

sometimes God allows speed bumps on  
the path to redemption...

# SUSAN M. BAGANZ

SALSA AND SPEED BUMPS



AN  
ORCHARD HILL  
CHURCH NOVEL

Salsa and Speed

bumps

Susan M. Baganz

Copyright 2015 Susan M. Baganz

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Edited by Sally Shupe

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are the product of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE® Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org).

Published by Prism Book Group

ISBN-10: 1-943104-35-2

ISBN-13: 978-1-943104-35-2

First Edition, 2015

Published in the United States of America

Contact info: [contact@prismbookgroup.com](mailto:contact@prismbookgroup.com)

<http://www.prismbookgroup.com>



*Other books by Susan M. Baganz*

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances  
Pesto & Potholes  
Salsa & Speed Bumps

Historical Christmas Novella  
Fragile Blessings  
(Also featured in print in *Love's Christmas Past*)

## *DEDICATION*

To Doris Pollard Wichern, a beautiful woman, my  
grandmother, and the best cheerleader.

*“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,  
whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,  
whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if  
anything worthy of praise,  
dwell on these things.”*

Philippians 4:8

## ONE

Dondé hay vida hay esperanza.  
*Where there is life there is hope.*

~Mexican proverb

*June 2011*

"Suck it up, Steph. You can do this," she whispered to herself. A lame pep talk as she rubbed her shaking hands on her skirt. She'd always enjoyed her job, but today? Today, she prayed she'd be able to keep from running to the bathroom to throw up. She swallowed hard and pasted on a smile as she stepped forward to greet the staff of *Every Child a Home* by name as they entered DeLuca's Cucina for their fundraising luncheon. She knew many of them from church and from having hosted this event in previous years.

"Miss Simson, how good to see you again." Max Bixby, the President and CEO of the non-profit adoption agency approached her. By his side was a handsome man in his early thirties with straight dark hair parted slightly off center and falling down on his forehead. His sapphire blue eyes twinkled, probably made even bluer by the cobalt shirt he wore with his snappy charcoal suit. "I have a new associate I would like you to meet. This is Mr. Roberto Rodriguez from Harrington and Associates. He is serving as legal counsel." He paused and looked around. "I see another benefactor coming." Mr. Bixby walked away, leaving them alone.



Stephanie reached out her hand. The attorney took it and raised it to his mouth while maintaining eye contact. "A pleasure, Stephanie." His voice had a rich, deep tone. She repressed the shiver of delight that coursed through her body as his lips touched her fingers. She forced herself to slow her breathing as she gave him a smile. He released her hand, and she froze—speechless. His eyebrow quirked before he spoke again, preventing any awkwardness to arise between them. "You appear familiar...do you attend Orchard Hill Church?"

Stephanie nodded. "Yes—for years, but I regret I've not noticed you there." Oh, she wished she had. Given her present life circumstances, it was probably better she hadn't. Nothing good could come of getting acquainted with any eligible bachelor at this point, no matter how handsome he might be.

"Not surprising, considering the size of the congregation. I moved into the Milwaukee area about two months ago."

"Welcome. You chose a wonderful organization to collaborate with if you were seeking a ministry opportunity. *Every Child a Home* has been doing great work in this area for years and has a wonderful reputation."

Mr. Rodriguez glanced over to where Mr. Bixby visited with some couples who had just arrived. "I've heard good things about them. How did you know I joined them for the purpose of ministry?"

"As legal counsel, I assumed your position was volunteer. I suspect most lawyers would not find working adoption cases to be highly profitable. Forgive me if I'm wrong."

"Correct. But I'll tell you a secret." He leaned

forward and whispered in her ear, causing a delightful shiver to course through her. "My wonderful Christian parents adopted me, and I want to help others because of the gift I was given by *my* birth-mother."

His breath tickled her skin and she detected a scent of wintergreen. "What a great reason to serve, Mr. Rodriguez."

"Call me Roberto, or Robbie, please." He stepped back, giving her space.

"Okay. Roberto. Lunch will begin soon, and I need to get everyone seated. I hope we can talk again. I would love to learn more about the work you do." She took a step towards a group of people mingling nearby.

"Are you available for lunch on Sunday? After church?" He spoke only loud enough for her to hear.

She stopped mid-pivot, placed a hand on her chest, and tilted her head to the side. "Are you asking me out? We just met."

He shifted on his feet, her only indication he might be nervous. "There's no ring on your finger, so I assumed you were single. Forgive me if I was wrong, but yes, I am asking for a date."

Stephanie tried to hold back a giggle and her hand moved to cover her lips for a second before dropping again to her side. "I accept. Sunday, after church. Shall we meet in the café by the fireplace?"

Roberto smiled, and she noted a dimple on his right cheek. What was it about Hispanic men that got her heart beating faster? Or was it just this particular one? Luis had never made her feel like this.

"Sounds good. I will let you get back to work, but first" — he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a business card — "in case anything comes up. My cell

phone is usually used for work, so getting a call for any other reason would be refreshing."

"Thank you." She took the card and slid it into the pocket of her skirt.

"Till Sunday." Roberto winked at her before he moved away to speak with other people who were arriving.

"Till Sunday," Stephanie whispered.

She hung in the background during the luncheon, refilling water glasses and listening to the stories from those who had adopted through the agency. A birth mother talked about how she made the difficult choice to give up her child. Stephanie stood in the back of the room and moisture came to her eyes at this young woman's story, so similar to her own. She rested her hand over her stomach. Could she be that courageous? She willed the tears away while scanning the tables and found Roberto watching her. He smiled, and she returned it as the heat rose in her cheeks.

She had made a date with this man. A stranger. At the same time, Luis, her ex-boyfriend and the father of her child, worked in the kitchen preparing the food for this event. She refused to talk to Luis for the past several weeks. He tried to approach her every Sunday, but she rebuffed him. He texted her daily, but she didn't respond to his pleas intermixed with insults. He was the biological father of their child, but she could not envision marriage to him.

The man was egocentric and macho, and she was beginning to question whether or not he was even a Christian based on his actions, words, and especially how he had treated her. He had only wanted her for sex—sex she *had* refused. His greater strength prevailed. She experienced a shudder of revulsion at

her remembrance of that night. She had been a fool and had never reported him, feeling somehow she was to blame for what happened. Shame had wrapped around her since and increased even more now that she was faced with the consequences of that experience.

Her eyes wandered back to Roberto Rodriguez. He seemed like a gentleman. Was it fair to accept a date with him? She was three months' pregnant. An unwed mother whose life was upended, and she was undecided about what to do next. She wasn't showing yet, but soon enough, she would be unable to hide the secret from a new beau, assuming one date led to another.

Physically, she found Roberto attractive. She already resolved that a kiss on the hand was fine, but not on the lips this time around. She would follow her friend Renata's rules and not be alone in private with a man until she was married. She wanted a guy who would love her for who she was inside, not for her body. She sighed. Her body wouldn't be looking so hot before long.

She would keep the date. What could it hurt? She fingered the business card in her pocket and smiled. *God, what are you up to bringing a new man into my life now?*

\* \* \*

Stephanie dreamt she held an infant, and her heart filled with joy. Out of nowhere, Luis appeared.

"It's my kid, give it here. If you won't move in with me, I get the baby," Luis growled. He was big and mean, not the charming man she once knew.

"You can't take my baby away from me," she cried

as fear exploded in her heart.

Luis wore a wife-beater t-shirt and jeans. He reached for the infant as someone else entered the room. It was Roberto, wearing a suit, tie and holding a briefcase. He stepped in between Stephanie and Luis who flexed his muscles. Robbie wasn't weak though. She could tell his strength was concealed by his suit coat as it stretched over his broad shoulders. He exuded confidence.

"This child is protected by the law, and you can't take the baby from Stephanie. I have documents to put an end to this."

"Papers? Like I care about that?" Luis sneered and reached forward to try to push Roberto aside.

"How about deportation papers? I think the Immigration officials over there would be more than willing to support me in fulfilling the mandates of those."

Sure enough, Stephanie turned and saw several armed officers from the Department of Immigration and Naturalization.

"I thought you had a permit to be in this country?" she asked Luis.

"I did, but it expired," he snarled, but his bravado faded as he searched for a way to escape.

"Luis, you have been in the United States for over a year and had plenty of opportunity to start the process to become a citizen. Now, it's too late." Roberto didn't move, providing a shield for her.

"But it's my kid. If I go, the baby goes with me," Luis whined.

"The child is an American citizen and, by rights, stays here. Sorry, buddy." Roberto stood firm.

Luis's fists clenched, his face turned red and a vein

bulged in his forehead. From out of nowhere, he aimed a pistol at Roberto's chest.

Stephanie screamed.

She sat up with a start, dripping with sweat. She glanced around her bedroom. It was early dawn. Her body shook. Her hair was plastered to her head. Her heart raced. After rising to use the bathroom, Stephanie walked to the kitchen and poured herself a large glass of water and drank. She leaned against the counter and took a deep breath until her pulse returned to normal. The calendar on the fridge reminded her it was Sunday—the day of her date with Roberto. For the first time in months, she had no nausea. Welcome, second trimester. Goodbye, morning sickness. Hello, vivid dreams and night sweats. With a sigh, she went to shower and prepare.

Stephanie's sense of foreboding increased as she drove to church. She wondered if Luis would hound her after the service. The café was a busy place, and she had not told him she had a date with another man. Why should she? They were done. It was none of his business, but she doubted he'd see it that way. Guilt wracked her conscience. She needed to confess to Roberto about her pregnancy. As a result, this might be her only date. She feared she was taking advantage of one of the truly "good guys" in the world by even having accepted.

Slipping into the auditorium through a side door as the opening song started, she slid into the row next to Renata and Tony. They were the only people at church she had stayed connected with in recent months. She stopped going to the adult group when she got that positive result. She couldn't live up to her own reputation. For now, only Renata shared her

secret.

Renata gripped Stephanie's hand with a squeeze and gave her a smile as they stood to worship. After the singing was done, Stephanie jotted notes in her bulletin and doodled as her mind wandered from Pastor Andrew's message to the possible confrontation with Luis that might be forthcoming. She willed herself to take deep breaths.

*It was just a nightmare.*

*It was just a nightmare.*

*It was just a nightmare.*

"Are you okay, Steph?" Renata leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"Terrified, but I'll be fine."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Luis. I am meeting a new guy for a lunch date."

Renata's eyes went wide and she mouthed, "Why didn't you tell me?" Her friend sighed, shook her head, and leaned back against the chair.

Stephanie shrugged. They were best friends, but they hadn't talked for a few days. She should have called. One more failure to chalk up to her account.

Too soon, and not soon enough, the service ended, and Stephanie wove through the throng of worshippers to the restroom. Finishing up, she freshened her lipstick and made her way to the fireplace in the café where Roberto stood talking to someone she didn't recognize. He appeared at ease and different yet no less handsome, wearing a button down shirt, no tie and beige khakis. Her heart beat faster at the sight of him. She swallowed.

Roberto saw her approach, said a few words to his companions, and met her as she reached the designated spot.

"Stephanie, you look stunning."

"You don't look so bad yourself, Roberto." Heat rose in her cheeks as his name purred off her lips.

"Shall we do Olive Garden or do you prefer Applebee's since you work Italian every day?"

"Applebee's would be a nice change, thank you for asking."

"Do you want to take separate cars and meet there? That way, if for some reason I offend you, you can leave at any time." Robbie gave a lopsided grin as he said the words.

"I doubt you'll offend me, but perhaps you might decide you want nothing more to do with me by the time the check comes. I think driving our own vehicles makes sense. We don't need to come back to the church later to pick one up."

"Well, well, well. What's the little tart dug up now?" Luis snarled.

Stephanie shivered and turned to face him. What would Roberto think?

"Roberto Rodriguez, meet Luis Vasquez," she managed to squeak out.

The men sized each other up. Roberto was taller by two inches, muscular and lean, and Luis was shorter but stocky. Roberto extended a hand, but Luis refused to shake it.

"I'm surprised, Mr. Vasquez, that you would refer to any lady in such disparaging terms. It borders on slander."

"She has you snowed already, huh?"

"Luis, please don't make a scene. You have no right to interfere in my life."

"I've every right." Luis was about to continue but was interrupted.



“Stephanie, I suggest we depart now.” Roberto took her elbow and navigated her through the crowd and away from Luis. When they reached the door to exit the building, he stopped and gazed at her. “Are you okay?”

Stephanie sighed. “Thank you. I’ll be fine. I’m famished and expect there will be a wait at Applebee’s. Should we head over?” She bit her lower lip, not looking forward to explaining what just happened.

“I’ll meet you there.”

They parted on the sidewalk, and Stephanie strode to her car without incident. Luis hadn’t followed them out. Her cell phone beeped a text as she settled behind the steering wheel. She glanced at it. Luis. His insults were like a punch to the gut. With a deep breath, she hit delete and made her way to the restaurant with a sense of dread and her invisible cloak of shame. Out loud, she spoke to reassure herself, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But would Roberto see it that way?

## TWO

Hemos estado tontos una vez en nuestras vidas.  
*We have been fools once in our lives.*

~Mexican proverb

Robbie opened the door to Stephanie's little red foreign import as she reached for her purse. She turned towards him, eyes wide. He couldn't believe she had agreed to lunch and was grateful a lowlife was his competition. He was determined to treat her like she deserved—special.

"Wow, pleasant surprise. How did you know what kind of vehicle I drove?"

His hand came forward to help her out of the low car. "Wednesday, after lunch, there were few cars left in the lot, and yours was to the back and just looked like the kind of car you would drive. Your personalized license plate is descriptive too—BLD BOM." Roberto smiled and closed the door.

"A result of my younger, wilder days. I should give it up. My best friend says my convertible is impractical transportation for someone in Wisconsin. She's right. I'll probably be trading it in soon."

"It looks like it'd be fun to drive with the top down on a day like today with the sun shining and the weather not too hot."

Stephanie nodded. "One of the selling points."

Together, they walked to the restaurant. Robbie seated Stephanie on a bench outside in the shade while he made his way to put their name on the waiting list.

He returned and lowered himself to the seat next to her, keeping a space between them. "In spite of the

length of the line, they said it would only be about twenty minutes."

"I think I can survive that long."

"Good, a woman expiring on the first date is considered bad form." He folded his hands in front of him.

"Expire? You make me sound like milk that's gone bad." She giggled.

He liked her laugh. "Never that."

"I should explain about Luis."

"The bore at church? No need. He's jealous because I am with you and he's not. Simple and understandable. We can forget it happened."

"Can you really forget things like that?" She turned towards him and placed a hand on his arm.

Warmth spread through his shirt like a branding iron. "No, but I can choose not to focus on it. I prefer to live as Paul said in Philippians, 'Whatever is pure and right and honorable...or something similar...think on these things.'"

"That's a good philosophy in theory, but harder to do in reality."

There was a heaviness behind the words as Robbie gazed into her troubled blue eyes. "Is life so difficult for you that you cannot consider the good things?" He placed his hand on hers—the electrical circuit completed a route through his heart. "I'm sorry. That's probably too personal for a first date, especially when I haven't even fed you yet." He removed his hand. This girl stirred things in him...

Stephanie giggled. "Personal, yes, but I'm beyond the foolishness of college years when I pretended life was great and grand and I was the hottest thing since sliced bread. There are things you should understand

about me before you decide I'm worth a second glance."

"So I can expect you to be authentic and not just eye candy?" He didn't mind the eye candy part at all but sensed a depth in her. He longed to learn more.

"I hope so. How about you? Are you going to be 'eye candy' as you put it?"

He glanced away and sighed. "I don't think I'm anything special outside of my standing in Jesus Christ. I'm an ordinary man who tries to do his job well and seeks to listen to God as He directs my steps, day by day."

"Does God direct you that closely?" She squeezed his arm with the hand still resting there. "I believe in God, and try to obey, but sometimes I feel, well, alone. Like He's not talking to me."

"Everyone goes through periods of wondering if God is listening and will answer prayers." He glanced back at her. He was close enough to inhale her perfume. She smelled like a piña colada—pineapple and coconut. His mouth watered.

"You've experienced that too?"

"More often than I'd care to admit."

"So what do you do? How can you walk daily without hearing His voice? I'm not being antagonistic, I want to figure out if I'm missing something."

Robbie was delighted with this line of questioning. More than anything, he wanted a woman in his life who shared his faith. "If I read God's word on a daily basis, seek to pray, and ask about what it is He desires of me, even when I don't hear him, I can make decisions and choices in a way I think is what He would want for me.

"It doesn't mean everything I do is perfect. I screw

up a lot more than I like. Not every risk pays off. At least I assume I've His approval on the path. If there is a check in my spirit, anything holding me back, I listen, even if it's something I want to do. I figure it might be the Holy Spirit telling me to stop. Does that make sense?"

"I think so. Scripture says you can grieve the Holy Spirit through sin. Does simple confession free one up to hear from Him again?"

"I think that's right."

Stephanie sighed. Her hand lifted off his arm and returned to her own lap.

He experienced a chill with its absence. "Is something heavy on your heart, Stephanie? I'm a safe person. I give all my clients a listening ear and complete confidentiality. I would do no less for you as a friend."

"Is that what we are, friends?"

"I'd like for us to be." He reached over to grab her hand and gave it a squeeze. He desired more than that but wondered if he even stood a chance with the beauty by his side.

"I think I would like that too." She rotated her hand around and squeezed back, giving him a smile.

Robbie's name came over the loudspeaker, so he stood and assisted her to her feet, all the while holding her hand. He released it to put his palm on her back as he guided her through the crowd to the hostess. Soon they were seated, placed their orders and received their beverages.

"A bit of Mexican for you?" Robbie teased.

"I get plenty of Italian, working at DeLuca's Cucina, but I don't eat there much. Sometimes I take a sandwich because it's quicker. If I ate that kind of diet