



OUT OF AFRICA - BOOK 4



OUT OF THE

*Past*



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



*For the little Joe-nado who keeps  
life interesting (and messy) -  
Mama loves ya!*

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# MERCIES IN *Disguise*

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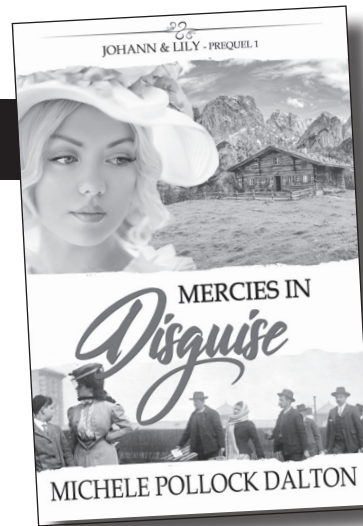
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*I look forward to sharing Johann & Lily's story with you!*



# *Out of Africa*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Friend,

Thank you for choosing to spend time inside these pages. I hope you will find a bit of humor and inspiration for your day. These characters have become precious to me for many reasons; and, I hope that you will enjoy this continuation in their stories of redemption, emotional healing, and dependence on the God who relentlessly pursues them.

If you have already read the previous books in this series, then you know that *this is not your typical Christian romance novel*. Some scenes depict the complexities of marital love and a healthy sexual relationship within the bounds of marriage. While these passages may be more provocative than you are used to seeing in Christian fiction, they exist to celebrate the beautiful blessing of God's fabulous design for human relationships. In contrast, you will also find the distorted view of sexuality that is so prevalent in our culture today. Bear with me as the story develops, these views will not be left unchallenged.

Once again, I will remind readers that this is not a "G Rated" storyline. You will find scenes and themes in this story that are graphic. I do not want to offend anyone's sensibilities; but, if you have ever wondered how God can bring something good out of evil, then please stick with me. The timeless truth of God's unchanging mercy and provision will

be prominently displayed in this ever-widening tale of love, family, and friends.

And finally, I want to offer heartfelt thanks for the insight my mother provided relating to the era of the 1970s and for her proofreading efforts. She is my sounding board and helps me put the brand of realism on what I write. Thanks so much, mom!

Keep the Son Shining!

*Michele*



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

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

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

**Lily “Lil” Brandt:** Matriarch of the Brandt clan. Grandmother to John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

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

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

**Winona “Noni” Brandt:** Housekeeper at the Double B Ranch near Pleasant Grove, California. Estranged from her husband, Billy Brandt. Mother of John, Ronnie, Sandy, and Suess.

\* \* \* \* \*

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**Amanda Lynn “Mandie” Thompson:** Four-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

**Bernard “Bear” Thompson:** A dairy farmer from Vacaville, California. Married to Irene Thompson; father to Jay and James Thompson; and, grandfather to Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson.

**Cassandra Sue “Cassie” Thompson:** Three-year-old daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

**Irene Thompson:** Married to Bernard Thompson; mother to Jay and James Thompson; and, grandmother to Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Currently living on the family farm near Vacaville, California and raising her granddaughters.

**James Thompson:** Farming near Vacaville, California. The youngest son of Bear and Irene Thompson.

**Margaret “Maggie” Thompson:** Farming near Vacaville, California. Widow of Jay Thompson; mother of Mandie, Cassie, and Rosie Thompson. Birth mother of Larry and Mary-Cate Phillips. Daughter of Lester and Dorthea Bakker.

**Rosalee Ann “Rosie” Thompson:** Infant daughter of Maggie and Jay Thompson. Currently living with their paternal grandparents, Bear and Irene Thompson, in Vacaville, California.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Dave Baldwin:** Fireman/paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Partner of John Brandt.

**Maude Baumgartner:** Wealthy widow employing Dr. Catherine Brandt. Currently living in a rehabilitation facility in Los Angeles, California.

**Shaughnessy Forsythe:** Attorney handling Maude Baumgartner’s legal matters. Resident of Sonoma, California.

**Lloyd & Mavis Phillips:** Owners of Phillips Antique Emporium and the Bygone Days Inn in Sonoma, California. Parents of Larry and Mary-Cate.

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



## CHAPTER 5

Maggie Thompson stared in disbelief at the fragile young man standing on her front porch. “Do you want to run that by me again, kid?”

The blonde boy spoke haltingly, “My name is Andrew Cassidy. I was born July 7, 1962, in Sacramento; and, you are my mother.”

“Come on in here and sit down before you fall down,” Maggie directed when she found her voice. When the teenager faltered on his severely deformed clubfeet, Maggie reached out and steadied him. After he was safely seated at her kitchen table, she searched his face for any sign of familiarity. The boy had her eyes and her coloring. More distinctively, he had his grandfather’s facial structure and build.

“My parents have been looking for you,” Andrew ground out. “I found the records that the private detective gave them; and, here I am.”

Perplexed, Maggie stared at the boy in consternation. “Why would they be looking for me? My mother said that the records were sealed when I asked about you.”

“You asked about me?” the boy stammered.

“Yeah, I asked. Lot of good it did me, though.”

“My parents think you cheated them,” Andrew confessed harshly. “They expected healthy babies; and, instead they got Aaron and me. At least Anthony’s doing alright.”

Rubbing a hand over her eyes in weary resignation, Maggie asked, “Who are Aaron and Anthony?”



"You should know . . . you gave them up, too!" the boy said hotly.

"Now, wait just a minute kid! First off, I don't like your tone. And, second, I don't know anything about where my babies got sent. The doctor took 'em straight from my body and handed 'em off to strangers."

Andrew glared daggers at the woman who was supposed to love and protect him. Instead, she'd given him and his brothers away . . . one right after the other. Not only that, she'd consigned him to hell on earth: the relentless medical procedures and doctor's appointments; dragging around a weak, broken body; and locked in a loveless home surrounded by angry adults. "So maybe you should have figured out how to keep your skirt down!" he shrieked.

Furious, Maggie slapped the boy across the face before she could stop herself. "You don't know a damn thing about my life or what happened to me; so, just shut your mouth!"

"I know that I am AB-negative; and, there are not many people in the world who can give me blood - you're one of them. So, unless you want to see me and Aaron buried, then you'd best come back to Sacramento with me."

"Oh, dear lord," Maggie muttered semi-reverently, as she dropped back down into the kitchen chair. "Kid, I'm not the one you need," she whispered. "You need your father."

"Well, where is he?" Andrew demanded. "Aaron doesn't have much time."

Panic welled up inside Maggie's chest with suffocating intensity.

"Mags!" James called through the screen door. "Hey?!" he said, as he banged into the kitchen. "What's wrong with you?"

Rounding on the stranger, Andrew challenged, "Are you my father?"

Taken aback, James sent a quizzical glance at the teenager before dropping down next to Maggie. The woman was pale and shaking. "You okay?"

"Get out of my way," Maggie stuttered, as she bolted for the bathroom.

"Who are you, kid?" James asked suspiciously.

"That woman is my mother," Andrew decreed. "Are you my father?"

James scoffed. "There's no way that you're Maggie's kid. Jeez . . . how old are you anyway?"

With a proud tilt of his head, Andrew stiffly answered, "I will be fifteen in a couple of months."

"Yeah, well that proves it. You think that woman had you when she was eleven years old? Get a grip, kid. You've got the wrong person."

"No, he doesn't, James," Maggie answered from the doorway. "Look at him. Who does he remind you of?"

Staring intently at the boy, James could see bits and pieces of Maggie; but, the closer James looked at the kid the more nervous he became. "Lester," he stuttered. "He looks like Lester." Oh, for the love of all things holy! What had that man done?

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm gonna get dressed, kid. Then, I'll take you home," Maggie declared.

James followed Maggie upstairs in a daze. "That's not actually your kid, is it?" he warily asked. Pivoting quickly, he muttered, "OH! Jeez," when Maggie yanked off her nightgown and began pulling on her jeans. "You could have warned me you were gonna do that," he kvetched.

"For Pete's sake, James! You're the one who followed me up here. Stop acting like a schoolboy. You've already seen everything there is to see," Maggie huffed. "And, that boy is my kid. There are two more like him in Sacramento; and, I guess they need blood transfusions or something."

An angry flush covered his cheeks; and, his blood began to boil. The beating he'd given Lester Bakker at Thanksgiving had almost killed the man; and, if he had a chance, James would finish the job. "Lester fathered that boy?" he growled.

"Did you think I survived nearly two decades in this house of horrors without any consequences, James Brian? That poor crippled kid and his two brothers are living proof of what went on here."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to take Andrew home and explain things to his parents. Hopefully, they can get Lester to cooperate. Beyond that, it will be up to them what they tell the kid."

\* \* \* \* \*

Maggie jumped up when a haughty middle-aged woman entered the room. Her blonde hair was perfectly styled; and, the pearls at her neck spoke of elegance and refinement.

Coldly, Mrs. Cassidy turned to her son. "Go to your room immediately, Andrew." With a stiff smile, she turned to Maggie. "Are you the woman who gave birth to Andrew?"

"Yes, ma'am. I believe so. There's a strong family resemblance," Maggie muttered.

Frigidly, the woman explained, "Andrew and Aaron were purported to be healthy infants when we agreed to adopt them. As you can see, that is not the case. My husband intends to file a civil suit against you for breach of trust and damages associated with the children's medical bills. You will be hearing from our attorney." With a dismissive wave, Mrs. Cassidy tried to shoo Maggie from the room.

Instead, Maggie squared her shoulders and faced off with the forbidding lady. "First, your quarrel is with my parents. You bought my babies from them on the black market – I never saw a penny of the money you paid them. I was barely twelve years old when Andrew was born. Secondly, Andrew mentioned that he needs blood transfusions. I am not the donor he needs – his father is AB-negative."

"We have suspended any further medical interventions for Aaron and Andrew. The state will take care of their medical needs once the surrender of custody is complete."

"What do you mean, the state? You adopted them! They are your children!" Maggie said hotly.

"Correction," Mrs. Cassidy snarled. "They are your children. Unhealthy children that you foisted off on an unsuspecting couple. The adoption decree is being revoked. As soon as that process is complete, the boys will become wards of the state."

Incredulous, Maggie looked at the heartless woman. "Wrong! If you are revoking the adoption decree, then I will be claiming my rights. You aren't going to send my flesh and blood to some state home."

With a tight smile, Genieve Cassidy gave a subtle nod. "My husband will make the arrangements, on the condition that you never try to contact us again. Expect delivery of the children by Sunday."

"Oh, I will," Maggie growled. "And, you'd better be bringing all three of them . . . Anthony included . . . or the sheriff will be finding out how you came by them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Maggie was shaking when she left the Cassidy home. What in the world had she just done? How was she going to take care of three teenage boys? In a daze, she stopped at the first park she found. Staring blindly at the children as they played, Maggie considered her options. The easiest course of action would be to pretend she'd never met Andrew and go back to the life she was building for herself. Unfortunately, her heart would not abide by that decision. The only solace she'd had in the surrender of her children, was that they were loved and cared for by good people. If that wasn't the case, then Maggie knew she had no other choice – she had to pick up the pieces and do the best she could.

If parenting was the only option available, then the next step was figuring out how to support a family with nothing but her wits and a patch of dirt. Her fields wouldn't be ready for the first cutting of hay for another two or three weeks. The truck garden was starting to produce some early lettuce, peas, radishes, turnips, and spinach; but, Maggie was uncertain about how much cash that would generate. With a heavy sigh, she dropped her head into her hands. What had that preacher in the

hospital said about things working out good?! “That man’s brain must have a short circuit,” she thought dismally.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hey, Lou,” Maggie flirted. “Haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

“Been scouring the small towns up and down looking for some new talent,” the paunchy man explained with a lecherous smile. “Still can’t find my blonde bombshell,” he joked.

“I have been thinking about your offer,” Maggie simpered. “Three hundred dollars a week doesn’t seem like much incentive compared to what I make here.”

Lou eyed the pretty blonde with interest. He’d been trying to convince her to make a move to his club since he’d spotted her a month ago. “Baby girl, you come on over to my gentleman’s club, and I will make it worth your while,” he promised. “You’ll pull down a hundred bucks a night in tips with the right act; and, you’d only be working two nights a week to make the same dough.”

“Just for dancing?” she inquired innocently. “I don’t want to get in trouble with the law you know.”

Lou smiled and ran a hand over the woman’s backside. “What you do on your breaks is up to you, baby girl. But, I don’t mind a little freelancing as long as the house gets ten percent.”

Maggie lingered a minute more, pretending to ponder the offer. “Oh, I don’t think I could do that,” she giggled. “I think I should stay here. Mickey’s been good to me; and, I don’t want to let him down.”

He was no fool; and, he wanted this leggy blonde on his stage. Lou knew the game better than anyone; so, he sweetened the pot. “One hundred and fifty bucks a night, plus five percent of the door. Two shows a night – that should net you a hundred bucks a shift in tips. What do you say? I’ll set you up with one of the other dancers to help put your act together; and, you can start rehearsing tomorrow.”

Bending over, Maggie whispered in his ear, “What time?”

\* \* \* \* \*

After giving notice at the cocktail lounge, Maggie felt a sense of dread. Dancing was one thing; but, if Lou expected other “entertainment” services, he’d be in for a surprise. Not only was her body incapable of providing such service, her mind nearly shut down over the thought.

The only reason she’d accepted the slimeballs’ offer was for the sake of her sons. “I may never win the ‘mother of the year’ award; but, I’m sure gonna do my best,” she mumbled to herself. In her mind’s eye, she could picture the drawing Catherine had sent her at Christmas. The sketch featured Maggie in the flowered courtyard with her three little girls. Somedays, she missed them desperately; and, other days she knew that the current arrangement was best. Maybe someday, they’d all be able to meet and enjoy each other’s company. “Someday,” she promised herself softly.



## CHAPTER 6

*Sunday, May 8, 1977*

With a glance around at the dreary house, Maggie wondered for the hundredth time if she was doing the right thing. Yesterday, she'd found a used stove and refrigerator; and, then managed to buy a few groceries with the last of her tips. What would her son's think of the ramshackle farm after living in high society all of their lives? More importantly, what would they think of her?

James watched Maggie pace nervously in the empty living room before he finally convinced her to sit down at the kitchen table. Taking her hand, he comforted, "Easy, sugar. Anything has to be better than going to a state home."

"You'd think so, right?" she stammered nervously, as a shiny black Cadillac limousine pulled into the driveway.

Andrew stepped out of the car with determination. He'd tried to explain to his brothers what was happening and where they were going. But, the strangeness of the situation hung over them like the after-effects of a bad dream. Carefully, he helped lift his youngest brother, Aaron, into the wheelchair produced from the trunk.

Angry at the world, Anthony lurched from the vehicle. His tousled strawberry-blonde hair hid his pale blue eyes and the distasteful expression on his face. He'd heard his parents discussing the "return" of

Andrew and Anthony on multiple occasions; but, he'd never expected to be banished as well. He was smart, healthy and strong – not like the other two.

As the youngest and most frail of the bunch, Aaron was used to being pushed around and disregarded by the people around him. The bracing on his back and legs made him dependent on others for most of his basic needs. Providentially, his older brother, Andrew, had been his protector, friend, and caregiver for most of his life. Anthony, on the other hand, was his biggest tormentor.

Maggie approached the young men cautiously. Anthony was the tallest of the three; and, he favored his father in height and attitude. Buck's gene pool had shown up in spades with his son.

For Aaron's sake, Maggie had hoped that he'd been the product of one of the other farmhands. Sadly, there was no mistaking the striking resemblance to Lester Bakker. "Come on in boys," she called with a feigned cheer. "I made some sandwiches."

"Who are you?" Anthony asked irritably.

James slipped an arm around Maggie's waist for support and answered sternly: "She's your mother. Show some respect."

Anthony gave a cheerless chuckle at the joke; and then stared, when he realized the man was serious. "How old are you?" the dazed teenager asked impudently.

With her head held high, Maggie answered, "I'll be twenty-seven in two days."

"What a tramp!" Anthony snarled under his breath. She'd barely been thirteen when he was born! And, younger yet when Andrew was born, he realized.

In two steps, James was off the porch and had the kid by the collar. "Watch your mouth, unless you want a one-way ticket to the state orphanage," he said coldly. "If I ever hear you talk to your mother that way again, you'll be dancing on the other end of the razor strap!"

Perturbed by the strange errand and the unfurling drama, the chauffer hopped back into the car and was halfway down the driveway

before Maggie realized that the boy's luggage was missing. "Hey, wait!" she shouted. Bolting down the front steps, she skidded to a stop when Andrew called to her.

"Ready to send us back already, mother?" he asked with impunity.

Swirling, Maggie sent an uneasy look in her son's direction. "He forgot to unload your luggage," she grumbled.

"No luggage," Andrew informed her coldly. "You're lucky the Cassidy's didn't send us back naked."

James looked from Maggie to the boys. "Get in the truck," he informed the older two. "You'll be staying at my place tonight. There's room down in the bunkhouse."

"What about me?" Aaron asked fearfully.

"He has to go with us," Andrew demanded.

"Well, sugar?" James asked. "What do you want me to do with 'em?"

Straightening her spine, Maggie gestured to the house. "Everyone inside," she proclaimed. "We'll figure it out while we eat."

\* \* \* \* \*

Anthony belly-ached through the entire meal; but, he'd quiet down whenever the big blonde man would send him a look. Finally, he'd had enough. "What am I doing here?" he demanded. "My parents never said anything about sending me away. It was the other two they wanted rid of," he said, with a sweeping gesture towards his brothers.

"Listen, kid," Maggie growled. "You're here for the same reason they are . . . so the sooner you get it through your head, the better."

"Bull!" the red-head stormed. "You convinced them to send me here. I don't know how; but, father has always said that I was the future of Cassidy Construction and Development." Furious, Anthony threatened, "If you don't take me back, I'll find a way on my own!"

"Go right ahead you spoiled brat!" Maggie yelled. "You give them a call and ask them if you can come back. Better yet, you tell them to send the fancy car. See what they tell you!"

Squinting menacingly at the irate woman, Anthony made a production of marching over to the phone. Furiously he dialed the rotary phone and waited for the operator. "Collect call from Anthony Cassidy to Stewart or Genieve Cassidy," he directed regally. After waiting for a few minutes, he challenged, "What do you mean? They have to accept the charges! Try again!" In frustration, he slammed the phone back into the cradle when the operator disconnected him.

James looked at the kid with sympathy. He couldn't imagine being dumped off with strangers and expected to adapt. "Listen, sugar. I'm gonna take these three out to the farm tonight. We've got beds in the bunkhouse they can use until you can round up something for them here."

"I don't know, James. What will your parents say? And, the girls?"

Shrugging, James replied, "You can't expect the younger one to sleep on the floor, Mags."

Looking from one to the other, Maggie felt helpless. "What do you guys think?" she asked. "The Thompsons are good people. Do you mind spending a couple of days with them until I can raise the money to buy some beds?"

Andrew glared at her; but, he knew they had little choice in the matter. He could sleep on the floor; but, Aaron suffered enough from the braces he was forced to wear on his legs and spine. There was no way he would add more misery to his brother's dismal life. "What are we going to do about clothes?"

"We'll go into Fairfield tomorrow morning and see what we can find at the second-hand store," Maggie offered.

"No, thanks," Anthony snapped. "I'm staying here! I don't want to miss my ride home when they send the car back for me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's nothin' bothering me," John repeated forcefully, for the third time in as many minutes.

"Man, we've been partners a long time," Dave Baldwin cajoled. "I know when somethings eatin' you."

"Just drop it, will ya!" John growled. "I haven't been hassling you about Barbie, have I!?"

Dave chuckled. "Nothing to hassle me about. I dropped her like a hot potato right after Thanksgiving when I found out she'd quit taking the pill. I've already got three kids; and, I don't need anymore."

"So, what about Cherie?" John questioned. "You two gettin' back together?"

"We've been talking; but, she's still planning to file for divorce. Dustin spilled the beans the last time the boys were over . . . she's gotta new boyfriend."

"Jeez . . . I'm sorry to hear that," John said sincerely.

Dave was quiet for a few minutes as he backed the squad into the garage. "Cherie never wanted me to join the fire service. But, I've got a lot of time invested in this job; and, it's something I like doing."

"Guess I never thought about how this job would affect family life. There's no one to worry about you when you're alone," John surmised. "Have you ever thought of doing anything else?" he asked his partner, thoughtfully.

"Originally, I'd planned to make a career in the service. But, when we got back from Germany, Cherie insisted we put down some roots. And, when I found out she was pregnant with D.J., I agreed to muster out. Now, she doesn't like the fire service. I don't know what she thinks I'm supposed to do for a living . . . sell insurance, maybe . . . who knows?"

"If that's what it took to keep your family together, would you do it?" John questioned curiously. He and Catherine had never talked much about his career choice; but, during their time in Sonoma, he'd figured out that he had more to offer in life than daring and a strong back.

Dave heaved a heavy sigh. "That's the question of the hour. What about you . . . ever thought of doing something else?"

John shook his head. "Not until that last cave-in," he admitted; "but, while I was up north, I found out that I enjoy photography and

advertising. Still, if it came right down to it, I'd probably spend a little time and get my physician's assistant's licensing. That seems like the easiest transition."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Wonder what Cherie would think about that?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Maggie awoke in shock when she heard the crashing downstairs. Men's voices carried through the house. Fearfully, she crept from the bed, intent on escaping out the window; before she remembered that Anthony was in the house. Dear God! What if they found her son?!

Turning, she groped in the corner for the rifle, before realizing she'd forgotten it downstairs. "Think!" she demanded under her breath; but, the heavy thunk of boots on the steps said that her time was up. Caught in the glare of the flashlight, she panicked and screamed in terror. This couldn't be happening again!!

"Thought you were gonna cheat me out of my place on this spread, didn't ya?" Buck slurred furiously. "Thought you could get rid of me? Well, girlie, me and my buddies come to take what's mine," he yelled, before grabbing Maggie by the hair. "Tie her hands behind her back; and, then tie her legs together around the thighs and ankles, so she can't kick. We're gonna have some fun!" he breathed heavily in Maggie's ear.

The other four drunk men followed Buck's instructions with perverse satisfaction and shoved Maggie down on the bed before cutting off her nightgown and underpants.

Everyone blinked in stupefaction when the overhead was light flipped on; and, a gangly adolescent stammered, "Get away from her!"

Buck dropped his pants, approached Maggie from behind, and gave the boy a callous smile. "Put the gun down kid, and come join the party. Mag-pie will take it over and over all night long, won't you?" he leered, jerking Maggie's head back and spitting in her face.

The resounding clap of the Remington stunned everyone in the room;

but, none more so than Buck Fletcher. He still felt the heat of the bullet that had skimmed past his nose within a hairsbreadth. "Get that damn kid," he hollered while trying to pull up his pants.

"You only get one warning, you drunk son-of . . ." Anthony uttered coldly.

"Leave him alone, Buck!" Maggie yelled when the old man lunged towards her son. "You fool! Can't you see the resemblance?"

When the old man charged him, Anthony raised the rifle again and put a slug in the guy's shoulder at point blank range.

Struggling, Maggie wiggled around to her back and stared balefully at the men circling her bed. "Get out of here, you stupid pigs, before you get shot!" she shouted, at the strange assembly of drunken deviants.

"And, take that creep with you," Anthony snarled at the confused idiots milling around the room. As one staggered past, he grabbed the guy. "Give me your pocket knife," he demanded.

"Follow them out," Maggie stuttered. "And, don't turn your back until you see their taillights disappear. Then call the sheriff," she moaned in relief.

Anthony freed his mother's hands and then gave her the pocket knife; so, she could start working on the nylon rope binding her legs. His own hands were shaking as he stood in the doorway leading to the front yard. As soon as the men had piled into the pick-up truck and disappeared into the night, he hurried back into the house to call for help. "You okay up there?" he called tremulously, after speaking with the county sheriff's department.

"Come on up here. You can hold them off better at the top of the steps if they come back." Maggie softly called, as she dressed. She was chilled to the bone and trembling so violently that she could barely stand.

"Ah . . . are you dressed?" Anthony stuttered, an octave above his usual pitch.

"Yeah, almost. Just get up here!" Maggie directed a little more sternly. "You lived inside me for nine months, and came out of my crotch, for

Pete's sake. Besides, I don't think you'll see anything more than you've already seen tonight," she mumbled to herself. When she was fully dressed, Maggie took the blankets from the bed and handed one to her son. "We're goin' out to the corn crib to wait. We'll have a clear shot in case anyone decides to make another visit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you think they'll come back?" Anthony stammered, as Maggie kept watch.

"Don't know, kid," she answered softly. Her hands were still trembling. Every little shadow in the farmyard sent shivers down her spine. "Did the sheriff's office say how long it would take to send someone out?"

"Sorry, I didn't think to ask," he replied, before inquiring, "Ah . . . what am I supposed to call you?"

The question stumped Maggie. "My girls always called me 'momma,'" she said with a soft smile and a glance at her son. "But, I guess you could call me 'Maggie.'"

Wide-eyed, Anthony demanded, "You've got more kids?"

"Yeah. Three little girls. They live with my in-laws now. Amanda is five, Cassandra is three, and my baby, Rosie will be a year-old next week." Maggie paused to fight back the tears. "There's two new ones; but, I don't know their names. A good family over in Sonoma adopted them right after they were born."

"Some mother you are," Anthony snarled. "What's that make . . . eight kids?"

Maggie sighed and tamped down on her temper. "Listen, kid. You don't know what's gone on in my past! You don't know what's happened to my little girls or me. And, all I know about you is that you're mine. So, cut us both some slack; and, keep the nasty comments to yourself."

Jumping up, Anthony approached Maggie. "You want to know about

me? Do you?" he yelled.

"Keep it down; or, you'll give away our hiding place," Maggie growled. That quieted her son down in an instant.

Rounding up his courage, Anthony whispered, "What were those men doing here?"

Uncertain about how much to tell the thirteen-year-old, Maggie began slowly, "This place belonged to my parents. The man you shot tonight worked for them for more than thirty-five years. When I took the farm over a while back, he was going to stay and help. But, all he wanted was for me to sell the place to him . . . at twenty cents on the dollar. He's a nasty fellow; and, he doesn't like to be crossed," she concluded.

"They were gonna . . ." Anthony sputtered, face aflame, "you know."

"Yeah, kid. I know. Games like that are what put three babies in my belly by the time I was your age."

Anthony's mouth went dry; and, he couldn't speak. Shock covered his face and anger filled his heart.

"You might as well know it all, Anthony," Maggie intoned hoarsely. "If you don't hear it from me; then, you'll likely hear it in town. All the ugly details have been in the newspaper for months now," she rasped. Steeling her resolve, she continued in a whisper that was barely audible. "My father would bring me out to this corn crib nearly every day as a child to discipline me. When I got too big for him to hold on his lap, he'd tie my hands to the wall over there where you see those ropes looped around the slats. It wasn't long before he started doing other things. Your brothers come from him," Maggie turned and caught the boys horrified look. She didn't want to tell him the rest; but, it had to be done. "The man you wounded tonight started 'disciplining' me after Andrew was born. So, I guess you can figure out where you came from."

Opening and closing his mouth, like a fish gasping for air, Anthony's young mind could hardly grasp what his mother was explaining.

"I'm sorry, kid. You don't know how sorry," Maggie blubbered, before pulling herself together. Tears were useless, and her son was

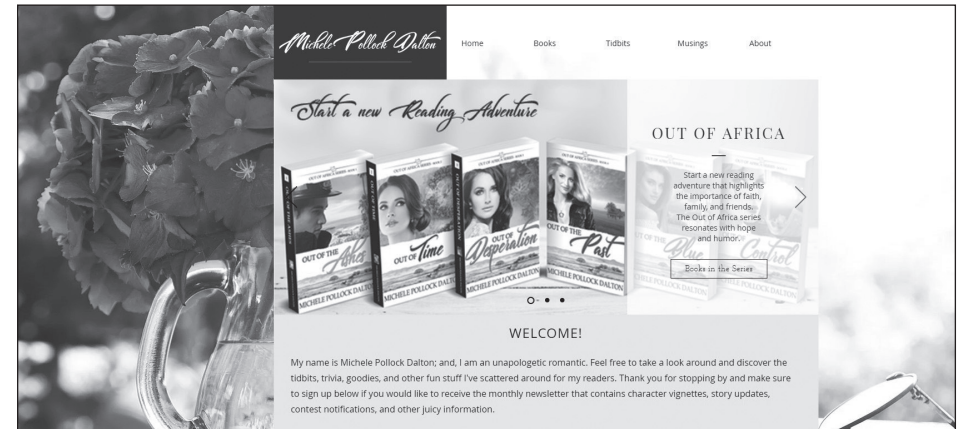
shocked senseless. "Come on, kid, snap out of it. You didn't do anything wrong. I appreciate what you did; and, he had it comin.' You warned him."

Anthony looked into his mother's sad eyes; and, then he spewed his supper all over the front of her shirt.

*\*\*\* END OF SAMPLE \*\*\**

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