggles sticking up all over everywhere. It was a magnificent rendering of a June bug as far as he was concerned.

"Now, draw the new bug," Mandie demanded.

"What new bug, sweetie?"

"The new bug that the ugly bug turns into," Mandie explained, with the most exasperated voice a four-year-old can manage.

"Honey, the June bug does not turn into a new bug. It will always stay the way you found it."

"Well, that is not fair! Why can't it be a butterfly, too?" Mandie replied with a great deal of outrage.

"Not everyone can change, Mandie. Caterpillars are born to be butterflies. June bugs are born to be June bugs."

While Mandie mulled over the great mystery of June bugs and butterflies, Catherine glanced over at John again. The gossip among the senior women in the complex had painted a poor picture of his moral character. "Scoundrel," "womanizer," and "playboy" were all descriptions attached to his name in their conversations.

Catherine had lived in the apartment adjacent to his for two weeks; and, she could attest to the revolving nature of his bedroom door. It was hard to forget the regular, tell-tale squeaking of bed springs that came through her thin bedroom wall. Still, in her brief dealings with the man, Catherine thought he had shown a great deal of compassion and kindness. Perhaps there was something more to the man - maybe there was a bit of butterfly in the "worm" after all.



CHAPTER 2

"She's leaking," John urgently whispered.

"What?" Catherine questioned, shaking the awkward musings from her brain.

"My lap is wet!"

"Uh, oh," Mandie muttered under her breath.

Catherine bolted up, then tucked her pencils and notebook into her rucksack. She reached for the little girl; but, John levered himself to his feet balancing the sleeping child in his arms. Cassie gave a snort of protest, then snuggled into John's chest more deeply.

Mandie led the little procession to her front door and then peeked inside. "Momma! Wake up! Cassie peed," she shouted. When her shrill greeting didn't wake her mother, Mandie resorted to shaking the locked screen door.

Catherine quickly reached over and pulled the girl away from the door. "We can take her up to my apartment for now."

When Catherine unlocked the door and gestured the little group inside, John was appalled to find the apartment empty. Except for the drapes, left by the last tenant, the room was devoid of all touches of home. Following Catherine through the living room, he was once again shocked to find a completely empty bedroom. When Catherine opened the closet door, he saw a single pile of neatly stacked clothes on the closet shelf, next to a couple of books and sketch pads. Other than that, the apartment looked entirely vacant.

Catherine pulled a sweatshirt, identical to the one she was wearing,

from the small pile of clothes in the closet. She turned and laid it on the floor near the window while motioning for John to put the sleeping child there. Returning to the closet, she pulled a simple white tank top from the quickly diminishing pile of clothing. Catherine stepped into the bathroom for a moment and returned with a threadbare, white washcloth. Then she motioned John and Mandie from the room.

Quickly, she removed the little girl's wet clothing and washed her off. After fashioning the tank top into a passable diaper for the girl, Catherine wrapped Cassie snugly in the sweatshirt and left her to finish her nap in peace. On the way out of the room, she closed the door most of the way. A quick stop in the bathroom gave her a moment to wash her hands and drop the soiled clothing and washcloth in the sink.

"Thank you," she said quietly to John when she entered the living room.

Confused, John replied, "For what?"

"For helping with our adventure," she began. "And, for not yelling at Cassie," she finished softly. Catherine nodded to the dark stain covering the front of his blue jeans. "I am sorry for the trouble. I should have brought her up to use the bathroom before she fell asleep."

"These things happen with kids," he said, with a squeamish smile and a little chuckle. "I will put a note on Maggie's door, so she knows we are up here. Then I'll clean up and be right back."

After her neighbor left, Catherine settled Mandie back down to continue her artwork with the sketchpad and colored pencils. Taking the tin cup and plate from her mess kit, she peeled the last orange for Mandie and put the water and snack in front of the little girl.

Returning to the bathroom, Catherine ran some water over the soiled laundry and rinsed the items out. After adding laundry detergent to some clean water, she gave the little dress and underpants a good scrubbing. When she was finished, she hung them over the towel bar to dry. Before she had moved on to washing out the washcloth and a few of her personal items, John had returned with wet hair, a fresh "Irish Spring" scent, and clean clothes. Catherine finished the wash as she listened to Mandie's pixie voice explain her newest artistic creation to John.

Catherine peeked in on Cassie before joining Mandie and John in the

kitchen. "It has been about an hour and a half. Do you think I should go down and check on Maggie?" she questioned, as she slid down to sit on the floor next to Mandie.

"Let her sleep," John suggested. "She's had a rough time of it lately."

Catherine settled in and listened to Mandie's chatter for a few minutes. Abruptly, she stood up and bolted for the door. "The baby! We forgot about the baby!"

John stood at the kitchen window and watched Catherine's mad dash down the long flight of steps and across the courtyard to Maggie's door. She paused for a moment at the door and listened. Then she started banging on the door, calling Maggie's name.

After a few minutes, the tired mother finally staggered to the door and let Catherine inside. John settled back down next to Mandie and waited for Catherine to return; but, after fifteen minutes of waiting, he started to get concerned. When Cassie came stumbling out of the bedroom wearing nothing but the diaper Catherine had devised, he decided it was time to check on the situation downstairs.

John directed Mandie to pick up the pencils before he went in search of the black sweatshirt Catherine had wrapped Cassie in for her nap. Pulling the toddler into his arms, he tucked the sweatshirt around her tightly. Leading the girls home was a short trip, but an adventure nonetheless — every sight and sound along the short pathway needed to be examined and explained in great detail.

John watched with a good deal of feigned interest as a line of ants marched across the pavement. He exclaimed in forced delight over the mama bird sitting on the edge of her nest, and he clapped profusely over the little pirouette Mandie executed at the bottom of the steps. Not to be outdone, Cassie had to sing, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" all the way across the courtyard - at the top of her baby voice - right in John's ear. By the time he knocked on Maggie's door, he was exhausted. "How do women do this all day?" he thought to himself.

He knocked quietly in case the baby was still sleeping; but, Mandie burst through the door with the force of a shotgun blast, calling at the top of her voice, "Mama! Cassie peed her pants!"

"I did not peed," Cassie yelled, squirming to be free.

John set the tiny dynamo on the floor; and, she took off after her big sister into the bedroom - dragging the obvious evidence of her unfortunate bladder lapse behind her.

Catherine emerged from the bedroom a few seconds later with the fussy baby on her shoulder. John reached out and let the cherubic infant grab his pointer finger in her chubby fist. Baby Rosie immediately angled the unsuspecting finger into her sweet little rosebud mouth and gave it a mighty chomp. Trying desperately to free his finger from the jaws of death on the other end was an exercise in futility; and, John finally gave up - fully expecting that he would have nothing left but a nub by the time Rosie finished.

With a chuckle, Catherine watched the mortal struggle over John's finger. After a minute of frantic combat between the grown man and the hungry "piranha" baby, she reached over and squeezed the baby's cheeks gently - releasing John's poor mangled finger from the steel-toothed grasp of the teething infant.

Continuing into the kitchen, Catherine asked lightly, "Did she break the skin?"

John examined his finger for permanent damage; but, with a lack of evidence to indicate a long-term injury from the premeditated, vicious attack, he merely said, "No."

Pulling the warm bottle from the pan, and testing the temperature against her wrist, Catherine settled the wiggly baby into the cradle of her arm and started to feed the ravenous child.

Unsure of what to do with himself, John quietly sat in the kitchen chair across from Catherine and contemplated his injured finger.

Within a few minutes, the baby was propped back up on Catherine's shoulder for burping. John was wondering if he should excuse himself when Maggie came through the kitchen door with Catherine's tank top and sweatshirt.

"I'm afraid Cassie had another accident," Maggie apologized.

"It is fine," Catherine replied, handing the contented baby to her mother.

Scooping up the soiled clothing, Catherine said a quick goodbye and made for the door.

“Thank you!” Maggie called as the young woman disappeared. Then she sat heavily in the kitchen chair and looked groggily at her daughter.

John watched Catherine through the kitchen window as she returned to her empty apartment. When he caught Maggie staring at him, he flushed at her obvious scrutiny.

Maggie studied him closely. “Leave her alone, Johnny.”

John grunted and stood to leave.

“She isn’t one of your ‘good time’ girls.”

“I figured that out myself,” he complained moodily and turned to the window again. The afternoon was almost gone; and, all he could think about was the single apple and small banana left in the rucksack on Catherine’s kitchen counter.

John had given into his curiosity while he was waiting for his new neighbor to return from Maggie’s. An examination of the kitchen had yielded nothing, aside from the mess-kit Mandie was using and a trial size bottle of dish soap. The second bedroom held absolutely nothing; and, the bathroom contained little more than a small sampling of essential toiletries – the laundry she had washed earlier hung on the towel bar. Cassie’s little bitty underpants hung next to several more pairs of white panties. Remarkably, there didn’t seem to be much difference between the size of the woman’s undergarments and the toddlers.

Maggie broke through John’s wayward thoughts: “I have some of Jay’s things for you to look through.”

“You want me to take them now?” he asked.

“Yes,” Maggie replied. “It is hard to see them sitting there every time I open the closet door,” she replied sadly.

John gathered a pile of clothes and a few small pieces of sporting equipment from the closet in the master bedroom. He stopped in the doorway to the girls’ bedroom and watched for a moment as they played some silly dancing game, whirling in circles to an old ditty.

Waving a short goodbye to Maggie, he suddenly realized what day it was. John struggled with the memories of a good friend – gone too soon.

John had spotted Maggie and Jay for the first time the day they moved into the apartment complex. Maggie had been as big as a house – days away from delivering Mandie. Jay had been struggling to get their

mattress and box spring down from the top of his car. John stopped to help that day, and a comfortable friendship sprung up between the young couple and the perennial bachelor.

Years of impromptu games of basketball or baseball had revealed Jay’s athletic streak. He had been the star quarterback of his school team. After high school, he and Maggie had followed family tradition and married the weekend after graduation. Two months later, Jay had been drafted for a tour in Vietnam.

Coincidentally, Jay attended the police academy in San Jose about the same time John had been in training as a firefighter near Jay’s hometown outside of Sacramento. After a short stint on foot patrol, Jay received his assignment to the highway patrol near Long Beach.

Then, exactly a year ago, John and his partner, Dave Baldwin, had responded to a 10-24 call – officer down. A freak hit-and-run during a routine traffic stop left Maggie with two girls to raise alone and a baby on the way.

Putting his gloomy musings aside, John dropped Jay’s remaining personal effects in the bedroom chair. Plopping down on the bed, he stared hard at himself in the mirror that hung above the dresser. He was a lonely man, and it showed. Jay was gone, but his legacy was secured by the three little girls downstairs. John had no one – nothing to show for his time here. His life was as empty as the apartment next door.



CHAPTER 3

Catherine sank into the pool of fading sunlight that fanned out across her kitchen. Tiredly, she looked at the papers and pencil shavings scattered across the floor. A colored pencil had escaped Mandie's clean-up efforts and was hiding near the base of her kitchen sink. With her back pressed against the wall, and her head resting on the door of the refrigerator, Catherine listened to the soft hum of the compressor. Within seconds her eyes closed; and, her breathing settled into a smooth, relaxed cadence.

A hollow "tap, tap, tap" roused Catherine from her nap. A moment later, a loud banging brought her to her feet.

John's frantic voice came through the screen door. "Hey! Are you okay?"

"I was until you started breaking the door down," Catherine muttered mutinously, as she hurried through the living room to unlock the screen door.

Flinging the door wide, John bound in and took her by the shoulders. He felt her forehead, he took her pulse, he checked her respirations, he searched her eyes for signs of distress or concussion; and, when John was finally satisfied, he set her free.

"You scared five years off of my life!" he sputtered accusingly. "What were you doing?" he asked, exaggerating each word.

"I was sleeping," she replied archly.

John shook his head and grimaced. "You are a strange woman."

"That seems to be the consensus," she joked, with a self-deprecating grin.

"Why were you sleeping on the kitchen floor?" he wondered out loud.

"That is where the sunshine was lingering," she said, wandering back into the kitchen. Bending, she retrieved the pencil from under the sink and returned it to the box on the counter.

John stepped into the kitchen and apologized, "Sorry for the mess. We were cleaning up when Cassie came trailing through."

Stooping, John began to pick up Mandie's drawings. Catherine gathered the pencil shavings into her hand and put them in the paper garbage bag under the sink. She quickly washed the tin cup and metal plate from the mess kit and left them to dry on the kitchen counter.

"Mandie added some fresh color to a few of your sketches," he commented, handing Catherine the drawings. "What is this one?" he asked, pointing to a sketch of her empty living room. A yellow stick person and several red circles had been added to the drawing by the budding, young artist.

Catherine chuckled, "That is my day-dream page." Reaching into the back of the sketch pad she pulled out a used envelope. Inside were several scaled-to-size drawings of living room furniture - different couches, several types of chairs, a desk and a variety of lamps and artwork. Each item was cut-out, like a paper dolls' clothes so that they could be laid out in the flat little room.

Pulling several of the pieces from the envelope, she arranged them around the drawing and showed John the "snapshot" of her favorite living room arrangement. Shaking his head, he pulled the envelope over and started shuffling through the remaining pieces. With his back to Catherine, he blocked her curious glances as he thoughtfully re-arranged the living room - switching out objects and trying different seating arrangements.

"No peeking!" he kidded when he caught her trying to steal a glance over his shoulder.

Laughing, she boosted herself up onto the kitchen counter and waited.

Finally, John stepped back and with a flourish of his hand, presented his carefully crafted living room design.

"Hmm . . ." she murmured. "I don't like the upholstery on that sofa."

"Then why do you have it?"

"It was the first one I noticed in the catalog," she responded, searching through the cut-outs for the one she preferred. Replacing the garish brown and orange patterned monstrosity with a creamy yellow, scooped seat couch, brought a hearty protest from John.

"There's no way you can stretch out for a nap on that thing," he blustered, pointing with disdain at the offending piece of furniture. Sifting through the pieces, he came up with a boxier styled sofa. "What about this one?"

The conversation went on with good-natured ribbing over obnoxious fabric choices and a heated debate over whether the sofa should face the living room window, or take up residence on a side-wall.

"This is it," John finally announced. "A man would be happy coming home to this place."

Catherine looked at the sketchbook and nodded her head in agreement. "The only problem is, who can afford it?" she laughed.

"True," John agreed, with a wink. "My taste always seems to run richer than my bank account."

Catherine grabbed a drawing of a lamp and ripped the shade from the sketch. She elbowed John in the ribs to get his attention and joked, "If I save my money I might be able to afford this!"

John groaned in response, then patted his stomach. "With all the money we've saved on food today, I think we could afford one of the throw pillows."

Tossing the banana and apple from her rucksack to him, Catherine chuckled and said, "Take your pick."

"I need real food," he moaned with mock angst. "Meat and potatoes. Let's go!" he demanded, grabbing Catherine's hand and pulling her towards the door.

Catherine pulled to a stop. "I can't go into a restaurant looking like this!" she said, gesturing to the black fatigues and sweatshirt.

"No one will care," he assured her. "Come on . . . I'm starving!!!"

John pulled on her hand again, but she backed away. When he turned to urge her on, he was confused by the sudden change in her countenance. The laughter was gone, and a profoundly solemn expression clouded her eyes.

"Are you making fun of me?" she asked quietly.

In perplexity, John grunted, "Huh?" Even with the deepening afternoon shadows, he could see the woman was truly upset.

"You go ahead," she replied, nodding to the door. "I think I am going to call it a night."

As she shepherded him across the room, John gestured helplessly. "What's happening here?"

"It was nice meeting you, John," she said with a tremor in her voice. "Good night."

"Wait!" he demanded. "We were laughing and having fun. What changed?"

"You did," she murmured, angling him out the door.

Confused, he stood outside the screen door and watched her lock him out. "Catherine," he questioned in frustration, "What's going on?"

Catherine paused and considered whether to answer him. Finally, she just said, "Words can hurt, John."

"I still don't understand," he muttered. "What did I say?"

Her glance caught the confusion in his eyes; and, Catherine considered him carefully. At last, she relented and unlocked the door.

John stepped back inside and closed the interior door behind him. If she was going to yell at him or cry, he couldn't tell. Either way, he didn't think the neighbors needed to know what was happening.

Catherine gestured at the length of her body. "Were you poking fun at me with your 'starving' comment?"

"Of course not!" he replied indignantly. "Why would you think that?!"

"It was a strange choice of words . . . considering."

The confusion was back. "Considering what?"

Defeated, Catherine sat down in the corner of the living room with her back against the wall. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs protectively. Without a lamp, the room was

almost dark now. John sighed and then gingerly sat down beside her.

"Considering what?" John repeated in the lengthening silence.

Turning her head slowly to meet his eyes, she said softly, "You really don't understand, do you?"

Thinly disguising his impatience, he muttered, "No. I don't."

Gazing back off into the darkness, Catherine thought of the best way to approach his offhand comment. "You have touched my hand, my shoulders, and my wrist," she said quietly. "What did you feel?"

"Feel?" he stammered.

"Not feel. . . emotionally," Catherine stuttered uncomfortably. "What did your physical examination tell you?"

"Your pulse is a little erratic, but . . ." he trailed off as understanding started to take shape. "You've been, uh . . . sick recently," he stated remembering the I.V. sites on the back of her hand.

"Yes," she answered with a sigh.

"And, you thought I was teasing you because you are . . . slender?" John asked cautiously. Catherine nodded dismally. "Oh, boy," he thought. "There's a landmine I never expected." Who knew a woman could be so sensitive about being thin?

"Sweetheart," he said gently. "I wouldn't tease you about that. Women are beautiful - no matter what size they come in."

"Ever the Lothario," she commented mildly.

"Hey! Now I'm offended," John said with a put-upon air.

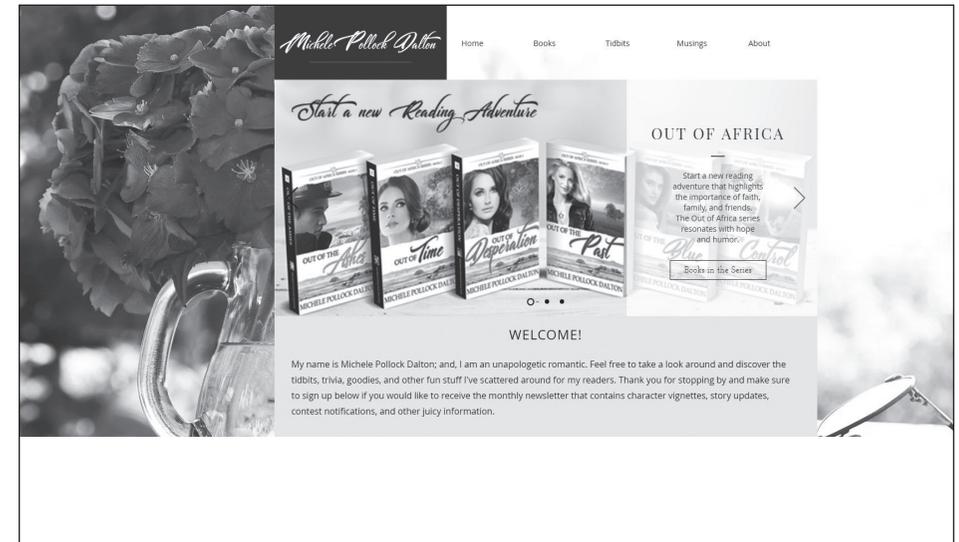
"Sorry," Catherine replied with a bit of the old humor lacing her voice. "Your reputation proceeds you."

"Bah! You can't believe everything you hear," John joked as he stood up and reached for her hand.

Catherine snickered. And, before she could banish the thought, said, "We share a bedroom wall, John. I hear quite a lot."

*** END OF SAMPLE ***

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