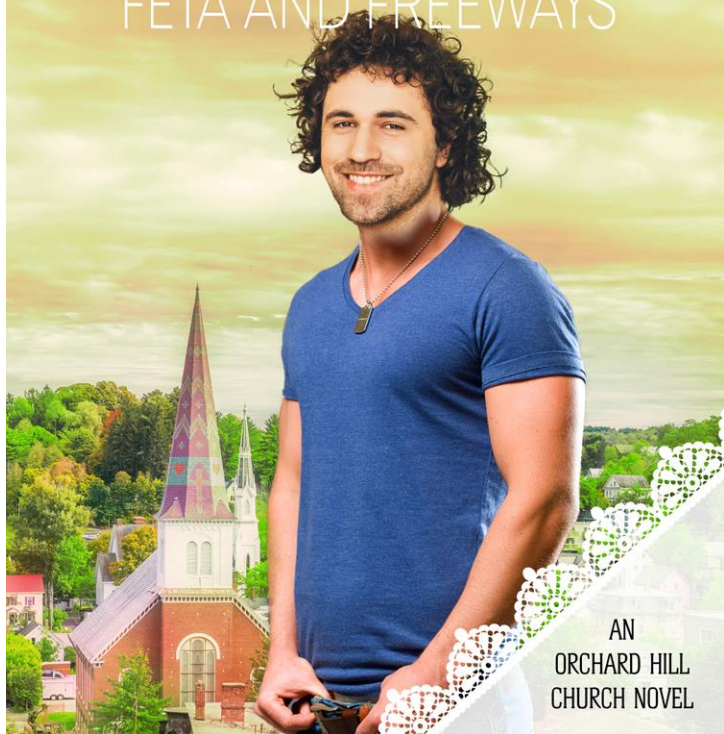


love was hidden
in plain view

SUSAN M. BAGANZ

FETA AND FREEWAYS



AN
ORCHARD HILL
CHURCH NOVEL

FETA AND
FREEWAYS

Susan M. Baganz

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Edited by Sally Shupe

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Quoted Scripture is from the *English Standard Version* of the *Holy Bible*.

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Dedication

To the members of Jonah's Vacation:

Jim, Jeff, Rob, Mark, Eric, and Irene.

Performing with you all was an honor, a joy, and a
precious memory.

Rock on!

Other books by Susan M. Baganz

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances

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The Baron's Blunder

The Virtuous Viscount

Short Stories

Little Bits O' Love

CHAPTER ONE

The way to love anything is to realize it may be lost.

G.K. Chesterton

July 2012

Sirens wailed, competing with Nikolos Acton's voice and guitar as they combined with the band's groove pounding through the speakers. Usually, nothing invigorated him more than the synergy of the mix of instruments and vocals. But today, as the audience joined in with the singing, what might have been a holy moment was marred by the dissonant sounds outside the tent. They played until the applause of the crowd drowned out the final chord.

"Thank you for coming. Our album is for sale at the back table." With a wave, Niko turned to his buddies.

Emergency lights pulsed off the cars parked nearby, but the sirens no longer rang in the air. "Wonder what happened?" Johnny scrunched his eyes as he often did when he concentrated.

Niko ruffled a towel over his damp curls and shrugged. "Let's get packed up. I'm sure Tia will fill us in after we're done signing merchandise and taking photos." He tossed the sweaty cloth into the bin. Tia'd collect them later. Outdoor summer concerts tended to be hot.

Marc frowned. "Whatever it is happened backstage." He stepped closer and elbowed Niko. "Any cute blondes catch your eye?"

"Not interested." Niko rolled his eyes at his bass

player.

“Yeah, right.” Sam winked as he packed his guitar and slid his sunglasses back on. It had been an inside joke that flaxen-haired ladies seemed to love Niko and sought him out after every concert. In spite of their Christian faith and venues, some of the women crossed lines, which surprised him. Not only in the provocative clothing they wore but even with their suggestive remarks and innuendos. It definitely made touring a challenge in the struggle to stay pure.

Niko shook his head at his bandmates. A festival worker in an orange vest motioned for him.

“Be back in a sec, guys.” He headed over.

“Nikolos Acton?”

“Yeah?”

“We need you out here. There’s been trouble.”

His adrenaline raced as Niko followed the woman out into the blinding sunshine. A wall of heat mingled with the hallucinogenic effect of emergency services lights. He squinted into the brightness. “What happened?”

“Is Tia Bartel part of your entourage?”

“Yeah, manager, handler, scheduler. She does everything. Why?” He couldn’t imagine Tia causing anyone trouble. His eyes scanned the scene. The police talked to a guy in handcuffs over by a squad car. The man glared at Niko and screamed obscenities. Niko remembered him from last night’s gig a few hours away. He’d been belligerent when he’d found Niko speaking to his girlfriend after signing her t-shirt. They were some of the last people they’d interacted with before tearing down.

An officer approached.

Niko pointed to the man. “What’s he doing here?”

He clenched and unclenched his fists even though he knew the person was incapable of assaulting him.

"Mr. Acton?" Officer Wilcox asked.

He nodded. "That'd be me."

"Apparently that man attempted to gain access to the stage, intending to kill you. Miss Bartel stopped him, and he transferred his aggression to her. We assume he anticipated her as a minor obstacle, but she proved to be a fierce opponent." The screaming man's face turned red. A swollen eye and ripped shirt gave testament to the fight he'd been in. Niko's eyes swung to where the paramedics worked.

Images of blood and skin taunted him from in-between the busy bodies surrounding a stretcher. *Tia?* He started toward the paramedics, but the officer grabbed his arm. "Wait."

He gulped as fury churned in his stomach. "What'd he do to her?" His heart pounded. His vision tinted everything red.

"We'll let the doctors determine the extent of her injuries. A young man witnessed the attack and dialed 911. By the time we got here...well, our rescue didn't go as planned, and he shot her. We're transporting her to Mercy. You can head over there after you're done loading up."

"No. I'll accompany her. Let me tell the guys."

"You'd better hurry."

Niko rushed to his bandmates, weaving in and out of the fans. He grabbed Johnny and pulled him aside. "Tia's been attacked. I'm riding with her. Pack up and join me at the hospital as soon as you can."

Johnny's face paled. "Is she okay?"

"No. Someone shot her. They arrested him. Tell the others."

Johnny nodded, and Niko pushed his way through the crowd, mumbling apologies and excuses about an emergency as the fans sought to stop him.

He bolted to the back of the festival stage as they loaded the gurney onto the ambulance. "I'm coming with her. She's our manager. I'm the closest thing she has to family here." The paramedic gave him a hand up, and he sat by Tia's side.

He examined the young woman. Blood coated her sandy brown hair, and her right eye was swollen shut. Her face was a mass of bruises extending down her neck. The vision sickened him. And that was only what little he could see.

Leaning forward he whispered to her. "Tia? It's Niko. I'm here." She didn't respond. He glanced up to the paramedic. "What did he do?"

The paramedic's sad eyes met his. "She's been beaten, strangled, and shot."

Niko closed his eyes and found them damp with tears. "Is she going to be okay?"

"We'll do everything we can, but her injuries are severe. She put up a fight and has a wound to her head. Along with a bullet hole in her left side."

He prayed. *Lord, please heal her.*

Tia was always available for them. She made things happen. Taking care of them and ensuring they were successful. She let him do his job and cheered them on from the sidelines. But it struck him now that while she knew a lot about each of them, the relationship had only been one-way. Did he need to call her parents? A boyfriend?

That last thought shook him. He'd admired their manager. She was cute and feisty but could be strong and businesslike when she needed to be. She put the

needs of the band first. Was there some special man in her life? Somehow, he'd assumed Tia would always be there. She was as much a part of their group as any of the band members. Specific Gravity didn't exist or succeed without her quietly working her magic behind the scenes.

But why would an attractive, young, single woman do that? If she fell in love with someone, would she leave? The thought terrified him.

He wondered who Tia Bartel really was and kicked himself for taking so long to even ponder that question.

* * *

At the hospital, Niko paced the waiting room. He signed papers as the responsible party for her bills. Somehow, they'd find a way to take care of her.

Johnny strode in first, followed by Marc the keyboardist, Sam their bass player, Wayne their drummer, and Rocco their driver and soundman.

"Hey, guys. Did you bring her wallet?" Niko asked as he rose to his feet.

Johnny handed Niko a bag. "I left her other stuff on the bus." The men surrounded him.

"It's weird going through a woman's purse." Niko pulled out the wallet to search for an insurance card.

"So you realize she's a woman?" Johnny's voice was solemn and soft. He supported the purse in his hands as Niko rummaged through its limited contents.

He glanced up, and their eyes held. "Kind of obvious. She has all the parts. Why wouldn't I?"

"Only because you've been blind to the fact she adores you."

Niko laughed. "Right. I'm nothing special."

"All the blondes on the road think so." Sam quipped.

"Yeah, they aren't acquainted with me like Tia is."

"True, she's seen your good, bad, and ugly sides." Wayne commented.

"Still doesn't mean she holds any special affection for me." Niko defended.

"Yeah, you keep lying to yourself about that." Johnny whispered.

Niko regarded the men. "There's nothing here. Call Jazzy Records. They should have the information."

"I'll do it." Sam offered. Niko handed him Tia's phone. She was the only one who dealt with their record company, negotiating their contracts for them. Sam started searching the contact list and went outside to catch a better signal.

"What happened?" Johnny asked.

"Police will come here to talk to us."

"Us? What does this have to do with us?" Rocco asked.

Niko shook his head and shrugged.

After a few short minutes, Sam returned. A frown marred his narrow face. "She isn't insured through the label."

"What? Why not?" Wayne stepped up to Sam.

"Back off, dude. It's not *my* fault. Angela at the office said they couldn't afford someone to travel with us. Tia struck a deal for her company, as an outside contractor, to join us. No pay or benefits, only commission paid after we return based on concert revenue."

"What?" Johnny asked.

"She's been covering her own expenses." Sam

frowned. "Apparently, they didn't think we'd do this well. Tia disagreed and negotiated to go out with us on this tour. Angela said tours like ours are expensive and hard to break even with. Tia insisted, promising the extra radio interviews she arranged would make up for it and increase sales. They agreed to the deal since it cost them nothing."

Silence dropped like a bomb between them. Niko closed Tia's purse after dropping her phone back in.

"Were any of you aware of this?" Niko asked.

A chorus of "no's" returned to him.

Johnny piped up. "What happened to her?"

Niko shook his head at him as tears filled his eyes. "She stopped a guy from coming backstage with a gun. He intended to kill me." He gagged on his own tears.

"And?"

"He beat her up and strangled her. He shot her when the cops tried to intervene." Niko leaned back against the wall and allowed himself to slide to the floor. Exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and terror pushed him over the edge as the reality of what she saved him from hit him.

She might die.

He dropped his head into his hands as the purse fell to the floor. He bawled like a seven year old who lost his favorite pet.

Johnny knelt down and wrapped his arms around Niko. Although Johnny was two years younger, they were cousins, best friends, and had weathered numerous storms together. "Hey, Nikolos. We'll get her through this."

The rest of the band crouched down around them, and Wayne prayed out loud. "Lord, our hearts ache for Tia. Please heal her and bring her back to us. Give the

doctors wisdom and guide their hands in providing her care. Help us too, Lord.”

“Amen’s” chorused.

A nurse approached. “Are you here with Tia Bartel?”

The men rose, and Niko stepped forward as he dried his tears. “Yes.”

“Are Johnny and Niko here?”

He raised a hand in front of his chest. “That’d be us.” He put a hand on Johnny’s shoulder.

She nodded. “Tia’s asking for you both. Come this way.”

* * *

Niko followed the nurse down the corridor to a room separated from the hallway by a curtain. He almost forgot he was carrying a purse, but he held it close like a talisman—even though he didn’t believe in that kind of thing. Johnny trailed behind.

A doctor glanced up as he entered. “I’ll allow a few minutes. She’s going into surgery.” With that, the physician left them alone.

He nodded and headed to her side. Her one good eye peeked up at him.

“So sorry.” Barely a whisper—Niko read her lips more than heard her words.

He shook his head and reached to touch her face. He refrained because of the swelling where she’d been struck. His heart squeezed at the thought of anyone hitting her. A soft curl tempted him, and he let it wrap around his finger. “You’ve nothing to be sorry for, Tia.”

“Johnny?” she mouthed.

“Yeah, I’m here.” He leaned over and gave a slight

peck to her unbruised cheek, about the only spot that wasn't injured.

"Call Roberto." Her voice could barely be heard, but it obviously cost her a lot to speak. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Sure, I'll call him." Johnny assured her.

"It's all over, and I missed it." The words were barely audible. She stared up at Niko as her body shuddered.

"It's not over. You're going to be fine. The doctors will take care of you, and we're here praying." Nikolos grabbed her hand lightly, taking care with the tubes attached.

She shook her head. Her mouth moved, but no more words could be heard.

Johnny piped up. "You can talk after surgery. We'll be back to see you then."

She turned her head aside and wept. Her hand lightly squeezed Niko's and fell slack. He reluctantly set it down on the cover. He leaned forward and spoke into her ear. "You'd better come back to us. Please. For me?"

A nurse entered to check on her. "She'll be in the operating room. The waiting area is on the third floor, and you can wait there for the doctor."

Niko and Johnny walked back to the emergency room lobby. A police officer awaited them with the rest of the band members. A nurse escorted them to a consultation room.

After getting all their pertinent information, the officer began. "The attacker is a one Howard Merkle. He was bent on revenge, but your manager, Tia, stopped him. He admits to beating her up. She fought him. He strangled her and held a gun to her. He claims

it accidentally went off and he didn't intend to shoot her."

"He planned to shoot someone." Sam's soft voice broke in.

"We believe he intended to kill Mr. Acton. We have a young person who was witness to the fight and called 911."

"What do you need from us?"

"Did you, Mr. Acton, rape Shana Amstead?" The officer flashed a photo.

"Excuse me? Is that what he claims? I'm a Christian and don't engage in sex outside of marriage. Forced or consensual." Niko's jaw dropped. He'd never faced such accusations before.

Max spoke. "We were with him all night at the hotel. We share rooms and don't go anywhere by ourselves. Too hard with the crowds. You could verify that with the security video. Johnny shared his room."

"Why do you think Mr. Merkle would make such a claim?"

Niko sighed. "I chatted with Shana after the concert—signed a t-shirt and had a photo taken with her. That was it. She asked to go out with me, but I refused. This Merkle guy came up and jerked her away. He said a few choice words to me as well." Niko shook his head.

"Could Miss Bartel testify to this?"

"She was with us, yes." Sam said. "She's our manager."

"She is in surgery right now. We need to get up upstairs." Niko added.

The officer nodded. "I have your information. Don't leave town for a few days, Mr. Acton." He surveyed the band. "I believe the rest of you are free to

go.”

They stood and sought the elevator. No one spoke, and Niko hugged the purse to his chest in an attempt to ease the ache deep within.

They slumped into seats in the grey, windowless waiting room, and Wayne brought them all coffee.

Johnny pulled Tia’s cell phone out. None of them had ever spoken to Roberto outside of seeing him at church. Once again, something Tia always handled for them so they could focus on their music. He walked over to the window to make a call.

“What’d she say?” Rocco asked.

Niko shook his head and set the bag on the chair next to him. “She was sorry. She missed something, but it was hard to hear and she struggled to talk. Oh, and ‘It’s over.’ But I have no idea what that meant.”

He bit his lip, folded his arms across his chest, still able to sip his coffee. He stretched out his legs and leaned his head back against the wall.

“Well, the tour is over—perhaps she meant that. Is she sad because she won’t be with us anymore?” Sam asked. “I know I’m going to miss her. We should have thrown her some kind of a thank you party.”

Niko sat up. “She’ll be with us.”

Johnny strode over and dropped the phone back in the bag. “No, she won’t. You’ve been too distracted by the attentions of beautiful women to realize that this was our last gig on this tour. Tia’s done. According to Jazzy, our new manager is Paige.”

Niko shook his head. “That can’t be right. What’d Roberto say?”

“He’s the attorney who had looked over our contracts. He said Tia has them, and we need to sign and send them off to Jazzy as soon as possible. He was

surprised she hadn't given them to us already, as she's had them since before we left Milwaukee."

"That's it? She's in terrible pain and she's worried about contracts?" Rocco frowned. "Why now if she's sat on them this long?"

Johnny shook his head. "That wasn't it. Roberto asked for me to call if she doesn't make it. He has her will on file and suspects, given the nature of her injuries, she wanted to make sure he knew it might be needed. He's praying for her. His wife, Stephanie, is one of Tia's friends. They'll give the prayer ministry at Orchard Hill a call. A lot of people will be praying."

Niko growled. "She's not going to die."

"You don't know that," Sam said. "She took a bullet for you and a beating before that. She's a tiny thing. How much abuse can her body take?"

"I refuse to believe she'll die. Johnny, if we weren't in a hospital, I'd slug you for even mentioning it as a possibility."

"We're supposed to leave town. So now what? We can't all stay here while she recovers." Marc threw his empty cup in the trash bin.

"I want to get home to my family, guys. I'm fond of Tia, but we need to make a decision about this soon." Wayne tapped his finger on his cup as his eyes connected with each band member in turn.

"I'm stayin'. I'll grab my stuff once we know she's okay." Niko lifted his eyes up to stare at the ceiling.

Sam sank into a chair. "I want to go home too. Hospitals make me nervous."

Marc nodded. "I promised my girlfriend, Ginny, that I'd be back in a few days. Sorry, Niko. I like Tia too..."

Johnny sighed. "I don't see what good it would be

for all of us to stay anyway. I scanned the budget, and while Tia's kept us tight, we weren't given much to play with."

"It comes down to economics, doesn't it? Trumps love any day. Probably a song in there somewhere." Niko sipped his coffee and stared down at his sneakers.

Johnny stood and came to kick Niko's feet. "I'll stay with you so you don't mope into a hole. We'll share a hotel room. I don't eat much and have some savings. I'm good. The rest of you can go."

"Let's wait to find out how she's doing after surgery and visit her before we hit the road." Sam offered.

Niko sighed. "Deal."

* * *

Two hours later, the surgeon finally came in. "Nikolos?"

He jumped to his feet, as did the band. "They're with me."

The doctor nodded. "The surgery went well, but we've been unable to wake her. We are concerned about this with her head injury."

"Can we visit her?" Sam asked.

"One at a time once she's in her room. It's intensive care. You'll have to wait there."

"Is it normal to have to go to intensive care after an operation like this?" Niko asked.

The surgeon frowned. "Until we can assess what's going on in her brain, that's where she'll stay. I won't lie to you boys. Her condition is critical. We almost lost her on the table."

"Thank you." Johnny said.

The doctor strode away. Niko picked up Tia's bag. They traipsed to the waiting room with more coffee and waited.

Lord, please...

An hour later, Niko walked into the room filled with machines beeping and whirring against the backdrop of his footsteps. She didn't move. He could barely see her chest rise and fall to breathe. At least she was doing that without help. When had he ever seen this woman still? She was a bundle of energy keeping them on track. She even did their laundry every week while on tour but insisted on them folding their own clothes.

"Come on, Tia. We're waiting for you. Wake up. Please?" He bent over and placed a light kiss on her cheek. "I'll return. Johnny and I are staying in town. We'll make sure they take good care of you." He touched a curl nestled next to her face. So soft.

Who was this woman, and why was he only now seeing her?

CHAPTER TWO

Love is a sweet tyranny, because the lover endureth his torments willingly.

Proverb

Niko and Johnny checked into a cheap hotel with their luggage, guitars, and Tia's belongings.

"Come on, Niko. We need sleep. They'll call if there's an emergency." Johnny leaned against his headboard paging through a notebook from one of Tia's bags.

"That's private. You shouldn't be reading her stuff."

"She wrote a lot, but you're right. I think, however, you should." He tossed the book to him.

Niko caught it and growled. "Go to sleep, Johnny." He slammed it onto the nightstand.

"Good night, coz."

* * *

The lights were out, but Niko couldn't relax. What if Johnny was right? Did Tia like him? Had he taken her for granted? Guilt plagued him. He slugged his pillow for the fifth time. Finally, he sat up and clicked on a small lamp, aiming it at his bed. Johnny slept facing the other way. He picked up the notebook, and his hand caressed the cover. It wasn't anything special, but it was private. He shouldn't read it. But what if it contained information they needed to help her? In spite of his lame justification for his action, he flipped to the first page.

Neat script went by date. He flipped to a recent

entry.

Nikolos did an amazing job tonight with the concert. He smiled more. Probably because of the sweet little blonde in the front row. Hardest part of being a manager to this band is I'm in love with the lead singer, who doesn't realize it. He soaks up the attention of the beauties who don't even know him. I guess it's the job description, right? Stay behind the scenes and let them focus on their ministry.

Unknown.

Unseen.

Unloved.

Lord, when will it be my turn for a man to smile at me like that? Someone who will want to understand my hopes and dreams and care about what haunts me and what makes me happy?

We'll be back in Milwaukee soon. Home for them, but not me. I'll be homeless and unemployed. The record label only allowed me on this tour under duress, and I don't get final payment until I've returned and the contracts are turned over to Paige.

Powerhouse Paige. Yup, betcha Niko will pay attention to her. She's a flirty girl, but she couldn't be bothered with my boys this past year. She only works with those whose star is rising so she can make more money and enjoy special favors. As if that's what's important?

The men of Specific Gravity aren't like that. They've respected all women. Young, old, attractive or not. Their mommas raised them well. Nikolos has spent time with ladies during the tour, but he's been smart, taking Johnny with him on double dates. Safety in numbers and avoiding the appearance of evil. I'm proud of them for that. I've been sad at being overlooked and ignored, but it's what I signed up for.

When we're "home," I'm left behind again. I disappear