

RUTH BUCHANAN



Flexible

A NOVEL OF MYSTERY, DRAMA, REHABILITATION,
SPIDERS, AND THE OCCASIONAL HEAD WOUND

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Ruth Buchanan

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"I Shall Not Care" and "To E." by Sara Teasdale from Love Songs (1917).

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**Collapsible
Flexible
Unbreakable (Coming Soon)**

1

If Rachel Cooper had known that directing the school drama would lead to so much *actual* drama, she would have passed on the entire experience. But since directing a play was written into her yearly teaching contract, she wasn't exactly allowed that option. Still, she liked to think that with a hint of foresight, she might have saved herself the grief and opted out.

After her idyllic summer road trip, she was not emotionally prepared for the jarring experience of diving full-force back into her life. Although she'd put off coming home as long as possible, she could no longer delay the inevitable. The start of a new school year loomed close on the horizon, bringing in its train a full juggernaut of responsibilities.

At least she had friends to help share the load.

Lynn fanned herself with a Stu's Diner menu and scanned the room for their server. They had Clark this time, the cute new waiter with dimples and an unstoppable cowlick. "Have you chosen a play yet?" she asked.

"No." Rachel frowned at her friend. "I've been putting it off until school starts and I know how many kids actually want to try out. There's no use letting it be *A Christmas Carol* all over again." She sighed, remembering the time she'd chosen a classic but cumbersome script with more parts than available

players. Even with doubling, she had been forced to coerce unwilling students into joining the cast. A few good-spirited faculty members had also been pressed into service, making cameo appearances just to help her out.

“Never again,” Rachel intoned sagely, blowing steam from the surface of her coffee.

Next to Lynn, Ann grunted and rolled her eyes in memory of the *A Christmas Carol* incident. As Rachel’s sister, ex-roommate, and closest confidant, Ann wasn’t afforded the luxury of forgetting.

Lynn continued to fan herself. “What’s up with this place today?”

Rachel glanced around the diner, seeing the same brick walls, messy chalkboard announcements, and harried wait staff as always. “What do you mean?”

“It’s about a million degrees in here.” Lynn downed several gulps of ice water. “It’s even too hot for coffee.”

Rachel raised an index finger. “First of all, it’s never too hot for coffee. Second, it’s not even that bad.” She paused. “Although it is hot outside.”

Ann nodded. “I love my job, but I really do hate this time of year.” August and September, typically the hottest months in Florida’s subtropical climate, made Ann’s outdoor work as a horse trainer somewhat more challenging than usual.

“I’ll drink to that.” Rachel clinked her coffee mug against her sister’s un-raised glass of sweet tea. “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for tomorrow.”

Lynn wiped some perspiration from her upper lip and took another drink of water.

Ann refilled Lynn’s glass. “Don’t be so dramatic. This is probably your one hundredth first day of

school.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration. But at any rate, it doesn’t get any easier.”

Ann snorted.

Rachel leveled a narrowed gaze across the table at her sister. “What?”

“First days are the easiest days by far.”

“And you know this because of your vast teaching experience?”

Ann rolled her eyes. “No, but I was a student once too. I had plenty of first days of my own. Everybody had new books and pencils and lots of paper. The teachers were shiny and well-dressed and nobody misbehaved on the first day. At least, not that I recall.”

Ann had a point. Rachel chose to ignore it. “Here comes Clark,” she told Lynn. “You can ask him if the air conditioner is broken.” Although clearly it wasn’t.

Clark placed three plates on the table without needing to be reminded of who ordered what, his ready smile bracketed by twin dimples deep enough to sink an index finger into up to the first knuckle. Not that Rachel ever imagined doing that.

“Why is the thermostat set to boiling?” Lynn asked him.

“I’ll go check.” He departed with the trademark good humor and sideways smile that had won their hearts.

Lynn cut her chicken into tiny squares. “Have you settled into your new place?” she asked Rachel.

Rachel nodded, her mouth so full of bacon and eggs that her cheeks actually bulged out a little. “Pretty much.” She covered her mouth with her hand lest she accidentally spray the others.

“Slow down there, tiger,” Ann said, “I don’t think

your food is going anywhere.”

“I’ve just missed this.” Rachel gestured with her knife and fork at her plate, the two women sitting across from her, and the restaurant in general.

“Well, eight weeks is a long time to be on the road.” Lynn took a delicate bite and washed it down with the last of her water. She lifted their empty water pitcher in the air until Clark, in the act of delivering plates across the room, spotted her and dipped his chin in acknowledgment.

Rachel gave a mighty swallow, almost choking as the overambitious mass worked its way down. Eyes watering, she reached for her coffee.

Ann shook her head and spooned oatmeal into her mouth, watching Rachel as if she were a lab experiment in progress. “You never learn.”

“My new place is really nice,” Rachel said, gasping a little as the giant wad of food made its way down her esophagus. Then, when Lynn and Ann raised their eyebrows in tandem, she said, “It’s very—” she searched for the right word, “—clean.”

Ann frowned. “Of course it’s clean. It’s brand new. But that doesn’t mean it’s nice.”

“It’s nice,” Rachel insisted. “I’m glad I moved there.”

“For now,” Ann commented.

“Don’t be such a pessimist.”

“I’m a realist,” Ann said. “I give it six months.”

Rachel shook her head. “I’ve already moved twice this year, and I don’t plan to move again. Besides, this place is perfect for me. It’s small, the price is right, and it’s a little closer to work—but not too close.”

“First of all, you’ve only moved once this year. We”—Ann gestured with her spoon back and forth

between Lynn and herself—"moved you the first time—"

"Along with Alex and Ethan," Lynn put in helpfully.

"Along with Alex and Ethan," Ann amended, nodding. "So technically you've only moved once."

"Hey. I packed all that stuff into boxes while on crutches and moved and unpacked it all by myself over this last week, dealing with all the spiders that came out of the boxes, so I think that counts as having moved twice, actually."

"You didn't move it all by yourself," Ann reminded her.

"Of course not. I couldn't exactly lift all of the furniture—"

"I rest my case." Ann lifted her bowl, tilted it sideways, and rotated it in circles to scrape out the last of the oatmeal.

"Now listen—" Rachel's heated rebuttal was interrupted by Clark, who appeared next to the table and plunked a fresh pitcher of water next to Lynn.

"Bless you." She poured herself a fresh glass and sucked half of the contents down in one giant draught.

"I just checked," Clark told Lynn, "and the thermostat is set the same as always. Maybe you just got overheated on the way in."

Ann and Rachel nodded along, glancing toward the over-bright windows. It was, after all, Saturday afternoon in South Florida, mid-August. It was an absolute scorcher.

Ann sighed. "From now until the end of October, it's nothing but heat waves, afternoon thunderstorms, mud, and fire ants for me."

Lynn swiped a hand across the back of her neck.

"More like from now until November. We don't get our first break in the weather until close to Thanksgiving."

"Sometimes it's the end of October," Rachel said.

"It would be nice if the break in the weather comes earlier this year," Lynn said. "That would be helpful as we get ready."

"Get ready?" Rachel asked, taken aback. What had she missed?

Lynn and Ann made eye contact.

"Shall we tell her?" Lynn asked.

Ann rolled her shoulders and rubbed the back of her neck. "I was sort of hoping to be somewhere else when you told her."

"Told me what?"

Ann leaned over and used her fork to spear a pineapple cube from Rachel's fruit cup. "Like maybe in the next county."

Rachel's gaze darted back and forth between the two of them. "Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"It'll be good for you," Lynn assured her. "And I promise you'll like it."

Ann choked on a mouthful of fruit.

"Eventually," Lynn amended.

She wouldn't. She was certain now. "Just tell me."

"OK, but don't interrupt."

Rachel lifted her coffee and took a long, fortifying gulp. "I'm ready."

Lynn put down her silverware and laid her forearms against the table, leaning forward and speaking conspiratorially. "I registered the three of us for a race."

"A what?" Rachel's voice climbed the scales.

"It's just a 5K."

"A *what?*"

"And don't worry. It's only a 'fun run.'" Lynn sketched air quotes around the last two words. "So you don't need to feel any pressure."

"A *what?*"

Lynn laughed. "You don't need to worry about finishing under a certain time or anything. I already paid the registration fee, so you don't have to worry about that. It's in December, which I know sounds like a long time from now, but you've never run before, so it would be good if you got on a training schedule as soon as the heat breaks."

"A *what?*"

Ann was absorbed with seeing how full she could fill her cup of ice water before it overflowed. Without looking up, she said, "I think she's stuck."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing." Rachel spluttered. "You registered me for a race? Without my knowledge? Have you forgotten that my right ankle still doesn't bend properly?"

"I told you not to skip physical therapy," Lynn tut-tutted.

"I had to take a road trip!"

Ann put down the water pitcher. "Not for the whole summer, you didn't."

"Rachel," Lynn interrupted, reaching over to pat Rachel's hand, "this will be good for you. I promise. I'll help you train, and I'll work with you, and we'll see what we can do about that stiff ankle. Ann will help, too." She glanced sideways at Ann. "I mean, Ann will probably help—"

"This was your idea," Ann told Lynn. She leaned back in her seat and folded her arms. "I'll run with you

guys on race day, but I'm not training with her. I already get enough melodrama at our early-morning workouts." She turned her eyes to Rachel. "Which, by the way, Coach Donovan's been asking when you were planning to start showing up again."

"Tell him I want to get the school year started first." Not to mention loosen up her ankle and regain a measure of flexibility. If he found out she'd skipped physical therapy, Coach Donovan would flip.

Ann nodded in acceptance of this timeline and ate more of Rachel's fruit.

Lynn gestured toward Rachel's stiff leg. "I'll e-mail you a link to some stretches," she said. "You'll be flexible enough in no time."

Rachel rubbed her hands down the sides of her face, dragging at her cheeks and making her eyes look ghoulish. "Why is my life like this?"

Lynn laughed. "Don't worry. You're going to love training. Running releases endorphins—endorphins which you, Miss Rachel, are certainly not getting any other way."

Rachel froze, arrested. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means," Ann said. "Unless you would like us to elaborate?"

"No, that's fine. I'm fine, thank you."

"That's what I thought."

~*~

The threat of running in a distant 5K was the least of Rachel's immediate worries. What really concerned her was the fall play.

In theory, the production shouldn't have been

such a headache. After all, it wasn't as if Rachel didn't have experience with directing. Then again, perhaps it was precisely because she had experience that she always dreaded this time of year.

Her first priority was to set up her classroom and complete her lesson plans. As a veteran teacher, Rachel accomplished these tasks quickly. Her next priority was to choose a play. To that end, she brought home a stack of scripts, brewed a pot of coffee, and fanned the best options across her tiny kitchen table.

First, *Murder Came Knocking*—a clever farce about a female murderer disguised as a private investigator posing as a maid in order to “investigate” the murders that she herself had committed. Second, *It's Spring My Love*—the coming-of-age melodrama about a shy boy who falls in love with a girl who's in love with the shy boy's brother, who is dying of a rare blood cancer. Third, a simplified re-telling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Normally, Rachel would have spent the evening debating the pros and cons of each play with Ann, who would have half-napped on the floor while mostly ignoring the proceedings. Rachel would have read aloud from each script until Ann offered to shut her up by punching her in the face. And a concussion was the last thing she needed right now.

But with Ann now living on the other side of the county as caretaker of the lush VanSmythe estate, and Rachel occupying a cramped apartment in the newly constructed Royal Palm Villas, such evenings now proved few and far between.

As Rachel opened the first script for perusal, a boom of music from the upstairs apartment caused her to jolt in her seat.

I wanna dance you, hit you, love you, baby

Wanna, ugh ugh, wanna, ugh ugh
I wanna dance you, hit you, love you, baby
Wanna, ugh ugh, wanna, ugh ugh
...Baby!

As far as Rachel could make out, this was the entire song, repeatedly looped over a throbbing, primal beat. She shook her head to clear the lyrics and concentrated on the first page of dialogue.

I wanna dance you, hit you, love you, baby
Wanna, ugh ugh, wanna, ugh ugh
I wanna dance you, hit you, love you, baby
Wanna, ugh ugh, wanna, ugh ugh
...Baby!

Those weren't even words that belonged in sentences together. Not that those were sentences. Not exactly. Rachel cocked her head to the side, mentally scanning the lyrics for subjects and verbs, wondering where the punctuation was inserted, or if the lyrics were actually punctuated at all. In a temporary fit of lurid curiosity, she considered running an online search for the lyrics just to check. But that way lay madness.

Rachel set down the script and skimmed the room for her ear buds. Maybe a little classical music would cover the offensive distraction and allow her to concentrate.

She'd made it halfway across the room before she spotted the spider, a tiny monster hulking halfway up the wall in the corner, brooding over the living room like an eight-legged overlord. This wasn't the average house spider—the sort with tiny bodies and spindly legs—the sort easily swatted or shooed away. This was a brown huntsman. Its crab-like brown legs looked thick and substantial against the spare white walls, its

fat body almost pulsing as it stared her down.

Shelob.

Rachel knew from experience that when it came to dealing with spiders, there was no time like the present. Failing to kill them immediately only led to perpetual panic over where they might have gone and the mental trauma of trying to fall asleep at night while simultaneously fearing that the spider would crawl into her mouth while she slept.

Rachel grabbed the first thing her hands could find and hurled it toward the corner. Unfortunately, that thing happened to be a paperback copy of *Bleak House*. It proved extremely ineffective. Nearly a thousand pages of Charles Dickens glanced off one corner of the wall and then the other, rebounding halfway back toward Rachel with a dented spine and the pages crunched on one side. Meanwhile, Shelob squatted unharmed in the corner, eyeing her beadily.

Rachel backed up a step, thinking. Using her flip-flop seemed unwise, given the V-shape notching of the corner and the shoe's general floppiness. Using a wooden spoon from the kitchen could prove effective against the corner, but that would require her to come within jumping distance of the spider. Too close for comfort.

Besides, in the few seconds it would take Rachel to dash to the kitchen and back to retrieve the spoon, the creature could disappear, and she'd never sleep again until she'd hunted him down and killed him. Either that or she'd resort to burning down the entire building and looking for a new place to live. And that just seemed excessive.

"I can do this," Rachel lied aloud. Backing slowly toward the center of the room, she reached down and

picked up a small footstool. As if she were a lion tamer approaching a snarling beast, Rachel advanced one slow step at a time.

The phone rang.

Jumping in alarm, she fumbled the footstool and dropped it. The spider scuttled sideways down the wall and disappeared behind a stack of boxes.

Rachel hopped sideways to hold her balance. Her stiff ankle gave a mighty pop, and she almost fell over. Across the room, her phone continued to ring.

She limped over and picked it up, fuming. "Hello?"

"Turn on your TV." Lynn's voice was urgent.

"What? Wait. Why?"

"Hurry. Channel 18."

"I don't have the TV plugged in yet."

"You've been moved in for a week!"

"Unpacking has proven a challenge." She tried to sound stoic, but failed. It's hard to sound stoic when you're out of breath.

"The spiders?"

"Yes. I just spotted another one."

"Ugh. Did you kill it?"

"Not yet."

"Well, that's not important right now. You need to turn on your TV."

"Why?"

"They're interviewing your boyfriend again."

2

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Rachel had objected to Lynn. Nevertheless, she’d located her TV, manhandled it into place, and made sure it was plugged in before the eleven o’clock news. Sure enough, the station re-aired the story from the afternoon just as Lynn had predicted.

Rachel stared at the clean lines of Detective Ian Smith’s profile as he answered questions about a recent string of burglaries. She wondered if he even remembered giving her his personal number at the end of last school year. He hadn’t been the most swoon-worthy man ever to hit on Rachel, or even the most compelling, but something about him had stuck with her. The calm voice. The cool gray eyes. The steady ways. It was no wonder the police department had chosen him as their representative to the local media. He seemed so honest and trustworthy.

His charms had obviously appealed to Lynn. Ever since Rachel had come back from her summer road trip, she’d been urging her to call him.

“I don’t have a reason to call him,” Rachel always objected.

“He gave you his card and told you to call him. I’d say that’s reason enough.”

Not reason enough for Rachel.

Detective Ian Smith was a man. Not like Lee, the man-child, who remained devoted to Rachel no matter what and always bent to her needs and whims.

Detective Ian Smith was a genuine, grown-up man—with an important job, a good reputation, heavy responsibilities, and a full schedule. A man who solved serious crimes and gave professional interviews on the evening news. He didn't have time for aimless calls from spinster English teachers with inflexible ankles and spider apartments.

Not that Rachel planned to call him, or even wanted to. Not necessarily.

Are you watching? Lynn texted.

Are YOU? Rachel texted back.

Lynn sent back a cartoon smiley face with two giant hearts for eyes.

Rachel groaned, silenced her phone, turned off the TV, stretched, and limped off to bed, pulling the covers directly over her face.

~*~

Morning came early to the Royal Palm Villas. Doors slammed. Children ran up and down sidewalks. Dogs barked. Cars seemingly without mufflers revved in the parking lot. Wives yelled at husbands, husbands yelled back, and children hollered for them to shut up. Rachel didn't think she'd ever have to set an alarm clock again.

Although by rights this should have been her first day back at early-morning workouts, Rachel had decided to skip in favor of spending extra time getting ready for the first day of school. Though Ann had stated that a good workout would offer the best physical and emotional preparation, Rachel's hatred of feeling rushed—coupled with her fear that something was bound to go wrong and keep her from being on

time for the first day—demanded that she skip workout in order to spend more time fretting about getting to school on time.

At 6:15, Ann texted her: *Great workout. All the punches. All the kicks. All the sweats. Happy first day.*

Rachel texted back: *On third coffee. Ankle popping every step, but feeling ready for the first day. What could go wrong?*

Rachel slid into her parking space and eyed the empty spot next to hers, the space where Lee's rattletrap usually sat.

Today, Rachel faced the reality of a school year without Lee. No Lee to follow her down the hall or carry in her bag or go on impromptu coffee runs. No Lee to mock her stiff ankle or question her wardrobe choices. No Lee to both infuriate and charm her all at once.

Rachel wondered if Lee's new job required him to dress in something other than frayed khakis, a rumpled shirt, and that silly fisherman's vest. She wished she'd taken the time to get together with him before school started, but the week between getting home from the trip and starting school had been hectic with moving. Until this moment, it hadn't occurred to her that she actually wouldn't see him every day. Rachel fished in her bag for her phone, briefly considering sending him a text.

Someone tapped on the driver's side window, and Rachel jumped, bobbling her phone and bonking her head against the headrest. She slammed a hand over her chest as her feet jerked against the floorboards. A jolt of discomfort shot up her right leg as her stiff ankle bent against its will.

"Sorry!" came a contrite, bird-like voice, muffled

through the pane of glass. "I didn't mean to scare you!" Of course she hadn't. Sharon Day was as incapable of malice as Rachel was of turning cartwheels. Miss Day stood half bent over to peer at Rachel, tiny wisps of golden hair curling slightly in the early-morning humidity. "Did you spill your coffee?"

Rachel rolled down her window. "No, it was in the cup holder. What's up?"

"I just wanted to say good morning and wish you a happy first day." Sharon fluttered her eyelashes. "And also see if you needed anything carried in, because I know Lee's not here to help you."

Rachel let out a long breath through her nostrils and concentrated on taking Sharon's comments at face value. Surely she was just being nice, not implying that Rachel was old, infirm, and incapable of carrying her own lunch and teacher's bag into her classroom. *Remember, Rachel. You're going to stop assuming things about people's motives.*

"I'm actually walking quite well these days." Rachel shot Sharon a smile. "I'm not using a cane or anything. So I think I can handle carrying everything myself."

A tiny line appeared between Sharon's perfectly-sculpted eyebrows. "Oh, OK. Sorry to bother you, Miss Cooper. I'll see you at afternoon pickup." She stepped back from Rachel's car in a half-bow, as if she were a lowly serf backing away from an imperial ruler.

"Wait," Rachel sighed. "There's a box of books in the trunk that you can carry in for me." She'd been planning to send Chris or one of the other boys out for the box later in the day, but with Lee's admonition at the end of last school year that she should give Sharon Day a chance and Lynn's assertion that Rachel never

asked for help still ringing in the back of her mind, she knew better than to pass up this golden opportunity.

While Rachel angled herself out of the car, trying to keep most of her weight on her left leg, Sharon lifted the box from the trunk. As they walked down the hall, Sharon chatting nervously about her schedule, a wave of first-day jitters rose in Rachel's chest. These weren't nervous jitters, but jitters of excited anticipation. As much as she dreaded school starting every fall, she also loved it: the all-encompassing absorption of the work, the drama of the students, and the daily thrum of teenage energy. Nothing else compared.

Rachel may not have been good at most aspects of adult life—but this? She was good at this.

At the end of the hall, she pulled the key from the band around her wrist and let herself into her classroom, flipping on the overhead florescent lights with one hand while reaching to push a twist of red curls from her face with the other.

A new year had arrived. A year full of as-yet-unknown stories, secrets, and challenges. A year in which Rachel could demonstrate to Ann, Lynn, and Lee that she'd learned from the mistakes of the past. A year in which she could turn everything around.

This year she would be more patient and less sarcastic. She would listen more and talk less. She would be a better friend, a better sister, and a better co-worker. She would be kinder and less judgmental. She would give Sharon Day a chance.

Through it all, she would never admit to anyone how much she missed Lee.

~*~