

Riveting from cover to cover
~Althea Zamzow

SUSAN M. BAGANZ

ROOT BEER AND ROADBLOCKS



AN
ORCHARD HILL
CHURCH NOVEL

Root Beer &
Roadblocks

Orchard Hill Romance #4

Susan M. Baganz

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Root Beer & Roadblocks

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Dedication

To Mark Steele (1956-2011).
A boss, friend, and fabulous pastor.
You gave the best hugs.
Gone too soon and terribly missed.

Other books by Susan M. Baganz

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances

Pesto & Potholes

Salsa & Speed Bumps

Feta & Freeways

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Black Hill Regency Suspense Romances

The Baron's Blunder (novella)

The Virtuous Viscount

Historical Christmas Novella

Fragile Blessings

Also featured in print in *Love's Christmas Past*

Short Stories

Little Bits 'O Love

1

*The worst thing that happens to a man
may be the best thing that ever happened to him,
if he doesn't let it get the best of him.*

Anonymous

February 2014

Johnny jogged to his car and grabbed his Bible. Fatigue weighed him down as he locked the sedan, the book tucked under his arm. Heading back toward the church, a movement caught his attention. A little boy from his Sunday school classroom escaped his mother's grasp and bolted his way, blind to a car backing out of its spot.

"David, stop!" Johnny bolted and managed to get behind the moving vehicle to shove the child out of the way. The rear bumper struck his own leg and knocked him to the ground.

The car's wheels stopped just short of running him over. *Thank you, Lord, for big tank cars with huge trunks.* The child cried, and a woman picked up the boy. "It's OK, David, you've only scraped your palms. This nice man saved you. How many times must I tell you not to run in parking lots? You are too small for cars to see you." She hugged the little boy tight.

Johnny dragged his legs out from under the car

and struggled to his feet, bracing himself against the trunk to catch his breath. The elderly woman, who had been behind the wheel, toddled around to him. "Are you OK? I'm sorry. I didn't see him. You moved so fast."

Johnny nodded. "No one would have seen him. It was an accident." He patted her on the shoulder before he limped across the parking lot. Pain seared through his hip and leg with every step he took. Reaching the curb, he sank down to the cement, thankful it was clear of snow.

His cousin Niko ran out of the church and knelt by his side. "Johnny, what happened?"

"He rescued my son from getting run over by a car that was backing out. He took the hit." A woman wearing a stocking cap and winter coat came up behind Niko with the weepy boy in her arms rubbing his eyes.

Johnny shrugged. "What she said."

"You OK? Do we need to call an ambulance?" Niko's gaze bore into him. The greater unspoken question loomed.

Teeth gritted in pain, Johnny returned his cousin's stare. "I want to sit through worship. You're on stage in a few minutes. Help me inside. I have an appointment with my doctor tomorrow. It can wait until then." He motioned for Niko to help him rise, and he did. The older woman came up to him and handed him a piece of paper.

"Here is my name, phone, and insurance information. Do you want to call the police and file a report? I wouldn't blame you if you did." Her arthritic, wrinkled hands were clenched tightly together as if in petition for mercy.

"I doubt that's necessary. Thank you, May." He took the paper and shoved it in his shirt pocket. David's mom passed him his Bible, which he'd dropped. The leather was brushed clean.

"Are you sure you're OK? I'm a nurse. I could take a look." Her face instantly turned three shades of red as she realized her inspection would involve him taking off his jeans.

Johnny smiled and leaned forward. "In my younger days, that would have been an offer too good to pass up, but I visit my doctor tomorrow. It'll wait." He turned to Niko. "Help me in?"

Niko frowned but walked along with him to the sanctuary and helped him settle into a cushioned seat. Then, Niko went to lead the worship band.

Johnny sat through the service even when everyone stood to sing. His left hip and leg ached as well as his shoulder, which had also hit the cement. *A nap. I just need a nap.*

After the service, a staff person took down all the information on the accident for an incident report for records at church. Niko approached with his guitar case.

"Ready to go?"

Johnny nodded and swallowed hard. Now would be the moment of truth. How bad was the damage? Ninety minutes sitting in one spot probably made him stiff. He pushed himself up with his good arm and stood. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to fight against the nausea.

"Johnny?"

He raised his hand. "Give me a moment. I'm just stiff," he lied. It was worse than that. With his Bible tucked under one arm, he stood up completely and

squared his shoulders. "Let's go." He grabbed his coat and slowly limped out the door and to the car.

"I'd like to drive you to the emergency room." Niko's voice brooked no argument, but Johnny wasn't to be defeated.

"No. I want to go home and take a nap. I'll put on some sweats first and see how bad it looks. If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

"You're too stubborn for your own good."

"True. I could have had that cute nurse taking a peek at my bruise, and I even passed that up."

"Who was she?"

"I'm assuming she was David's mom. He's a young boy new to our Sunday school classroom who has quickly attached himself to me."

"How old?"

"I'm not sure. Five or six maybe?"

"The woman seemed familiar."

"We've met thousands of women over the years, Niko. They all start to look the same."

"No, I mean like I should be able to identify who she is, but I couldn't place her."

"Yeah, I had a sense of that but was in too much pain to really pay attention."

"Do you think this will impact—"

"my cancer? Go ahead, Niko. It's not like we can never talk about it. Could it escalate the cancer? I haven't got a clue."

"Sorry, dude. Oh, hey, I almost forgot. Tia said she invited someone over for lunch today."

"Probably a single woman. I can't seem to convince her I'm not in the market for a wife. I'm a poor gamble for anyone."

"Don't talk like that."

“Why not? It’s true. Marry me, remain childless, and quickly become a widow. Yeah, the scale is all weighted in my favor there.”

They pulled into the two-car garage, and Niko came around to help Johnny out. Johnny had come to live with his cousin Niko and his bride, Tia, after he’d received the diagnosis.

“Please, Niko. I have a little dignity left—let me hold on to it as long as I can.”

Niko grabbed his guitar instead. “Fine. Just remember who picks you up when you do a face plant on the stairs.”

“There’s a rail, and I plan to use it.” Johnny limped up the steps, half pulling himself up using the rail for each level, and opened the door into the breezeway. Niko followed close behind. Entering the kitchen area, he saw Niko’s wife. “Hey, Tia. I’m going to take a rain check on lunch.” He walked down the hallway to his room, shut the door firmly behind him, collapsed on the bed, and let the tears fall.

After a few minutes, he dragged himself back up, kicked off his shoes, and slipped off his jeans to inspect the purplish-blue mark along his hip and down his leg. He shrugged on some sweats and left to use the bathroom. Tia confronted him as he emerged.

“Niko told me what happened. How bad is it?” she whispered.

Johnny swallowed hard. “Bad, but I don’t think I broke anything.”

“You could have a hairline fracture.”

“I promise not to run any marathons and risk cracking it further.”

Tia shook her head and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “We love you, Johnny, and just want to help.

I'm sorry if you think I'm smothering you."

"Nah. It's nice to know someone cares."

"We do. Can I get you anything?"

"Something for the pain, perhaps. What was for lunch?"

"Salad and some paninis."

"You made me one?"

Tia nodded. "I'll bring you a plate."

"Great. You're the best."

He hobbled back to his bed and propped himself up against his headboard. Tia arrived with a drink, medicine, and lunch.

"Just set the plate aside, and I'll come and get it later."

"Sorry to spoil your Sunday plans."

"Johnny, you're more important than any plans. As it happened, she cancelled out as well."

"OK. Thanks, Tia."

"Anytime." She left and closed the door with only a tiny click of the latch.

He downed the pain medication with the cold root beer she had brought. Johnny leaned his head back, and the smell of toasted feta cheese and other goodies on his sandwich aroused a grumble from deep within. In spite of the savory flavors Tia had blended, he only managed a few bites. He set aside the plate and slid down in the bed to find the least painful position.

He awoke later in the afternoon and stumbled to the family room. Johnny levered his way into an antique chair with stiff wooden arms. Niko had been sitting nearby reading and making notes.

"Working on your next worship set?" Johnny inquired.

"Yeah. It's hard with Pastor Dan on leave right

now. He'll be back soon, but something happened, and they asked me to fill his shoes even after his return. At least for a while. I've also been thinking about the youth band and how to inspire them to grow as worship leaders. They'll be scheduled in a few weeks."

Johnny nodded. "You'll do great."

Niko set his Bible and notebook aside. "I appreciate the vote of confidence. It's a different preparation than what we did with Specific Gravity performances. How are you feeling?"

"Really sore. In pain. Wishing I drank something harder than root beer." Johnny gave a dry laugh.

"Tia has some news for you."

"As my friend or manager?"

"Manager." Tia walked in and sat across from them on the couch. "Wanna hear?"

"Sure, it'll distract me."

"Got a call from Abbey Road Studios. They have an artist demanding you for playing electric guitar on her album. I have basic downloads I can put on your tablet to listen to if you're up for a plane ride."

"Cool. Wow. Hit by a car. Cancer eating away at me and now one of the highest honors—to play at the most famous recording studio in the world?"

"Was it on your bucket list?" Niko asked.

"I don't have one. And even if I did, I'd never have dreamed so high." He took a deep breath and glanced back to Tia. "When do they want me there?"

"Well, that's where this gets interesting. They'd like you to fly out of O'Hare late Monday night. Do you even have your passport?"

"Yeah. I do, and it's up to date although I'm not sure why. It's been years since we've toured internationally. Guess I always thought I'd get a

chance to go on one of those short-term mission trips someday."

"Maybe this is your mission?" Niko suggested.

"Hard to say. So if the doctor clears me tomorrow morning...will it be too late to book a flight at that point?"

"As long as there are seats on the plane, I can arrange it. As things stand, you should be fine."

"Are you sure you're up for this, Johnny? You can barely stand right now." Niko asked.

"I can play my guitar sitting if I need to or even flat on my back. Managing pain would be my main concern."

"Sure you don't want to go to the emergency room and get an x-ray tonight? Could speed things up tomorrow if you have those to take with you."

"And it would ease your mind, right?"

Niko frowned. "Yeah. Sorry, but I worry about you."

"I know, and I appreciate it." Johnny leaned back. "I'll let you drive me in to get it checked out. Better to have that information now, to see if this trip is even possible. I doubt any doctor would allow me to fly if my hip is broken, right?"

Tia nodded. Niko rose and helped Johnny to his feet.

"Let me retrieve my wallet. Gonna need my insurance card."

Tia jumped up. "I'll get it for you, and your shoes. Why don't you sit down to put those on?" She flew out of the room before he had a chance to respond. She returned with some slip-on canvas shoes. "There. Good to go."

A cry came from down the hall. "Apolo is up."

Johnny stepped forward, but Niko steered him toward the garage door. Apolo was Tia and Niko's infant son, and Johnny adored him.

"Tia will handle Apolo. You can visit him later."

"Fine."

~*~

Katie settled David down for his afternoon nap. He kept asking after Johnny and wondering if the man was OK. She told him he probably was and hoped she wasn't lying. Something about the man triggered memories of years ago. An old flame she'd loved dearly but who failed her when she needed him most.

She flipped up her laptop, started to search out his name, and soon had pages of images and videos of Johnny Marshall. The young man who wooed her in high school had grown and achieved his dreams. Dreams her parents claimed were foolish. Back then, Katie had demanded he seek a serious job. She refused to marry, a struggling musician.

While there were photos of him with the band from years ago and a few concert pics, most of those focused on Niko. Johnny wore a cap and glasses. He was fierce as he played and amazingly good. *Was* this the same person who saved her son? David called him Johnny, and she recognized Niko now that she watched the online videos of their band and checked out their website. The Johnny she once knew was never camera shy, but the one here refused to look at the lens. His expression was serious, intense, and sad. Not the exuberant, idealistic guy she'd fallen in love with all those years ago. Her Johnny had hair on his head — this one was bald. She shook her head. If it was him,

she wondered what had happened to change him so drastically. Could it be the same man, or was it just one of those weird coincidences?

"Mommy, where is Johnny? I wanna see Johnny." David asked as he bellied up to the table, kneeling on the chair to grab his milk.

"Honey, I realize you like Johnny, but I don't know him, where he lives, or who he really is. I doubt you'll see him again."

The little boy set his glass down and slumped onto his heels. "Never?"

"I don't know, honey."

"But every week, he's in my class. He plays with me, reads me stories, and talks about Jesus. Sometimes he sings."

"Maybe he'll be there next Sunday."

David gave a loud sigh. "OK, Mommy. Sunday is tomorrow?"

"No. Seven more days. One week."

"Too long. I don't wanna wait," he pouted.

"I understand, sweetheart, but wait you will."

"Can I pray for him?" The little boy with the dark brown hair bent his head, held his hands together, and began to mumble under his breath.

"Sure. You can do that." Katie whispered as she placed glasses of water on the table and went to grab the hot dishes. "Mom! Dad! Dinner is ready." She sat down next to David and waited for her parents to make their way to the dining room.

"Where is Mabel?" asked her mother.

"We let Mabel go, Mother."

"What? Did you hear what she said, Herbert?" The older woman slammed her fork down in a childish fit.

"Huh?" The older man reached for the spoon to

put the potatoes on his plate. "Whatever you say, dear."

Katie closed her eyes so her parents wouldn't catch her rolling them. Her father couldn't hear well and suffered with the after-effects of a small stroke. Her mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Katie had moved back to the area to help care for them. Her older brother, Ken, lived two towns away and couldn't sacrifice his family to provide the kind of care their parents needed. Katie dreaded the decisions that were going to have to be made. As a nurse, she hoped she could keep them here, together, for as long as it was safe.

"Eat, Dad." She spoke loudly. Her father smiled, nodded, and grabbed a slice of ham to put on his plate. Seemingly forgetting her mild tantrum, Katie's mother served her own food. Katie tended to her son. Bedtime would be welcome, except she wondered if memories of a certain set of brown eyes reflecting deep pain and longing would haunt her dreams. What had today's Johnny longed for?

~*~

The morning was a rush to get David off to school and make it to the oncology clinic on time. Winter was not much fun, but she was grateful for the neighbor snow-blowing the driveway and sidewalks for her parents. Thankfully, they had a few weeks of a dry spell but insanely cold temperatures. Cold so brutal that it was unusual for February in Wisconsin. Katie would not complain.

She settled in behind the counter to schedule and register clients. She did some of the initial check-in at

the rooms too, but this early in the morning and new on the job, she was still getting used to the front office procedures before they threw her into the full-fledged fray of dealing with cancer patients.

The bell at the door rang, and she glanced up as the man from yesterday limped in. His coat was zipped with a knit cap pulled low, covering his ears. Even though the clinic was inside a larger medical center, it wasn't too far from the entrance. Gloved hands reached up to take off his scarf. He tugged off the gloves and made his way to the counter.

"Johnny Marshall. I'm here for my eight fifteen with Dr. Osgood. I brought some x-rays with me." He pulled a folder from under his arm. Handing it over, he stopped. "It's you—from yesterday."

"Yeah."

"How is David? Is he OK?" Johnny asked.

"He's fine. More concerned about you. He prayed for you several times yesterday."

The man gave a smile. "He's a cool little guy. Tell him thanks for me, OK?"

"Sure. Would you have a seat? The doctor will be with you shortly."

"Yeah, thanks, um, Katie." He squinted as he looked forward. He tipped his head and went to sit down, gently lowering himself into an armed chair.

Katie took a deep breath. Her suspicion had been correct. This Johnny was the same one from her high school days. The one who had crushed her heart and given her the best gift ever at the same time. Her son adored him, and now Johnny sat in an oncology clinic, which could only mean one thing.

The man she loved had cancer.

2

Character is a habit long continued.
Greek Proverb

Katie's fingers clicked on the keyboard, and he scrutinized her. She looked up at him, and recognition slammed him in the gut. He blinked rapidly. Deep grooves lined her forehead. She had those same gray eyes that bewitched him years ago, and she wore her dark brown hair cropped shorter in the back and longer on the sides. She parted it to one side, and it shimmered in the fluorescent office lighting. She wore simple silver jewelry and pale lipstick and minimal makeup. A fresh and clean appearance of a woman not in the first blush of youth. And a mother as well. A single mother if his guess was correct. There were no rings on her fingers, and David asked a few questions in class about fathers.

Johnny struggled to breathe. David's mom was Katie? She was back in town? *Chill. Cool it.* He took some deep breaths and glanced over to the desk. She was busy on the phone and looking at the computer. More beautiful than she had been at eighteen. He slid over to a seat out of her line of sight, blinking back the tears, not from the pain in his hip but from a crack in his heart. The woman who abandoned him, turned her back on his love years ago, had returned, and he'd

have to see her every time he came in. If he didn't like his doctor so much, he'd switch, but it was the best oncology clinic covered by his insurance. His options were limited.

Grow up, dude. He was a man now. He could handle this. She'd gone on with her life and had a kid. He'd gone on with his and was possibly nearing the end. As depressed as he was before he walked in the door, his spirits sank even lower. *Why, God? Did you do this to slap me in the face? Kick me when I'm already down?* It didn't make sense.

A nurse called his name, and he rose to follow her to an exam room. Blood pressure was high. *Really? Wonder why?* Pulse rapid. *No duh.* He remained quiet, only answering questions he was asked, and awaited the doctor, who arrived within a few minutes.

Doctor Osgood scanned the x-rays and reviewed lab work. He sat down across from Johnny. "You managed to escape with some deep bruises, and I can write a prescription for a pain reliever to get you through this week. I'll clear you for travel. But, Johnny, we do need to put a plan in place for your treatment. Are you sure there isn't anyone who could be a match for a bone marrow transplant? It might mean a cure."

Johnny's shoulders slumped. "I'll think about it. You said you cured me last time, though. Who's to say I'd lick this one? There's no guarantee another won't pop up in the future."

"True. But there's no guarantee you're going to make it home alive this morning. Car accidents, heart attacks, yes, even at your age. Anything could happen to you to end your life at any point. There are no guarantees. Listen, Johnny, I'm a fan of your work. You love the Lord. Don't you think He would want you to

do whatever it took to continue your ministry here on earth?"

"Maybe." Johnny shrugged.

"Should I prescribe an antidepressant as well? I can. I suggest you get in some counseling or in a small group at church for support."

"I got Niko and Tia," he protested.

"You need more than them. You dump on those two, and they will take it until it weighs them down so far they can't get back up. Sometimes people can care too much. You have to share yourself with a few others at least. Even let the public know. You've not shared a word on social media about what you're struggling with, yet after your last battle, you guys had no trouble stating why you had pulled off from touring."

"True, but we were on the other side. It's easier to share the victories, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you might have a bigger impact if you're honest about the struggle and let others care for you through it. Just think about it, Johnny. I want you back next week after your trip to see how you're doing."

"OK."

"Have a safe journey to Great Britain, and don't forget to get up frequently to walk about the plane cabin." The doctor rose. "And Johnny...I'm praying for you."

Johnny struggled to his feet and shook Dr. Osgood's hand. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

Johnny came out to schedule his next appointment, and Katie was at the desk. "I'm supposed to come back sometime next week. Do you have any openings on Wednesday or Thursday?"

"I can get you in at eight thirty on Wednesday. Will that work?"