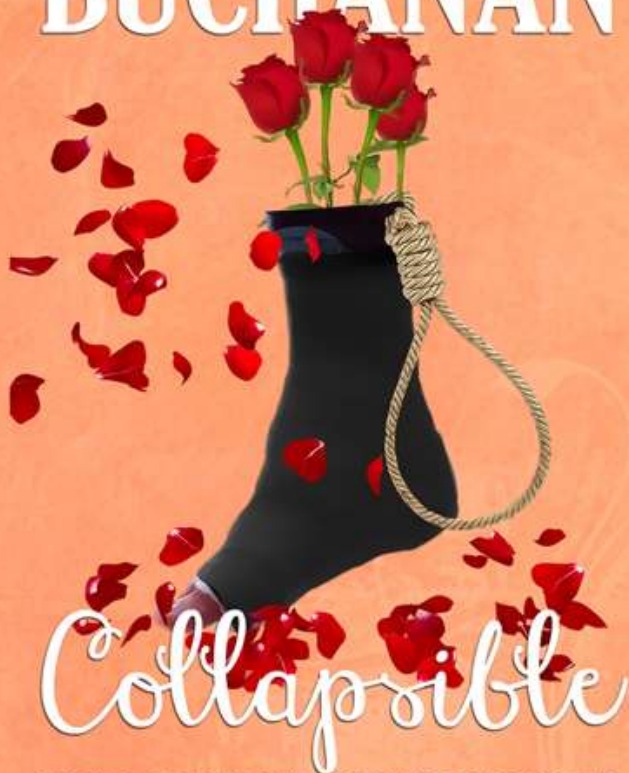


RUTH BUCHANAN



**A NOVEL OF FRIENDSHIP, BROKEN BONES, COFFEE,
SHENANIGANS, AND THE OCCASIONAL MURDER**

Collapsible

Ruth Buchanan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2017

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-964-5

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Beef, who saw it all begin.

1

Rachel's total life implosion came about in this way: one Wednesday morning in early April, she tripped and broke her ankle.

She didn't remember falling. One minute she'd been rushing to finish her drill on the agility ladder, and the next, she was going down hard. Her scream covered the sound of the snapping bone—a sickening little *snick*—and she found herself lying flat on her back on the gym mats, right leg elevated, foot lolling strangely. Somehow her foot had looped through the ladder on the way down, and now she rolled on the floor in a snarl of straps and plastic rungs.

This couldn't be happening.

Coach Donovan whooped. Then, there he was, dropping down beside her, so close that she could feel the heat radiating off him. One of his giant hands cupped her calf to stabilize her leg while the other hovered in the air, poised to intercede if necessary.

"I think I'm hurt," Rachel said, alarmed to hear her voice wobbling strangely. Not that her ankle actually hurt, though. Not exactly. It just felt wrong somehow.

The buzzer went off across the room to signal the end of the final round. If she were to have even a prayer of showering and getting into her classroom before her students showed up, she needed to pack her gym bag and jump into the car immediately. Instead, she lay writhing on the floor of the gym tangled in the

agility ladder, leg cradled awkwardly by her coach, heart still hammering from the final cardio push.

Rachel turned her head to the side and saw a set of feet approaching. She looked up and beheld her sister's face, dripping sweat. "What happened to *you*?" Ann asked.

"She rolled her ankle," Donovan said.

Rachel felt thankful that she and Ann worked out with Donovan privately instead of as part of his workout classes. This scenario was embarrassing enough with only two witnesses.

Rachel winced as the pads of Donovan's fingers pressed against her foot to keep it from listing to starboard. She blinked through the mist and reached a hand to swipe back gobs of clumpy red hair from her forehead. "I hope it isn't sprained," she moaned.

Ann grunted dispassionately, using her teeth to pull away the hook and loop strips of her boxing gloves. She pulled off the gloves and swiped her forearms across her face. She leaned down to take a closer look at Rachel's ankle. "Yikes."

"Ann," Rachel gasped, "do something." Although what exactly she wanted her sister to do, she wasn't sure.

"There are cold packs in the mini fridge in the office," Donovan said.

Ann jogged away and Donovan tightened his hands around Rachel's leg. He narrowed his eyes. "Lie still."

Rachel curled an arm over her eyes. "This is the worst," she moaned. She could feel her heartbeat everywhere: behind her eyeballs, down her legs, through her toes, and in the tips of her fingers. "Let go of my foot for a minute." Cautiously, she rotated her

elevated foot in tiny spirals, breathing a sigh of relief when it moved. Surely if she could move it, it couldn't be too badly hurt.

Ann reappeared, threaded her arm around Donovan's, and pressed an ice pack against the quickly-swelling ankle.

"I think it's OK," Rachel said, ignoring the looks that Donovan and Ann gave her. She looked away and concentrated on keeping her breathing even. "Let me see if I can stand."

"You'll have to get untangled first," Ann said. She squatted and began to tug at the straps to the agility ladder. "Scoot your hips up," she told Rachel.

Donovan shook his head. "I don't know, Rachel. If your ankle's broken, you could do some real damage by trying to walk." He moved the flat of his hand against the sole of her foot to provide further stability. "Just stay put for a few minutes until we see if—"

"I'm *fine*." As Rachel struggled up to her elbows, her arms trembled beneath her. "It's not broken." Her sore abs convulsed in protest, and she subsided against the mats, panting slightly.

Ann worked the rest of the ladder free and pulled it off to the side, straightening it out neatly before coming back to stand over her sister, hands on hips.

"You should still have an X-ray," Ann said, frowning.

"There's a walk-in clinic down the road." Donovan squatted back on his heels. "But it'll be closed at this hour."

"I don't need that. I'm *fine*."

"So," Donovan said to Ann, ignoring Rachel completely. "X-rays?"

Donovan scooped his arms under Rachel, lifting

her. She could no more have stopped herself from squawking than she could have reversed the flow of time. This was to remain etched in her memory as one of the least dignified moments of her life.

Given Rachel's life, that was saying something.

~*~

The sweep of early-morning air felt divine against Rachel's clammy face. Heavy with humidity as it was, it still felt blessedly cool when compared with the swampy atmosphere inside the gym. She closed her eyes and savored a moment of stillness as she and Donovan waited for Ann to pull the truck around.

Donovan hitched Rachel higher against his perfect chest, and she felt herself blushing. Had this been a romance novel, one of her arms would have been flung around Donovan's neck, while the other would have rested against his strong chest. Instead, Rachel's arms had been near her sides when he'd picked her up, and now they lay folded over her stomach. One of her shoulders dug into his chest. In a book, of course, Donovan would not have been so sweaty, and Rachel would have been less frazzled. Her hair would not have been this angry shade of red, nor would her cheeks have been as splotchy.

She prayed for Ann to hurry up with the truck—or for a crack in the sidewalk to open and swallow her completely, putting an end to this humiliating experience.

Ann pulled to the curb, hopped out, and jogged around to hold the passenger door open while Donovan set Rachel in the cab. He stepped back, and Ann draped a hoodie over Rachel's torso and tucked

the ends around her shoulders. Startled, Rachel realized she was shivering. This was strange considering how long it generally took her to cool down after a Coach Donovan workout. The arrival of April meant that even in early mornings, Florida temperatures quickly gave way to pre-summer heat. Before sunrise, Rachel often drove home from the gym with the A/C on max.

She definitely should not be shivering.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, light edged up the eastern horizon, tinging the sky with pale pinks and blues. The clouds, soft and pillowy, had gone slightly gold around the edges. It would have been a perfect moment. Perfect, except that Rachel's life was over. She glared down at her swollen limb. "This is the stupidest thing that's ever happened," she said.

"Really?" Ann checked her mirrors and flicked on the turn signal. "You think this is the stupidest thing that's *ever happened?*"

"Well, OK. Maybe not the stupidest. But it's close. People are supposed to break their bones when they're little kids, not when they're thirty-four years old." Rachel was rendered momentarily speechless as the truck bounced over a speed bump. "Ow."

"There's a bottle of aspirin in the glove compartment," Ann told her, "but I think it's mostly disintegrated."

"*Disintegrated?*"

"It's been in here for a while."

Rachel flipped open the glove compartment and pulled out a clear plastic bottle filled with a clumpy white powder. She switched on the overhead dome light to check for an expiration date but found the label too cracked and faded to be helpful.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” she asked. “Snort it?” She shook the bottle. Most of the powder stayed glued to the sides.

Ann puffed out a breath, her patience with Rachel’s injury obviously extending only so far. “Wait until we get to the hospital, then. You’ll only have to pay eighteen dollars a pill or whatever.”

“Good point.” Rachel snapped off the cap and stuck an index finger inside to poke at the clumps. “It’s probably not wise to keep mysterious bottles of white powder in your truck,” she advised her sister. “If you ever get pulled over and searched, you’re going to have some explaining to do.”

Ann ignored this.

Rachel continued. “Police officers always have their eyes open for stuff like this, you know. That’s because random traffic stops often turn up all sorts of other crimes. Like how they caught Ted Bundy during a routine traffic stop.”

“Thank you for the lesson in criminology.”

“All I’m saying is that maybe the Memento Killer will run a few red lights on the way to visit his next victim, and then we’ll all be able to sleep better at night.”

“You and your killers,” Ann said, shaking her head.

“You really should take crime more seriously,” Rachel told her. “One day you might find my advice helpful.”

2

Rachel's X-rays revealed a narrow black crack along one of her ankle bones. Her doctor referred to this as a lateral malleolus fracture, but she was hardly listening. Her ankle was broken, and life as she knew it was over.

On the ride home from the hospital, Rachel sat silently in the passenger's seat, clutching her hospital paperwork and fretting. A broken ankle was bad news at the best of times, but this was beyond ridiculous. A broken ankle at the tail-end of the school year. And she and Ann were moving in three weeks. Their house was currently a disaster zone.

Her phone vibrated as a text came through. Lee.

don't see yr car at school. r u here? or did memento get u?

Rachel groaned as she envisioned Lee's reaction to the news that she had broken her ankle while exercising. Perhaps there was a way that she could just not tell him.

Don't joke about murder. She texted back. Serial killers are a serious problem. But I'm OK. Sort of. Long story. Talk to you tomorrow.

"Is that Lynn?" Ann asked, rolling through the stop at an empty four-way intersection.

"Lee."

"That boy." Ann shook her head, *tsking*.

Rachel nodded. *That boy.* Those two words

summed up Lee quite well.

"So," Ann said. "I'm starving. Breakfast at Stu's?"

Rachel's stomach gave a gurgle of agreement, but some things took priority even over Stu's breakfast burritos. "Can we get this prescription filled?" She smoothed out the papers she'd been clutching, pulling out one of the sheets and skimming it. "Hydrocodone, one tablet every four to six hours for pain." She looked up. "They were going to give me oxycontin until I told them what happened that one time." Rachel had once been prescribed oxycontin after surgery and had entertained everyone in the recovery room with detailed accounts of what the walls were saying.

"Hydrocodone probably won't make you high," Ann mused. "Too bad."

"At least that would have made this situation a little more entertaining. Hydrocodone will probably just turn me into a zombie."

"Poor you." Ann put on her blinker and turned onto the bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway. "You're going to be injured *and* boring."

"At least you'll be there to take care of me," Rachel said. "I'm sorry you had to miss your rides this morning. I mean it."

"It's fine. I can reschedule them. The horses aren't going anywhere. But about tonight. I won't be home. You'll be on your own."

"What?" Rachel goggled at Ann. The idea that her sister wouldn't be there to take care of her had never occurred to her. This really was the most unmitigated disaster.

"Charlie has laminitis," Ann explained, "and I told Margaret I'd stay at the barn overnight to ice his hooves."

"Ice his..." For a moment, Rachel felt bereft of speech. Just for a moment. "Ann!" she trumpeted. "How could you?"

Even with her crutches, Rachel's pain was such that she couldn't imagine doing anything more complicated than lying on the couch and moaning until the next morning. How was she going to shower? Make dinner? Brew coffee? There was no way she'd be able to manage on her own. This was tragedy on par with anything Shakespeare had ever written; only that unlike in Shakespeare, there wasn't the promise of comic relief.

Ann didn't seem the least bit guilty about staying at the barn overnight instead of staying home to take care of Rachel. "When I agreed to take care of Charlie," she said in a reasonable tone, "I had no idea that you were planning to injure yourself on the agility ladder, now did I?"

"*Planning to injure myself?*" Rachel squawked.

"Besides, unlike a sick horse, you have the ability to care for yourself."

"So you're saying that if I had laminitis, you'd stay and take care of me? How kind," Rachel said. "How very kind and thoughtful." She knew she'd taken a detour into the ludicrous at some point, but now that she was there, she seemed unable to stop.

"If you had hooves, yes. I would stay home and take care of your laminitis. But if I don't change the ice regularly tonight, Charlie could founder. And if he founders, he'll definitely have to be put down. You don't want a perfectly good horse to die because you tripped over a set of straps and plastic stripping this morning, do you?" Ann leveled a look at Rachel.

"No." Rachel said in a small voice. "I don't want

Charlie to die.”

“Besides that, Margaret is paying me. Would I be getting paid to change the ice on your leg?”

“No. I’m not going to pay you to change the ice on my leg.”

“All right, then.”

“But what if the Memento Killer breaks in and strangles me with my own curtains or something?”

Ann rolled her eyes, but eased up on the gas as they went over the speedbump on their way into the pharmacy parking lot. “Then I’ll tell Mom you loved her.”

3

Lynn texted before she came over. *Picking Ethan up from school, then on my way w/ coffee. Need anything else?*

Rachel smiled. Trust Lynn to get her priorities straight.

True to her word, Lynn arrived about twenty minutes later, bearing two cups of coffee and letting herself and her son in with her spare key. "Hello?"

Rachel did not rise to greet them. She regarded Lynn and Ethan from where she lay, half-sprawled on the love seat. "Welcome to the ridiculousness that is my life."

Lynn looked down at Rachel. Rachel could only imagine what she looked like: the hair, the rumpled workout clothes, the splint.

"You look like you could use some coffee," Lynn said. She set a Styrofoam cup on the stack of boxes currently doubling as a coffee table and drew over another box, settling on it with ease.

The aroma of coffee drew Rachel to a half-sitting position. She reached for the cup, her spirits rising along with the gloriously scented steam. Ethan settled on some boxes in the corner with his mom's iPhone.

"I'm sorry this place is such a wreck," Rachel said.

"Whatever. You guys are moving soon." Lynn turned toward Ethan. "Come give Miss Rachel a kiss."

"It's OK, Ethan." Rachel waved a limp hand. "Don't bother. I'm disgusting." Nevertheless, Ethan

obediently came across the room to kiss her cheek. At eight, Ethan currently straddled the line between childhood sweetness and the early onset of adolescent awkwardness. She caught a whiff of his weird little-kid breath as he leaned forward to brush her cheek with his chapped lips.

Lynn reached out to steady the computer chair on which Rachel had propped her splinted leg. As the sides of her blonde bob swung forward into her face, she reached a thin hand to sweep back her hair in one swift motion. "You really should get some pillows under that," she observed. "And you need to keep it above your heart."

Sighing, Rachel burrowed down into the love seat, hoping the motion would bring her leg at least incrementally higher than her torso. "I already packed the throw pillows, and I don't want to touch the pillows on my bed until I'm showered. I'm repulsive."

Lynn rose and walked to the bathroom. She returned moments later with a stack of folded towels. Gently, she lifted Rachel's splinted leg and slipped the towels underneath. "How often have you been changing the ice packs?"

The senior member of their little friendship trio, Lynn had both the age and personality to assume the mothering role within the group. Although Lynn's fussing occasionally annoyed Rachel, today she basked in the special attention.

"If by ice packs you mean bags of frozen food, I've been changing them as soon as they start getting mushy. It's annoying, but if I don't keep ice on it, it swells up so big that it pushes against the splint and feels like it's going to pop. I don't know what I'm going to do later tonight when it's time to go to sleep."

She paused to think. "Probably just die." Rachel sighed dramatically, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the couch cushions. "It's fine, though. I figure it's just a matter of time. It'll probably just save the Memento Killer another house call."

At Rachel's wilting tone, Lynn cocked her head to the side. "Come stay with us tonight. I'll take care of you and feed you and change your ice packs, and we can send Alex to his office while we watch BBC dramas and drink coffee."

It sounded perfect. Rachel sighed again. "I can't."

"Of course you can."

"Nope. For one, I'm too exhausted to pack an overnight bag."

"I'll pack your bag."

"For two, I have to teach tomorrow." She rubbed her eyes and then opened them to stare wearily across at Lynn. "I can't stay up all night drinking coffee *and* try to handle school tomorrow with this stupid leg. It's just too much."

"Rachel. That's crazy. You just broke a bone. You shouldn't go back to work until the pain dies down, or at least until you've gotten a cast on it. And besides, I don't like you staying here alone. Not with all these murders."

"First, it's not really broken. It's just a fracture. And second, I hate to impose on you and Alex."

"Alex doesn't care. He wouldn't want you staying here alone in this state either. And a fracture *is* a break."

"Third, it's only been three murders so far, and I was just kidding about the Memento Killer. He isn't a home invader—

"They don't *think*."

“There’s never any sign of forced entry, meaning the women probably already know him somehow, which is how he decides what mementos to give them. They just don’t *know* that they know him, I guess—which, if you think about it, is just too creepy. But anyway, it doesn’t matter because I’m certainly not letting any men in tonight, killers or otherwise, since I can barely make it to the door. So whether I’m home alone or not is beside the point.”

Lynn frowned. “I still don’t like it.” She leaned forward and placed a cool hand on Rachel’s forehead. Evidently satisfied with what she felt there, she picked up the bag of mushy peas, walked to the kitchen, and returned with a bag of frozen corn and draped it carefully over the splint.

“Frankly, you should be more worried about Ann staying out at the barn by herself tonight.” Rachel felt no qualms about throwing Ann under the bus.

Lynn blew a quick breath upward, puffing her bangs off her forehead. “Oh, believe me, I’m worried about her too.” She smoothed back her hair. “But that’s a conversation I’m going to have with her, not you.”

Momentarily, Rachel pitied Ann.

“Serial killer or no serial killer, you should come stay with us tonight,” Lynn said.

So they were back to this. Rachel rolled her eyes. “Your house has stairs. I can’t handle stairs.” She reached for her coffee.

“I’ll make you up a nice bed on the downstairs couch. Or Alex can carry you up the stairs.”

The thought of Lynn’s thin husband staggering up the stairs like a weedy Rhett Butler was enough to send Rachel into a spasm of laughter. Since she’d been in the process of swallowing coffee at the time, the results

weren't pretty. She cupped a hand under her chin to catch the dribbles.

Lynn handed Rachel a napkin.

Rachel, still wheezing, took the proffered napkin and wiped her eyes. "Lynn, please. You're beautiful and you're wonderful and I love you. But to tell you the truth, today has been sort of awful. I just want to sleep in my own bed tonight."

And just like that—without even knowing it—Rachel had made the decision that would determine her fate for the next six weeks. Had she stayed overnight at Lynn's, she would have had someone to talk her out of going to school the next day. If she hadn't gone to school the next day, she would not have been scheduled for a late-afternoon appointment at the orthopedic surgeon's office. In the long run, sometimes it's the smallest choices that have the farthest-reaching effects.