



SOMETIMES, GOD USES  
OUR DEEPEST PAIN  
TO BUILD BRIDGES  
TO HIS BLESSINGS.

*B*ratwurst  
&  
*B*ridges

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Susan M. Baganz

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# Bratwurst and Bridges

*Orchard Hill Romance #5*

*Susan M. Baganz*

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Bratwurst and Bridges

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## *Dedication*

To David Mundt and Ken Nabi.

You both believed in God's calling for my writing long  
before anyone else.

I am grateful and blessed to have been led by you both.



*Other books by Susan M. Baganz*

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*Pesto & Potholes*

*Salsa & Speed Bumps*

*Feta & Freeways*

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*Bratwurst & Bridges*

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Short Stories

*Little Bits 'O Love*

# PROLOGUE

*Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell.*

Emily Dickinson

*January 2013*

Smoke filled the air. Dan bolted into the house dropping his keys as he rushed to the kitchen. "Sharon!" he yelled through a cough. On his mad dash to grab the flaming pan on the stove, he almost tripped over her. He opened the sliding glass door off the dining area and tossed the metal, flames and all, into the snow with a resounding *hisssssss*.

He ran back to his wife sprawled on the kitchen floor. "Sharon?" He checked for a pulse. None. Panic seized him as he fumbled for his phone and called 911 while beginning chest compressions. "Yes, my wife's not breathing. I started CPR. Send someone, please."

The phone dropped to the floor as he counted out compressions. Under his breath, he repeated the chorus to *Staying Alive* to keep a rhythm, broken only by coughing as the hovering smoke continued to assault him.

*Don't be dead. Come on, sweetie. I need you. You're too young to die.* Tears fell onto her cotton shirt. Minutes dragged on like hours until a paramedic pulled him off. Dan stood by in disbelief as they too failed to revive her.

The coroner arrived.

Dead on the scene.

The words spoken to dispatch by the paramedic pierced his soul. He listened to his voice answer questions, but it was as if he hovered above it all. People came and went in a haze. They covered up the body of the woman he loved and carried her away to the morgue. *The morgue?*

Unreal.

When the house was empty again a chill reminded him of the open sliding door. He went out to retrieve the pan and tossed it in the garbage outside. He shut the door behind him in a daze and collapsed on the couch.

She was gone. His wife of ten years. He grabbed his phone, dialed her parents, and broke the news. He repeated the process with his own before calling Pastor Andrew.

"Sorry to bother you so late."

"That's fine, Dan, what's up? You don't sound good."

"Sharon's dead," he choked out. "I don't know what happened. I came home from worship rehearsal and she was...dead. The paramedics, coroner, and police all just left. I tried to revive her..."

"I'm coming over," Andrew said.

"No. It's late. I just wanted you to know."

"I'm coming over. No arguments." The call disconnected.

His stomach growled. Sharon often prepared something light for him on rehearsal nights. Even if he ate earlier, he always came home hungry. He rose and headed to the kitchen. Opening the fridge, he found his favorite dessert, homemade apple pie. He stared at it, realizing it was the last act of love his wife showed him. He slammed the door shut as his gut rebelled at



the thought of food.

Soon Andrew arrived along with Tony, Simon, and Nick, the members of his accountability group. They surrounded him.

The men laid hands on Dan, and Andrew prayed. "Heavenly Father, You knew Sharon's beginning and end, and You understand Dan's grief at losing his beloved wife. Wrap Your arms around him now in the wake of this loss and sustain him through the days to come. We won't pretend to understand why You've chosen to do this, Lord. But we still love You and bless Your holy name."

Dan had no more tears to cry. "Thanks. I've called our parents and now you. Can you let others know?"

"Sure. Come on. You'll stay with us tonight." Andrew pulled Dan to his feet.

He nodded. Any energy to protest went out the door with his heart. A house of memories surrounded him and he wondered if he could live through this. There was no way he could sleep here tonight.

He trudged to the bedroom and stared at the bed where they had slept together, cried together, loved. He shoved some clothing in his gym bag and hauled it back to the living room. Opening the front door, he followed his friends out and locked it.

# ONE

*Mourning is love with no place to go.*

Anonymous

*January 2014*

The last box was dropped on the stack that lined the wall of the two-bedroom apartment. “Thanks, Tony.”

“Call if you need anything, OK?”

Dan nodded. The door shut behind his friend and he took in the space around him. A new bed was in the bedroom with new nightstand and dresser. There was a new sofa and loveseat, kitchen table. Even the dishes, pots and pans, and silverware were new. He’d sold almost everything that reminded him of her—except for a few boxes tucked in the closet of the guest bedroom containing pictures and memories of the children they’d miscarried, her journals, and a few other items from their ten-year marriage. Her photo was on the nightstand by his bed and even looking at that was torture.

Next to his apartment door was a small office that shared a wall with the apartment across the hall. One wall of that room had the hallway on the other side, the room butting up against a similar office in a similarly designed apartment. A wall in the hallway spanned the distance between their doors which mirrored each other in the hallway. He’d make that his home office. The other two apartments on this floor were at the other end of the hall with windows facing

the parking lot.

One year had passed. He stopped by the cemetery yesterday and trudged through snowdrifts in the subzero weather for the reminder that this was his reality. That was when he finally took off his wedding ring. At thirty-four, he was a widower. An unmarried pastor at a church meant he needed to be extra careful as he worked and served. He had no wedding ring to keep the more forward single women from approaching him and making suggestions.

*Right. Like I'm some "catch."* In reality, he'd buried part of himself in that cemetery. Hopes. Dreams. The one person who'd understood him best...

A bang on the wall adjoining his apartment to the one across the hall startled him. Then a cry. Some softer words and a shout. *Great.* His neighbor had kids. Loud kids. Well, it was probably a good thing he spent so much time at work, then...and that his bedroom was on the far side of the apartment away from that wall.

Except he was on a forced leave of absence. He might appear put together on the outside, but inside he was numb. He'd sold the house he'd shared with Sharon and was on the cusp of an unknown future. For the last year, Andrew, his boss and senior pastor, had suggested he take time off. He'd resisted.

Finally, Andrew sat him down and insisted he take time off to heal. He mentioned "unresolved grief" and the need to rest and adjust. Andrew was right. As a pastor, Dan counseled mourning families often. So why had he been so blind and resistant to his own need to process his loss? Once Sharon was in the ground, he'd buried himself under the needs of ministry and the hurts of the people coming into his

office. It had seemed safer than looking inside his own heart.

The calling to ministry had grown heavy now that he'd been barred from work. He wondered, was it time to quit? Move on to what his father called "a real job?" What would he even be good at? Ever since accepting Christ at fifteen, he'd only ever wanted to be a pastor.

*Bang! Bang! Crash!*

Dan stood up and went to the door, opened it, and strode across the hallway. He gave the wood three firm raps.

The door swung open and a child ran headlong into him. Dan stumbled backwards, finding support against the hallway wall that ran between the two apartments. The child ran past him into his own apartment.

A young woman appeared in a snug tank top under an unbuttoned flannel shirt falling off one shoulder...and shorts and silly fuzzy pink boots. "Quinn! Get back here!"

She pulled up short at the sight of Dan. Her stormy gray eyes suddenly struck him. Red hair pulled up in a sideways ponytail with bangs *à la* Valley Girl from the 80s provided a contrast with her pale skin.

"Oh. I'm sorry," her voice was low and husky, and he took note of the piercings on her face. "My son—"

"—just ran into my apartment." Dan straightened to his full six feet in height. Instant thoughts condemning this scatterbrained mother and her unruly children raced through his brain. *Stop it. You don't even know her.* Shaking his head, he said, "Is that your only child, or should I be expecting another any minute?"

A little head framed in fuzzy orange curls and bright brown eyes, peered out from the side of the

door.

The woman glanced down. "I only have the two, and she's not as prone to mischief as her brother. I'm terribly sorry. They are always a bit wild when they return from a visit with their father. May I come in and search for Quinn?"

Dan nodded. The woman picked up the little girl and straddled the child on the hips of her low-rise jean shorts. He led her into his apartment, leaving the door open.

"Quinn?" The young woman called as she started to inch around the space. She turned and shot a hand out at him. "I'm sorry. Where are my manners? I'm Skye. My son Quinn is our rabble-rouser and Meghan here is my little mouse."

"I'm Dan. I just moved in." He let his hand grip hers in a quick shake before letting it drop.

Skye turned and quickly resumed searching the apartment with Dan trailing her.

~\*~

Skye took a deep breath and hoped her face hadn't turned beet red. It was a terrible look for her and she was embarrassed that this was how she managed to meet her handsome new neighbor. She'd watched him moving in and couldn't help but drool over his modelesque appearance. Blond hair, the soul patch and nerdy glasses made him even more swoon-worthy. *Hey, I might be divorced but I'm not dead.* In an empty second bedroom, she found Quinn hidden in a closet next to boxes labeled *Sharon*.

Another woman held this man's heart. Better to realize that now. But he wore no ring on his finger. A

white line where the ring would have been told her there used to be one there...until recently.

She grabbed Quinn's wrist and pulled him to his feet. "That was a bad job, Quinn. Now you apologize to Mr. Dan here for trespassing in his home."

The little boy with the dark hair and blue eyes stared up at Dan. "I's sorry, Mr. Dan."

"I am terribly sorry too, for the noise and the disruption in your day." Skye half-swung, half-dragged Quinn. She noted the frown on her neighbor's face. Obviously, she failed to impress him. Without another word, the door shut behind her. She went to her own apartment, released her kids, and closed the door firmly.

The tears came unbidden. She didn't think she was unattractive, but obviously her ex, Riley, disagreed. The names he called her when he was high on drugs still bounced around her brain. She wasn't going to let any magazine model, no matter how cute, make her feel bad about herself or her parenting.

She did that well enough on her own.

"Time for naps, kids." She followed them down the hallway to their room and got them settled in their beds.

Returning to the living room, she looked at the mess Quinn left. The paints she set up to use were scattered all over. Thankfully, none spilled on the carpet. She picked up her supplies and righted her canvas and easel. She wanted to try her hand again at another painting since she'd heard from a gallery that was interested. She tried to set up before the naps to give her more time to actually paint before she needed to deal with the kids...obviously, that hadn't worked today.

Since the divorce, she'd gone on state insurance and food stamps. Her husband failed to support them even though the state garnished his wages. He often called in sick or was sent home for being hung over. She was surprised he even still held a job much less supported his drug habit. Better not to think about that though. She started to paint and dark colors mixed with red reflected her mood after meeting her grumpy neighbor.

*Can you blame him?* Her kids were wild and Quinn hid in his home. A single man wouldn't be used to the kind of chaos she lived with on a daily basis. This was mild compared to what she used to experience when she was married.

Never again.

Never again would she trust a man.

Especially not a good-looking one.

She painted and shushed the part of her brain that tempted her to consider the possibility.

*Dan.* Dang, but he sure was attractive. She'd be keeping an eye on his comings and goings.

Maybe there was a way to beg his forgiveness for their disturbance. They, whoever "they" were, always said a way to a man's heart was his stomach. She longed for him to see her as more than a falling-apart single mother.

~\*~

The knock on his door that evening shocked Dan out of his somber reverie. He opened it to find a different woman than the one he'd seen earlier. She was wearing actual jeans now instead of the shorts. Her hair was down, combed, and longer than he

expected. She sported black frames that highlighted her gray eyes. Eyes that looked into his, searching for something.

"Good evening, Skye. Can I help you? I don't think Quinn has returned to hide in my closet again."

"No, Dan. I brought this for you as an apology for earlier and well, to welcome you as a neighbor."

She held up a pan and the scent of warm apples and cinnamon wafted up to make him salivate. He swallowed hard as he took the plate. "Thank you."

She handed him a potholder. "It's kind of hot."

He shoved it under the pan and rushed to set it on the table. He returned to the door where she stood, with the potholder and handed it back to her. "There."

"OK." She glanced down at his naked feet.

His gaze followed hers. "I'm new here but was wondering where you go to church?"

"Church?" Skye shook her head. "I've no use for God. He's never been there for me when I needed Him."

"Really? What happened?" Dan leaned against the doorjamb. He was curious about this woman.

"Long story. But I'm OK now. The kids and I are doing better than ever." Her eyes looked at him with a new wariness. "Well, I'd better get back. Quinn is always into mischief."

"Yeah. Thanks again for the pie."

She turned and walked away, and he admired the view. He shook himself as he closed his own door and flipped the lock. He shouldn't consider the attractions of any woman. Not that there was a place in his heart for one. The scent of apple pie drew him to the table. He remembered the one Sharon baked for him before she died. He'd never been able to eat it and finally his



sister tossed it away when she came to clean up for him. He'd avoided apple pie ever since.

As if baking that pie killed her? He stepped into the kitchen to grab a plate, spoon, and knife. He sliced a piece of pie and put it on the plate. He got some vanilla ice cream out of the freezer and put a scoop next to the steaming hot pie, grateful he'd gone shopping since Quinn's visit. Soon a white soup surrounded the pie. *Just the way I like it.* He sat down and broke off a piece with some ice cream. The spoon hung in midair as he contemplated taking the bite. *It is not a betrayal of Sharon to eat a piece of pie. You need to get over this.* He shoved the pie into his mouth and closed his eyes as he chewed, letting the warmth and the flavors mix. He swallowed.

Grief welled up within him, and he pushed the plate away as the tears came. *I should be done with this by now.* He disgusted himself with his weakness.

But he wasn't done, was he? *God, why couldn't Skye have baked me brownies, cherry pie, or anything else but this?* He rose so quickly the chair tipped over as he stumbled to the bedroom, collapsed on the bed, and wept.

Morning came and he struggled to prepare. He might not be working, but he longed to be at church. No one else had to know he'd been put on a leave of absence to heal. Did they? Could he bear being there? Where did a hurting pastor go to heal anyway?

He wished he knew the answer. It was Sunday and he'd start with a church worship service. But did he dare walk into Orchard Hill?

## TWO

*My grief lies all within, and these external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells with silence in the tortured soul.*

William Shakespeare

Skye stared at her painting in shock. A man in tears. A cross. The dark colors of sorrow and pain. It resembled her new neighbor. She hadn't intended to paint him. It really wasn't him. He left that morning, head down, as if defeated before the day began. What haunted him? Whatever happened to Sharon? Her artist's curiosity was getting the better of her as she imagined all kinds of reasons for his low spirits.

She pulled out her sketchbook as the kids watched their favorite videos. Her pencil flew over the page as she sketched her neighbor. Different perspectives. Exploring. As if drawing him would give her insight into the darkness within.

The buzzer rang for the outside door and she rose to go to her intercom. "Who is it?"

"Riley. I want to see you and the kids."

"You're not allowed here. Leave or I'll call the police."

"Aw, come on Skye. It's cold out here."

"Then go where you'll have a warm welcome. Leave me alone."

He buzzed again and she picked up her cell phone as she checked the locks. "Hi, Police? My ex-husband is trying to get into my apartment building. Yes, I have a

restraining order. He won't leave." The outside door opened and boots stomped up the stairs causing her heart to race. She shushed the kids and rushed them to her bedroom where she closed the door and asked them to hide in the closet. It saddened her that this was a well-known game to them.

"He's entered the building," she said to the dispatcher.

"Police are on the scene. Can you buzz them in?"

"Yes." She stepped to the door and hit the buzzer.

"Come on, Skye. Let me in. You love me. I want to see my kids. You can't keep me from coming around." He pounded on the door.

The officers ran up the stairs, followed by shouts in the hallway as he fought with them.

"Ma'am. Are you OK?" the dispatcher asked.

"Scared," Skye confessed.

"They've taken him away in handcuffs but an officer needs to talk to you. Can you open your door for her?"

"You're sure he's gone?"

"Yes."

She peeked out and a female officer awaited her. Skye unlocked the door and let the officer in. "Hold on a second." She ran to the bedroom and let the kids come out. "Coast is clear. You can go back to your TV show."

The kids ran to the living room, ignoring the officer and resumed their movie.

"I'm Officer Alvarez. Can I get your statement?"

Skye nodded and gave a rundown of the events and soon the officer left.

Her entire body shook. She went to her room, closed the door, and collapsed on the bed. When

would he ever leave her alone? When would she ever stop reacting like a wounded war vet every time Riley came near her?

She loved him once and used to do drugs with him. Until she got pregnant. Sometimes she wondered how her drug usage affected Quinn, who was hyperactive. But what did she know? Maybe that was normal for a four-year-old. In contrast, Meghan was quiet and withdrawn, and Skye wondered how much of that was a reaction to her mother's fear when Riley came around.

It still surprised her that she'd managed to leave him. Where had she found the courage? Riley's jail time made it easier to pack up and go without worrying about his immediate reaction. She had anticipated retaliation. The courts gave her full physical and legal custody and awarded him supervised visits. In spite of that, the kids returned home confused, and Quinn was especially wild. She wondered if Riley slipped Quinn drugs. Having the caseworker ensure the kids received no food from him didn't make a difference. Her son probably reacted to the insanity of his father.

When her heart rate returned to normal, she went to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She dried off and headed to the kitchen. Soon she was settled back down with a cup of tea and her sketchpad. Her drawings now took on a darker tone. Some abstract. Some so vivid it almost brought back her panic. Footsteps on the stairs made her jump to check. It was Dan, not Riley. She peered through the hole. He approached the door wearing his leather jacket, fogged-up glasses held in one hand. He stuck his key in the lock. As he turned it, he glanced at her door. Did

he realize she spied on him?

A sigh of relief escaped her lips and she returned to her sketchpad. She didn't need to worry. Riley was in jail and they were fine. Energy surged so she grabbed her laundry and headed to the first floor to throw a load in. She was surprised to find Dan down there with his own.

"Hi." He said, barely glancing at her. He'd changed clothes and now wore faded denim jeans and a Packer sweatshirt. Canvas shoes covered his feet.

"Aren't the Packers done for the season?" she asked as she dumped clothes into one of the washers.

"Yeah. They lost their wild card game so they're out. Season's over."

"I don't follow that too much. Kids don't tolerate sports much less shows I might enjoy."

He gave her a small smile and a nod. "I'm sure they keep you busy."

She nodded and pushed her quarters in the machine. "Speaking of...I should go see what trouble they've gotten into while I was down here. Later, Dan."

He glanced up, his eyes wide. "My door is unlocked. You don't think..."

She grinned at his panic. "I wouldn't put it past them, but don't worry. I don't think they would do any damage." She started up the stairs with him behind her. She entered her apartment and quickly discovered both kids were in the kitchen trying to get a box of cereal down. She ran to help them, averting a disaster. She was almost disappointed that Quinn hadn't made an attempt to escape.

She managed to get her clothes in the dryer without running into her handsome neighbor but