

Taking the Plunge

Sample Chapter

Angela Breidenbach

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — for example, electronic, photocopy, recording, for personal or commercial purposes — without written permission of the author(s). The only exception is for brief quotations in printed or electronic reviews.

© 2016 by Angela Breidenbach

© 2019 Angela Breidenbach, Republished with new cover

eBook ISBN 978-0-9827172-9-5

Print ISBN 978-0-9980847-0-1

Also available in audiobook

Published by Gems Books (Gems of Wisdom)

Contact for questions and permissions: angela@angelabreidenbach.com

Breidenbach, Angela

Taking the Plunge/Angela Breidenbach

1. Fiction 2. Romance—Fiction 3. Historical—Fiction

This book is a work of fiction set in a real location. Any reference to historical figures, places, or events, whether fictional or actual, is a fictional representation.

Biblical verses used in this work of fiction are taken from the (RV) Revised Version 1885 and are Public Domain.

Published in the United States of America (Missoula, MT)

Chapter One



Late winter, 1892

Helena, MT

Delphina O'Connor ran to the edge of the plunge. "Kick up!" Was that Mr. Broadwater's daughter in the deep end? Delphina strained to see in the darker waters of the deep end. The electric lamplight didn't quite reach far enough to tell who fell in, but she wasn't succeeding in getting out! The young girl thrashed against the heavy woolen skirt of her swim costume unable to keep her head above the hot springs pumped into the monstrous indoor pool.

Grabbing the pole hook from the wall, Delphina stretched out as far as she could. But soon the youngster would no longer break the surface to see the lifesaver. "Calm down, grab on!"

Panicking, she took in more water than air. Terror overtook the waterlogged child as she thrashed and knocked the pole away. Delphina couldn't get hold of the swim outfit either. It slipped off the hook each time the girl twisted. The girl's hands couldn't reach the surface in the twelve-foot depths and she was fatiguing fast.

Bubbles.

Knowing how to swim wouldn't help when both woolen skirts would drag them down. But she had to try. "Help! I need help!" A quick glance around proved no one else had entered the natatorium yet. Did no one hear her scream?

She threw the pole hook on the deck, took a deep breath, and jumped. Warm water sucked her under as she swam hard. She kept her eyes on the dark descending figure as the girl went limp. Kicking her swimming slippers as hard as she could, Delphina managed to get a hand on the girl's billowing sleeve and yanked at the material. But she couldn't budge the weight of sopping wool more than a smidgeon. The girl was closer to Delphina's size than she'd realized. Both costumes swirled around them like the jellyfish in an inky dark ocean.

She pointed her shoulders at the plunge wall and kicked harder, with every ounce of effort in her being, until her legs burned and her arms felt numb. For a moment, the surface tickled at her face, but Delphina couldn't stretch above it to catch the air she needed to propel them both to safety and gulped half water with the oxygen. Delphina willed her body, and the one she towed upward. Instead of surfacing for air, the two sank further toward the bottom. The skylights retreating into pinpoints of blurred light. Burning lungs, a screaming cough clawing at her throat, Delphina refused to let go of the adolescent.

Muscular arms closed around her torso from behind and thrust her toward the surface. Still she wouldn't release the ruffle her fingers clutched. Up. Up. More arms grabbed at hers and fought to pry the limp girl away as liquid gave way to air.

Delphina sucked in half a stomach full of water as she gasped for life a moment too soon. Then she choked, coughed, and heaved out what she'd taken in. Nose burning, ragged gasps, and more coughing racked her ribs until she fell exhausted on the pool deck trembling from the exertion. A shadow fell on her face, blocking the natural light from the natatorium's windows high above.

A man's voice directed towards the skirmish further down the planked deck. "Arms above her head. Press her stomach." He called orders to others even as the man's big hands thrust Delphina's arms above her head. "Turn her over and get the water out of her." He flipped Delphina like a rag doll and spanned her back with one hand. He waited for a breath, then flapjacked her back and watched her face for signs of life. Seeming satisfied, he stood and turned to supervise the boys following his lifesaving orders.

The shadow man moved away leaving Delphina sprawling on the pool deck in the least ladylike manner, skirts as scattered as driftwood. Lifting to her elbows, Delphina managed to see Wilder spew out more water than a body should be able to hold. But she survived! Delphina lay back and thanked God. She took a deep breath grateful for the other rescuers and the sweet feeling of dry air moving in and out of her chest.

Her rescuer returned. “What do you think you two were doing swimming in the deep end in those costumes?”

She’d feel much more comfortable if the man’s features were visible. After all, he’d had his hands all over her. But the light pouring in from the windows above produced backlighting drowning his face in shadows. “What?” Delphina’s head throbbed and her ears needed unclogging.

He fired off another question like dynamite near the mines. “Don’t you know better?”

She squeezed her burning eyes and blinked a few times trying to distinguish more about the man towering above than the outline of his legs askew, fists jammed on hips. His darker hair dripped down on her like rain spattering saturated ground. As her vision adjusted to the ethereal illusions of color in geometric patterns created by the immense stain glass windows, electric lamps, and arced cathedral ceilings inside the natatorium, his angry eyes crackled like lightning over the Montana mountains.

“What?” She shook her head and blinked hard as she threw the heavy braid behind her shoulder. The length and weight of the sopping plait so great it slapped the wooden floor like a mop.

“I said,” he paused creating a stern effect, “you obviously need to return to your governesses. The two of you almost drowned.”

Governesses? “I don’t need a governess. I am—”

“If you can’t avoid danger by yourself, then you must be under the care of an adult.”

Enough. Only her first day in position and already a near drowning incident. Delphina shoved to her shaking knees and then to standing. The heavy skirts of the swimming costume threatened to drag her right back down. Planting her hands on her hips as he’d done, she snapped back, “I am an adult, sir, and I’ll have you know—”

“Adults don’t behave irresponsibly.” He glared at her.

She wanted to scream at this insulting stranger. Then she remembered he'd saved not only her life, but also Wilder's—the girl who was in her care and the daughter of her new employer. She closed her eyes and deliberately lowered her hands to her sides with a long, long inhale and exhale. "First, let me say thank you."

"Don't. Just be more careful." He called to the dozen or so gathered around them. "Boys, let's get all this gear cleaned up and ready for laps."

She tightened her lips against her teeth. Teeth that wanted to bite all of a sudden at his imperial tone. "Sir, I was not irresponsible. I was, in fact, trying to save Miss Broadwater."

His head jerked back in surprise. For a moment, his handsome face registered astonishment...and then he chuckled. The chuckle rippled into an all out laugh thundering as it echoed in the cavernous building.

Delphina's face rushed with warmth. "That's quite enough, sir. You may have saved our lives," she looked around at the other dripping young men gathered around them. "But you have no right to insult either of us. Exactly who are you anyway?"

"Hugh Thomas, the swimming instructor, luckily for you. And you would be?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Ah, the swimming instructor for the men." What a chauvinist! "I would be the scientific and ornamental swimming instructress for the women."

The man's eyebrows lifted. "The what?" He started to laugh and then sobered when he took a look at the group helping Wilder Broadwater. He shook his head flinging water droplets around them. "Then I'll suggest you be replaced immediately."

She gasped. Unfortunately as she did, the water still streaming from her hair sucked into her windpipe. Coughing the water out of her lungs doubled Delphina over and delayed the dramatic delivery she'd planned.

She pointed a finger at him until she rose to standing. To her surprise, he waited. "You'll do no such thing!" Her words would be so much more convincing if she didn't cough through the water streaming down her face from the mass of tangled hair.

"Just get it all out." He landed several smart slaps on her back causing more hacking than necessary, in Delphina's opinion. "You'll feel much better."

"You—" She held up a hand signaling for him to stop and jammed the other against the unexpected sharp stitch in her side. "Don't touch me!" Her words came out more like a hoarse tom cat.

He walked away. “Miss Broadwater, let’s get you seated.” He gently lowered the teary girl on a chair one of the many young men grabbed and deposited nearby. “Towels? Let’s get some towels around these girls.”

Delphina’s eyes widened. He could be kind to Antoinette Wilder Broadwater, but not to the woman who tried to save her life? What an impolite heathen! Then the warmth of a towel wrapped around Delphina and a gangly boy propelled her to another chair near Wilder’s.

She looked up and nodded her appreciation. “Thank you.”

He answered with a kind voice, “My pleasure, miss.”

Hugh’s directions scrambled the group into action as they cleaned the deck of lifesaving equipment. “Frankie, throw on a dry robe and fetch Miss Broadwater’s parents. They’ll want to know immediately.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Thomas.” The boy that’d been caring for Delphina bobbed his head and took off to his errand.

What was he, all of fourteen? Still, he had more manners than his uncouth instructor. But Wilder had been given into her care this afternoon. “I’ll get your mother, Wilder.” Delphina rose, but the low chair caught at her swimming costume. She fell forward, catching herself on the heels of her hands, preventing her face smacking into the wood deck, but splayed on the ground in a most unladylike fashion—again.

“Miss O’Connor!” Wilder called. “Are you all right?”

The next second strong hands clasped around her waist and hauled her up to her feet like a pile of laundry. “Go on, Frankie. I have this under control.”

Delphina closed her eyes to stop the tears of both pain and embarrassment, as she pressed hot, stinging hands against the cooler folds of the wet swim skirt. “Thank you,” she swallowed her pride. “Thank you, again.” Delphina could not bring herself to offer even a polite smile.

He stood too close, hands still on her waist, and leaned down to her ear so only she could hear him. “I fear dance instructor is not a good idea either.” His chuckle tickled the skin behind her ear.

Why did his voice sing in her veins?

~**~

The girl's eyes sparked a deep amber fire. She shook free of his sturdy hands. "Unbelievable!" She pushed him away. "You have no idea who I am or what I'm capable of and yet you presume to judge my abilities!"

He wanted to laugh at the girl smoothing the mass of sopping hair out of her eyes, but the seriousness of lives nearly lost subdued Hugh. "What I know is you're too young and inexperienced for this position."

Wilder chose this moment to pipe up. "Oh, Miss O'Connor's not too young. She's a spinster."

At the child's unfiltered input, the swim instructress nearly turned purple under the tangled mass of hair the color of evergreen bark after a downpour on a spring day. Hugh couldn't help himself. He tossed off a grin that broke into a rumbling laugh. "I see."

"Wilder!" Miss O'Connor spun to chastise the owner's daughter. Then she obviously grappled for words before giving up and turning back on him. "I'll have you know, sir, that I have a teaching degree from Vassar and that I focused on the science of health—and that includes an excellent knowledge of swimming and lifesaving."

"Then you of all people should know better than to swim with all," he gestured at the voluminous swimwear, "that on in the deep end of a pool."

"I did not—"

"Wilder, oh Wilder," Mrs. Broadwater swept into the natatorium. "Dear heart, please tell me you're all right." She clasped the wet girl tightly to her bosom, not caring about her clothing.

"I believe she'll be fine, ma'am."

"Is that the case, Miss O'Connor?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Broadwater, I haven't been able to check Wilder myself. I've been," she tipped her head toward Hugh, "detained for questioning."

"Wilder, what happened?" Mrs. Broadwater pulled her daughter's chin up with her hand and examined her closely.

"Mama, I ran out to place a candy order for after swimming, you know how hungry I get after being in the water." She hung her head. "But I slipped in when I went around that corner." She pointed to where the railing stopped. Her shoulders slumped as her mother's eyes narrowed. "Miss O'Connor jumped in after me. Then all these boys saved us both."

"Candy." Hugh choked back a growl. "You both almost drowned for a candy?"

Wilder's eyes brimmed. "I didn't mean to do that." Puppy dog eyes plead up at her parents as Mr. Broadwater joined the crowd.

"Ah, but you did, young lady." Her father's stern voice caused a cavalcade of tears. He peered through round spectacles at his pocket watch. "The counter isn't open for another thirty minutes. What possessed you to race in so early?"

She mumbled, "I didn't think Mama would let me have any." Tears streaked down her cheeks.

Miss O'Connor popped into the momentary lull. "Wilder, this is exactly why the rules for not running on the deck are there. With your parents as the owners, it's even more important for you to set the example for the other girls and boys who come to take a plunge." Then she turned to the Broadwaters. "Would you consider sitting your daughter out for the next class as a discipline? She should have to dress out and sit on the side so she can still learn from the instruction."

Evidently Miss O'Connor told the truth. But was she their governess or his employee?

"No, Papa! That's not fair!"

"I think that's not fair either, my girl." He agreed.

"But sir—" Miss O'Connor started.

He held up a hand. "I didn't build this entire resort just to have my only daughter misuse it. Nor did I build this natatorium to lose her." Charles Broadwater pursed his lips as everyone waited for his decision. "Wilder will sit out, as you've suggested. In addition, the temptation that caused the poor behavior is also removed." He directed his attention to the young girl. "You've also lost your purchasing privileges at the shop yonder for the classes Miss O'Connor chooses to sit you out."

"Papa, that's really not fair!" She whined.

"I will notify the staff. Should Miss O'Connor need to make this decision again, the two parts will make the whole."

"But—"

"Evidently I need to add more discipline before you learn a lesson?"

She hung her head, light hair and a limp blue ribbon drooped over her shoulders in a stringy mass. Poor girl resembled more of a cocker spaniel at the moment. "No, sir."

Hugh folded his arms. He rather liked his employer's way of thinking and handling of his daughter. The colonel hadn't once raised his voice. "Sir, if I may, the women cannot survive in the deep end. Twelve feet is not safe for a lady, even one who thinks she can swim." Then he pointedly glanced in Miss O'Connor's direction. "Might I suggest a cord across the pool at the four-foot mark? I don't believe the ladies should venture deeper than four feet. The risk, as we've seen, is too great."

"Just one minute. There's no need to limit the ladies to the shallow end." Miss O'Connor leapt to the defense of womankind everywhere. "This was an unusual circumstance. In fact, I've been able to swim—"

"I did not see proof of that today, Miss O'Connor." He stepped closer. "In fact, I saw exactly the opposite as I saved your life."

Everyone craned to catch up with the last banter, bebopping back and forth between them like birdies on the badminton court. "Indeed, you did not, sir!" As her hair dried, it unraveled into frizzy ropes that hung like Rapunzel's locks. Did she know how comical she appeared? "What you saw was two bodies fighting heavy woolens in the water. You did not see my lack of ability to swim. You couldn't have—"

"You're making the point, Miss O'Connor. I pulled you both up with great effort and then all these boys assisted getting you and Wilder on the deck."

"Why was that, Mr. Swim Instructor? Were we too heavy for you to get out of the water yourself?"

Mr. Swim Instructor.

"I do believe you've made my point."

He meant to answer. He opened his mouth, about to, and then Hugh realized she was right. All five foot two of her and he'd needed help with the weight of those skirts.

Colonel Broadwater took the reins of the conversation. "What I'm hearing is that my daughter nearly drowned because of her swim costume and that her teacher, and a very fit man, both had trouble because of these contraptions you ladies wear. Is that what you're telling me?"

Both instructors answered at once, "Yes." Their eyes were drawn to one another. Hugh's were then drawn down the drenched lady in front of him. He couldn't really tell much of any detail under all that droopy black fabric. How many sheep were shorn for that outfit? Was there a woman under there? But something about the flaring fire in her eyes made him swallow. Hard.

"Besides my own daughter's safety, these swimming costumes are putting any lady that chooses to enjoy the natatorium at risk. Is that what you're telling me?"

Miss O'Connor nodded vigorously at his words while Hugh contemplated the unknown world of women's fashion. If that's what they wore, that's what they wore. "Sir, this is why we need to create some sort of mark the ladies shouldn't go beyond for their own safety."

"No, that is not what we need."

Miss O'Connor's inability to allow the men to protect her scorched his nerves. "If not that, then I can see the need to post extra lifeguards at all times. Can you be any less practical?"

"My goodness, but your creativity astounds me." Miss O'Connor actually stepped in front of him and her tone...it stung him. "Truly, don't you think there's another way?" Then she turned her back on him.

Did she just accuse him of being an imbecile? "Excuse me." Irritation seethed between his teeth.

As she peeked over her shoulder, a hint of a smile tipped the corner of her mouth. "Of course." She blinked innocently as if she meant it, and then addressed Charles Broadwater. "I think the best opportunity we have for the safety of women from here on out would be to adopt the new swimming costumes European women are wearing. That does away with all this excess fabric."

Mrs. Broadwater gasped. "But modesty, Charles, we must protect the modesty of our patrons."

"I wore a much less bulky swim outfit at college, Mrs. Broadwater." She reached a hand out and took the lady's in hers. "I assure you, the girls' modesty was not compromised. However, we could swim safely. Wouldn't that be a good compromise?"

The colonel stroked his manicured goatee as he thought. Then putting a hand on his daughter's head, he said, "Miss O'Connor, would you be able to show us some of these new designs? If Mrs. Broadwater and I could take a look at them, I'd consider replacing all the rental costumes. But we still have the challenge of affordability."

~**~

The frizzy little Rapunzel tossed a conqueror's grin at Hugh. The sparkle in her amber eyes seared him like a burning beam swinging from a roof to bowl him over. Then an odd thought

snuck up on him. If he had to work around her, he'd have to protect himself from this fiery female.

~**~

To read more of Taking the Plunge, choose your favorite store here:
<http://angelabreidenbach.com/books/taking-the-plunge/>

**Thank you,
Angela Breidenbach**