

the road to healing
is filled with potholes

SUSAN M.
BAGANZ

PESTO AND POTHOLES



AN
ORCHARD HILL
CHURCH NOVEL

PESTO AND POTHOLES

Susan M. Baganz

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ENDORSEMENTS

"In this dynamic novel, talented author Susan Baganz takes readers on a roller-coaster of events and emotions to remind us that even when life seems off-track, God rides beside us and promises "Have faith, child; you are safe in my care." Reserve space on your Keepers shelf for *Pesto and Potholes!*" Loree Lough, award-winning author of 104 books, including reader favorite *Saving Alyssa* (#3 in Harlequin Heartwarming's "A Child to Love" series) and *For Love of Eli*, winner Reader's Choice Best Short Contemporary award (Abingdon's "Quilts of Love" series)

"Poignant romance of two lost souls learning about the things that go wrong, humanity's fault lines and how to grow and love again despite the potholes that inevitably crop up. Baganz manages to throw some laughter and joy into desperate situations in this debut novel. Read *Pesto and Potholes* for a crazy adventure that makes Italian food with a side of Ninja warriors seem natural." Lisa Lickel, author of *The Last Detail*

DEDICATION

To Dr. Robert G. Lane,
Professor Emeritus of Clinical Psychology at the
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, for helping me see
potholes as places of hope and healing.

PROLOGUE

August 2008

Renata placed the last candlestick on the table. The pastor had told her to submit. Be kind and cheerful for her husband. She hadn't had time to change out of her work clothes, but had at least put on lipstick and combed her hair. She was bursting to tell Mick the news.

The click of the doorknob sent a shiver of fear up her spine. How can a doorknob...? *Peace, Renata, God will not abandon you.*

Mick strode in. She smiled at him. "I'm glad you're home, Mick. I have something to tell you."

He scowled at her, and she swallowed her fear. The cold look in his eyes chiseled away at her joy. "I went to the doctor today for an ultrasound. We're having a girl!"

The force of the slap he delivered snapped her neck back. She should have anticipated it from the look in his eyes. She had prayed he would come around to being happy about being a father. She had hoped for a miracle for their marriage. "But Mick—" she cried.

He mimicked her in a high voice. "But Mick." He slapped her again. "Don't expect me to be happy. A girl? You thought I'd want a girl? Even if I wanted a kid, the last thing I'd want is a girl."

"Please, Mick—" She was pleading now. She dared to look up at him. *God, please, help me.*

His hand came up, and she shrank back. Warm moisture flowed out of her nose as his fist withdrew. He grabbed her hair and jerked her head with such force she saw stars. She struggled to stay on her feet as

he dragged her to the living room and tossed her like a rag doll to the floor.

She gasped for air as his steel-tipped boots ravaged her side, her stomach, her back. She lost track of any specific pain. Everything hurt. She tried to curl up. *Please, please don't hurt my baby. God, rescue me!*

A final kick to the head was the last thing she remembered as she slid into darkness.

* * *

She awoke with no notion of how much time had elapsed. She feared moving in case Mick were nearby. She listened. The house was silent and bathed in moonlight from the open drapes in the living room. When she moved, pain radiated through her entire body. Was there any area he had not struck or kicked? Her hand came to rest on her abdomen. The baby didn't move.

She crawled slowly to the landline phone near the kitchen. She braced herself on a chair to lift up and reach the handheld receiver. She dialed 911, slid back to the floor, and, once again, welcomed the darkness.

* * *

She awoke in the hospital in labor. *No, it's too soon for the baby to come.*

But come she did.

Renata held the tiny infant in her arms and wept as her baby's skin turned blue and grew cold. If only she had died with her daughter.

Lord, how am I to go on now?

CHAPTER ONE

September 2009

At last, Renata had the freedom to start life over. A clean slate. The past was dead and buried. She wiped sweaty palms on her skirt as she waited for the pastor's message to end. He was talking about trusting God, even when times were hard.

She had lived that message, hadn't she? Had someone forwarded her name and informed him she would be there?

Renata shook her head as she bent in prayer along with the rest of the large congregation.

Help me to trust You on this new journey, Lord.

Renata longed to slip out and go home, but her gregarious roomie, Stephanie, had driven and now held her hostage. Steph brought her a cup of coffee as Renata hid behind a plant in the crowded café where people mingled. Renata held the cup more as a prop. It gave her hands something to do as Stephanie introduced her to friends. She shifted her weight as people gathered close, bumping into each other.

Stephanie grinned at her, and Renata smiled halfheartedly as she took a deep breath. She had just met Gabby and Paul, and their ten-month-old son, Jacob, who was sleeping on his daddy's shoulder. They were nice enough. Being that close to a baby was agony.

Just don't look at him.

Some other young men had come to join them as well. Bryan, James, and John were the names she had been told. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck under her long hair as Bryan looked her over like a

horse he considered for purchase. The hardness of his eyes reminded her of... *No. Don't go there.* She was grateful nothing more was required of her other than "Hello."

Was it impolite to look at their shoes? She'd heard a person could learn a lot about someone by his shoes. Bryan wore dirty athletic shoes. High priced, but unimpressive indeed.

Dark brown dress shoes entered the circle, and Renata's gaze came up as a tall man in crisp khakis, a button-down white shirt, and no tie arrested her attention. Stephanie drew him closer to her side with a wide grin.

Was everyone here Steph's friend? Renata chuckled mentally. Her outgoing, blonde bombshell of a roommate hadn't changed much since college. Ren took in the details of this man. Tall. Muscular. Hair the color of a dark roast coffee. Deep chocolate eyes. His glance was warm and sincere. He looked...safe.

Hmmm. Isn't that something?

Her shoulders relaxed as she released a breath of air, and her heartrate slowed. She paid close attention, which was not an easy task in the noisy chaos of the café area of the church after the worship service had ended.

"Tony, I'm glad you are here. I wanted to introduce you to my roomie. Renata. This is Tony, my boss at De Luca's Cucina and Gabby's little brother" — she turned to Tony — "and this is Renata Blake, a dear friend of mine who moved here from Oshkosh."

"Glad to meet you. What'd you do in Oshkosh?" asked Tony.

Renata flinched, sucked in a breath of air, and held it.

"Let's not talk about the past. Renata is here for a new start in life." Stephanie gave Renata's arm a squeeze as she spoke.

Renata exhaled slowly and gave her friend a look of gratitude.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable." Tony's voice was deep and resonant. He sounded sincere.

"Tony, the bonfire on Thursday night would be a great opportunity for Renata to get to know more people here at church." Gabby jumped in to change the subject.

Blood pounded behind Renata's eyes.

Other people planning her social life? This couldn't be good.

She shook her head. She would rather sit at home and read a book. It was too soon.

Stephanie, however, disagreed. "What a great idea, Gabby. I can't take her because I'm scheduled to work at De Luca's. Renata, you should go. It'll be fun. I'm sure Tony would pick you up."

"Hey, what about me?" said Bryan as he thumped his chest. "Am I chopped liver or what? I'll come get you, Renata." His eyes lingered overly long on her body, and Tony cleared his throat.

James and John also chimed in with offers to escort her.

"No offense, but I have known you boys *far* too long." Stephanie turned her gaze away from the trio. "It should be Tony. I can trust *him* to be a gentleman."

Renata watched as Tony glanced at the men with a grimace at the rebuff they had received. He turned his attention back to her. "If you would like to go, I'd be pleased to give you a ride and help you get acquainted." His eyebrows rose, daring her to turn him

down.

A sliver of courage rose to the surface as Renata's eyes darted to Stephanie and back to her friend's handsome employer. "That would be fine. Thank you, Tony." She wondered if he even heard her as her tentative words came out softly. Her gaze dropped to her hands clenched around the cup she held.

Brian snorted and stalked off. John and James faded out of the group to join him, mumbling their goodbyes. The tension left Renata's shoulders at their departure.

Paul smiled as he switched his sleeping son to his other shoulder. "You can rely on Tony. I may be his brother-in-law, but there's no one I would trust more than him. His parents set a high standard for any man to follow." He turned to look into his wife's eyes. "As I learned when I was courting his sister." They smiled at each other.

Gabby and Paul turned to go. "It was nice meeting you, Renata. Bye, Steph. We'll see you later at Mom's, right, Tony?"

"Sure. And Paul? Watch out, I'm eager for a game of football."

"You got it." Paul gave Tony a fist bump to the shoulder as they left to visit with other people.

Tony turned back to Stephanie and Renata, since their group had shrunk to three. "What are your plans for this afternoon?" He sipped his coffee.

"I have some unpacking to do," Renata answered.

Tony frowned. "Sounds like a less than relaxing way to spend the day. I will pick you up around six-thirty on Thursday. I work until six when my brother will come to fill in for me. I apologize in advance if I arrive smelling like garlic." He winked.

"You are forgiven in advance." Renata giggled. "Does that mean we won't be bothered by vampires?" She glanced up at him.

Where did that come from? I can't believe I said that! A cute guy looks at me, and I become mush? Oh, I am in trouble. Haven't I learned anything from the past?

Tony laughed, nodded and lifted his Styrofoam coffee cup in salute. "Till then."

Stephanie led Renata away. She resisted the urge to look back at Tony.

What had she gotten herself into?

* * *

Renata sat cross-legged on the floor as she broke down the last of the boxes. She dragged her aching body up, stiff and sore from unpacking, and bent to grab the cardboard to put in the basement. Coming back up the stairs, weariness settled into her bones.

She slid her favorite round wicker, cushioned Papasan chair out to the patio, relaxed into the chair, and popped open a can of cola. Two other plastic chairs and a small table were on the makeshift deck. She had originally feared living in a first floor apartment in Milwaukee, but this neighborhood had been safe so far. Kids played Frisbee down the block. Her neighbors represented many different nationalities, and they had welcomed her and smiled as they would walk by, ride bikes, or meet in the hallway.

The Singh family, from India, lived kitty-corner upstairs. Sarai had dark skin, shimmering long hair, and the most winsome smile, and their two adorable children often had grins a mile wide when they said "hi!" to her. Her husband owned the C-Store down the

road. Alphonso, from Cuba, lived next to them on the second floor. He was a single man who worked an irregular schedule as a firefighter for the City of Milwaukee.

Edith Montell lived above her. She was an older lady who had a helper come several times a week. Renata suspected Edith was in her seventies, but she had a spry attitude. There was a Hispanic single mom, Christine, next door, and a young African-American couple across the hall whom she had yet to meet. All in all, it was a colorful neighborhood made up of hard-working people. It was quite different from her "white bread" upbringing further north in Wisconsin. She had fallen into a rainbow of fruit-flavored candy.

Stephanie pulled her rear-wheel-drive convertible up in front of the apartment complex. Renata thought her friend's car was silly for anyone to drive if they lived in Wisconsin. She suspected it wouldn't handle snow well. Renata rose out of her chair and walked out to help bring in the Chinese food.

She spooned beef with peppers onto a plate for herself and chicken chow mein onto another plate for Stephanie. Rice, fortune cookies, and crab rangoon rounded out their feast. They settled on the porch to enjoy dinner outside.

"Are you sure about me going Thursday night? I won't know anyone. I'm intimidated by the prospect. You didn't give me much of a choice."

"You will be fine. You did have a choice, you know. I wouldn't have forced you. I'm not Mick." Stephanie paused. "Everyone who meets you loves you. Be yourself. You'll be safe with Tony. He's well-liked and will make sure you are connected to more people. He'll watch out for you."

Renata fought the pain Mick's name conjured. She swallowed hard. "How do you know Tony? I mean, I know you work for him, but your knowledge of him goes beyond employer and employee."

"I met him at church when I moved here a few years ago. I've always considered Tony as a big brother." She paused. "He had a girlfriend a while back and was on the verge of getting married, but something happened. He never speaks about it, and it's generally understood he doesn't want to be asked. Working for him, I have seen his Italian temper flare in the kitchen when things get crazy, but he always apologizes. He's a fair boss. He defends his waitresses if a client gets out of line. He works hard. If he has a fault, it would be that he is overly responsible. Gotta say, though, the woman who snags that hunk will be fortunate."

"Okay, you've convinced me. I'll be in good hands with Tony, and I committed myself to going. Don't be surprised if I need reassurances this week. I'm terrified. There are too many new things hitting me all at once."

"I understand. You've been through pain and loss and have hidden inside yourself for years. You needn't fear. What happened in your marriage was not your fault. None of it. Stop blaming yourself and believing you are flawed and incapable of a man loving you. My job is to keep reminding you that you are a princess in Christ...precious and delightful to Him. He will watch over you. If you can trust Him, you can walk through this week, and Thursday night, in confidence."

"I needed that, Steph. I hoped the move would help me live above the shame. Instead, it's a shadow dodging every step I take. Guess it's going to take time.

I could not ask for a better friend to help me through."

"Aw, I love you to bits and always have. You know the challenges I've had as well. Maybe together we can face the future. Kind of like *Laverne and Shirley*. 'We're going to make it—'" Stephanie started singing off-key, and they both broke into laughter.

"I'm not going to be the one wearing a big letter on my chest," giggled Renata. "Does that mean I get the Fonz or Richie? Please don't let us have a Lenny and Squiggy living nearby."

"Okay, Ren, enough stalling, what's your fortune cookie say?" Stephanie was cracking hers open, but Renata had just pulled hers out.

"It says, 'An unexpected relationship will become permanent.' Ha! There is no way I'm trusting a man again...much less marrying one."

"Whoa. I can't blame you. I haven't found one worth marrying yet. I'm probably a little more cautious after watching what you went through. Wanna hear mine?"

"Sure." Renata crumpled up the tiny fortune and threw it in the garbage. She shivered in distaste.

Stephanie stifled a giggle. "It says, 'Be a generous friend and a fair enemy.'" She flexed a bicep. "Watch out, men. You mess with Renata, and you'll answer to me." She growled and made a silly face.

Tears of laughter flowed from the two women as the sun set, and they joked about television characters from old shows.

* * *

Tony entered his parents' home, lugging the large laundry bag from the restaurant, and went to the washing machine to start a load. He could smell

Mom's signature spaghetti sauce simmering in the kitchen. Home. It smelled wonderful. He finished as small arms wrapped themselves around his leg.

"Uncle Tony! Up!"

Tony looked down to see his niece, all of two years of age and with large hazel eyes staring up at him under a mop of curly red hair. She had a big grin, and he bent down to pick her up.

"Annalise, how's my favorite girl?"

Annalise giggled and gave him a big hug and kiss. "I'm your girl, Uncle Tony. Mama says you need a wife, an' I gonna marry you." Another kiss followed, and Tony put his face into her neck and blew loudly, causing the little girl to squeal and wiggle in his arms. Laughing, he set her down and squatted to her level.

"You are going to be a beautiful woman someday, Annalise, and by the time you grow up enough to marry, I'll be old and decrepit, and you'll prefer some handsome young man. Thank you, though, for offering to save me from my bachelorhood."

Annalise looked at Tony with her eyes scrunched, and her forehead wrinkled in thought. "What derpt mean?"

"Decrepit? Hmmm, old, worn out, broken down—"

"Oh." Annalise smiled and skipped out of the laundry room as fast as her little legs could carry her. "Mama, Uncle Tony gonna marry me when he decrept." Tony laughed as he followed her to the kitchen where Mom and Ginger were.

He greeted his mother with a kiss and a bear hug. He dipped his finger into the sauce to taste it, earning himself a whack with her wooden spoon. He grinned. "Mama, you make the best sauce this side of the

Atlantic."

"Go on with you." She laughed and swatted at him. "The boys are out in the back making up a game of football. Go join them and work off some mischief."

"Aye, aye, Mama." He scooted out the side door to the yard where they traditionally played football.

"Tony!" Paul walked up to him and gave him a hardy pat on the back, "What'd you think of Renata? Your sisters are already scheming to get you two hitched."

Tony groaned. "Not again. When I find the right girl, I'll be glad to let them advocate for me. I only met Renata this morning. For Pete's sake, give me some breathing room here."

"Did I hear my name taken in vain?" Peter was married to Tony's sister, Ginger.

"Yes, I hear the womenfolk are meddling in my love life again," said Tony, rolling his eyes and giving his brother-in-law a strong handshake.

"What love life would that be, Tony?" asked Michael, another brother-in-law who had to duck out of the way when Tony aimed his fist to tap Michael's shoulder. Michael was married to Gianna, the twin of Ginger. Both Paul and Michael's families exploded at the same rate, each father proudly boasting six kids.

Alexandr came up behind Tony and grabbed him at his waist with one arm while giving him a nuggie on his head with the other. "Hey, little brother, you up for me trouncing you in football?"

"Better to lose at football than at love, heh, Tony?" said Paul, laughing and running away as Tony chased and tackled him to the ground. They chose sides, with Nicholas, the eldest son of Peter and Ginger, age eleven, permitted to join in and even out the teams.

The game lasted over an hour, and the men straggled into the kitchen, hot, sweaty, and covered with grass stains. Tony watched his siblings greet their respective spouses, and he experienced a pang of jealousy. At times like this, he wanted to curse Stacy for the way she'd left him for another man before their wedding. The dream of love he saw with his siblings could have been his. Here he was, in the midst of it all...alone. He thought he'd be over the pain by now.

The younger children dragged Tony into the larger living room. He flopped as though dead on the carpeted floor, with as many kids as could manage it heaped on top of him. "Monkey pile!" they yelled and giggled as Tony grunted, pretended to be hurt, and tickled the children who got closest to his hands. Soon the pile toppled over, as gently as Tony could manage it, to the delight of all before they jumped on him again.

Mr. DeLuca said grace and they finally started eating. Tony remained quiet through the boisterous meal. Of course, in his family, someone had to have a strong desire to say something if they wanted to be heard among the rabble. His sister, Gabby, shared about his upcoming "outing" with Renata, and Tony endured the teasing from the guys. He glared at his sisters, who told him how to hook this girl for a wife. Suggestions of chocolate and flowers and cards abounded. When the meal ended, he sighed with relief. After he collected the clean restaurant laundry and hauled it to his car, he returned to give his mom and dad a hug goodbye, and took off for his apartment.

Tony washed his own load of dirty clothes when he got home in the complex's basement laundry facility. A few quarters spent, and he would have the

clean clothes he needed for the week. While waiting for the load to finish, he sat in his apartment and flipped channels on the television.

I have over one hundred channels. Why can't I find anything of interest to watch?

He turned off the TV in frustration and pulled out his laptop to log on and check his Facebook account and e-mails. He leaned back in his favorite chair, smiling as he read posts by friends and responded to a few. It took time to clean up his e-mails, with most of them going to the recycle bin. The clothes made it to the dryer, and by nine o'clock he had them all folded and put away. Tony flopped into his bed and thought about his day.

He enjoyed his family. He reflected on all the silly, cute things his nieces and nephews had said. He found their perspective refreshing. He remembered the football game and smiled at the fun he'd had with the guys as he rubbed muscles that would be sore tomorrow.

The memory of Renata rose before him. What a unique name. Ren-a-ta. It sounded like a song. Her blue eyes were spectacular, brought out by the blue sweater she had worn. She acted shy, but their church was large and new to her so he could understand that.

But why the reluctance to mention what she did before coming to this area?

She puzzled him. Her melodic voice fit with her pretty, heart-shaped face. Tony shook his head at his fanciful thoughts. Soon he'd stray into thoughts he shouldn't have. Renata was another sister in Christ, someone to introduce around so she would be comfortable. He had learned his lesson the hard way with Stacy. He would keep his distance. In spite of

that, he looked forward to Thursday night.

CHAPTER TWO

It had been a dreary, rainy week. Renata hoped they would cancel the Thursday night bonfire due to wet weather. Thursday, however, dawned bright and clear, with a brisk, cool breeze to dry up the moisture of the previous days. Tony texted her.

Looking forward to tonight. Dress warm. See ya @6:30
Tony

Renata had never had a cell phone before her move to Milwaukee. Stephanie had convinced her it was vital and had shown her all the features. It overwhelmed her, and texting was new. She managed to reply.

Got it—see ya. Ren

She smiled because he had cared enough to contact her. She assumed the restaurant business could be crazy hectic, at least from what Stephanie shared. Anticipation replaced anxiety.

Renata paced outside on the front patio. She wore jeans and her red corduroy shoes, as well as a shirt and sweatshirt. It wasn't due to be a cold night, but there was a chill in the air.

Tony pulled up in a gray sedan, and she was surprised a striking man like him drove such a practical car. It was several years old but in good condition. Her opinion of him rose. He didn't waste money on trying to impress others with material things.

She smiled as Tony walked up to the building. She admired his build and confidence. Stephanie was right. This was a man she could trust. She needn't fear with Tony by her side. Tony didn't see her at first, but when