

# RUTH BUCHANAN



## Unbreakable

A NOVEL OF RELATIONSHIPS, GETAWAYS, TEEP KICKS,  
BACON, NUPTIALS, AND THE OCCASIONAL STABBING

# Unbreakable

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.

### **Unbreakable**

**COPYRIGHT 2017 by Ruth Buchanan**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. The ESV® text has been reproduced in cooperation with and by permission of Good News Publishers. Unauthorized reproduction of this publication is prohibited. All rights reserved. The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV) is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410  
Harbourlight Books sail and mast logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0048-9

**Published in the United States of America**

*Titles by Ruth Buchanan*

**Collapsible  
Flexible  
Unbreakable**

**Murder on Birchardville Hill**





# 1

January had a way of making Rachel want to flop into bed, pull the duvet over her face, and stay that way forever. Instead, she did the responsible thing and worked on her New Year's Resolutions. They probably wouldn't do much good, but Lynn and Ann would give her a hard time if she didn't come up with four resolutions as promised.

When they'd first challenged her to do this, she'd tried to slither out of it. She'd claimed that New Year's Resolutions were nothing more than corny coping mechanisms, but Ann shot back that perhaps a semi-spinster English teacher with a gimpy ankle and a special knack for disaster was in no position to look down her nose at such things.

Rachel had no arguments against such logic. Annoying as it was, she wasn't in a position to reject advice from people who actually had their lives together. She accepted the assignment with what she hoped passed for humility, promising to come up with at least four resolutions, record her weekly progress in a notebook, and give status reports whenever they met for breakfast at Stu's. Which is why on New Year's morning, Rachel fortified herself with a slurp of well-creamed coffee and got down to business.

Her first resolution was so obvious that it required no dithering. She picked up her pen and wrote in quick, smooth strokes. *Resolved: to stop reading into*

*ordinary situations and thereby creating groundless, alternate storylines in my head.* Her days of assuming things were numbered. Assuming that Call-Me-Matt had been stalking her. Assuming he'd been the Memento Killer. Assuming *Lee* had been the Memento Killer. Then assuming *Lee* had left poetry scrawled backstage for her during last semester's fall play when the entire time it had been a disturbed cry for help from a suicidal student. Assuming Detective Smith had been wrong about the students he'd identified as at risk, even though she'd asked for his expertise.

Alone in the silence of her living room, Rachel's cheeks heated. She underlined the resolution twice.

Now for number two. *Resolved: To pay attention in church.* This was Lynn's suggestion, and Rachel had no reason to ignore it. Half the time, she had no idea what was going on. Hopefully, with most of her major life issues solved, she would now be able to concentrate better.

After the second resolution, Rachel hit a wall. She tapped her pen rhythmically against the page. Should she resolve to drink less coffee? Ha. She may be ready to make some changes, but she wasn't insane. Besides, how would she face all those early mornings without it?

Then it hit her. She clicked the pen, bent forward, and wrote, *Resolved: To master the flying teep kick.* With her ribs mostly healed and her ankle fully rehabbed, anything was possible—perhaps even the ridiculous kicks that Coach Donovan and Ann seemed intent on making her master during their early-morning workouts. "Considering how often you manage to get yourself into ridiculous situations," Donovan had said, "the least you could do is learn to defend yourself." He



had a point.

Now all that remained was to think of a fourth resolution, and she would be home free.

~\*~

"I can't think of anything!" Rachel topped off Lynn's mug before turning politely to her sister. She tilted the pot toward Ann. "Coffee?"

Ann snorted, leaned back against the booth, and continued skimming through texts on her ancient flip phone.

Lynn closed Rachel's Resolutions Notebook, set it in the center of the table, and tapped it with a slender finger. "These three are a fine start. Good job, Rachel."

Rachel flushed. As anticipated, victory was sweet.

"What'd she pick?" For someone who hadn't looked up from her phone in the last five minutes, Ann sounded surprisingly interested. "Something about killing all the spiders in the world?"

"Oh, good one." Rachel reached for the notebook. "Let's write that down."

Lynn pulled the notebook out of reach. "Don't be silly. Rachel has resolved to take situations at face value, to pay better attention to the sermons at church on Sundays, and to master the flying teep kick at your early-morning workouts."

Ann's gaze flicked up from her phone. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." Rachel nodded and pried the notebook from Lynn's hands. "But don't tell Coach Donovan."

"I'm absolutely telling Donovan." Ann's thumbs tapped against her phone.

"Are you texting him *now*? Ugh, don't."

"Why not? He'll have to know eventually."

"I just don't want him to get his hopes up."

"Are you kidding me? Rachel—you thinking about workouts when we're not actually at workouts? He'll be thrilled to know you're starting to care."

Rachel sighed. "It's not that I care, exactly. It's just that I wanted to give myself really challenging goals, and that one will probably be the hardest."

Lynn raised one well-manicured eyebrow. "Harder than tackling personality issues fundamental to your very nature?"

Ann chuckled. "Have you seen her on the mats?"

Rachel crossed her arms. "Thanks for the confidence boost."

Lynn tilted her head to the side. "I didn't know a 'flying teep kick' was even a thing."

"I think it's a thing." Rachel scratched the top of her head, sending her curls bouncing. "Coach Donovan has us learning it."

"Although he has been known to make stuff up," Ann admitted.

Their food arrived. After Lynn prayed, the three fell into a comfortable silence while Lynn sliced her chicken into tiny cubes and Rachel ate her bacon.

"I have a fourth suggestion for you," Ann said around a mouthful of breakfast burrito.

Rachel tucked a roll of curls behind her ear. It immediately sprang out again. "Oh, boy, here we go. I'm sure I'll love this."

Ann shrugged. "Think what you want, but you really should make it a goal to figure out what's going on between you and Ian Smith."

Rachel's face burned. "There's nothing going on

between me and Ian Smith." She reached for her water glass and gulped several cold mouthfuls.

The corners of Ann's lips tilted up in a sly smile. "Only because you haven't figured things out yet."

"There's nothing to figure out!" Rachel snapped. "He expressed some interest, and I acted like an insane person. He still helped me out last semester when all of that stuff went down with Jessica—" Rachel swallowed a sudden lump in her throat and caught Lynn's sympathetic gaze. She steadied herself and continued. "He helped me with Jessica, but what choice did he have? A life was at stake!"

"And now?" Lynn asked.

Rachel shrugged, feigning serenity. "I haven't heard from him at all over the holidays. But that's fine. I'm done trying to figure things out." She reached for the Resolutions Notebook. "If I'm to be faithful to these resolutions at all, this is the point when I *don't* start speculating on Ian Smith's feelings and intentions." She held up the list and underscored the words *stop reading into situations* with her index finger, glaring pointedly at Ann.

Seeming unperturbed, Ann dabbed the corners of her lips with a napkin. "If you say so."

Rachel rolled her eyes and scrounged in her bag for a pen. "I will say this, though. I do have to figure out my dating situation."

Lynn perked up. "You have a dating situation?"

Ann leaned back in her seat, looking around broadly as if consulting the whole room. "Isn't that what I just finished saying?"

"I'm creeping up on my mid-thirties," she reminded them, as if they didn't know. "If I'm to get married and have babies before I'm forty, I'd better get

on it." She scribbled in the notebook. *Resolved: To sort out my romantic relationships and finally settle down with a good man.* She read the resolution aloud to Ann and Lynn, slipped the pen back into her bag, and downed a hearty scoop of eggs.

"Oh yeah." Ann shook her head. "This will go great."

Lynn chuckled. "Don't listen to her, Rachel. I think that's a solid resolution. And don't worry. I'll help."

Ann scoffed. "Better you than me."

"You're the worst," Rachel informed her sister.

"Now, ladies," Lynn soothed. "You're family. Be nice."

"Speaking of which, I have mail for you." Ann slid a hand into her bag and pulled out a packet of mail.

"Is the post office *still* forwarding my mail to your address? I contacted them about this *weeks* ago!"

Ann shrugged. "Beats me what the problem is." She handed the packet across the table and returned to her burrito. "But I hope you fix it soon, because you're currently getting more mail at my house than I am."

"I don't know how much of an accomplishment that is when it's mostly junk mail." Rachel flipped through a series of long, narrow envelopes from car dealerships, insurance salesmen, and credit card companies. At the back of the packet, however, one tall, square envelope rose above the rest. She turned it over in her hands, wondering at the flowing calligraphy.

"That looks like a wedding invitation." Lynn observed from across the table, stirring more cream into her coffee. "Who do we know who's getting married?"

"No one." Then Rachel's eye caught the family

name on the return address label, and she sucked in a breath. Surely not. She flipped the envelope and used a clean butter knife to slice upward through the flap.

Lynn tsked. "Rachel. Never cut toward your face. You could put an eye out."

"It's just a butter knife. How much harm could it do?" She set the knife next to her plate and pulled out the card, goggling down at the couple smiling back. "It's not a wedding invitation." She heard her own voice as if from a distance. "It's a Save the Date."

"So?" Ann asked. "Who is it?"

"Yeah, who's getting married?" Lynn leaned forward, craning her neck.

Rachel's words came slowly. "Sharon Day."

"That little blonde teacher with the fluttery eyes?" Ann asked, clearly indifferent. "Well, good for her. Who's she marrying?"

"It's *whom*," Rachel corrected absently, although clearly this was no time for grammar. She flipped the Save the Date so Ann and Lynn could see the photo of Sharon Day and her fiancé.

"It's Lee."

## 2

It was as if someone had paused the universe. Lynn halted mid-sip while Ann froze mid-chew. In any other moment, Rachel would have been pleased to see her friends displaying evidence of the same shock that she felt. As it was, all her emotions were engaged in processing the sundrenched engagement photo of Lee Martin and Sharon Day. When was this photo even taken? And *where*? They were wearing sweaters and didn't appear to be sweating. So it couldn't have been Florida.

"I didn't even know they were officially dating." Ann used her straw to swirl the ice in her glass.

"They only made it official at Thanksgiving." Rachel pinched the Save the Date between two fingers and flapped it back and forth. "What *is* this?"

Lynn frowned. "Lee didn't talk to you about this? Odd. I didn't know you two were still on the outs."

"We're not on the outs!" Rachel sensed her voice pitching upward and drew a deep breath. "At least, I didn't think we were."

"When's the last time you talked to him?" Ann asked.

"Right before he and Sharon left to go out of town for Christmas. They headed to the Midwest so he could meet her family. I told him it sounded as if they were moving a bit fast. I guess I didn't know how fast." With a flick of her wrist, Rachel spun the Save the Date

onto the table. She glared at it. The traces of Lee's influence in the simple design were unmistakable: the textured paper, the elegant font, and the tasteful embellishments. At least Lee would be marrying someone who would appreciate his artistic gifts.

Lee would be *marrying someone*. And not just anyone, either. Sharon Day—a woman Rachel had once found intensely exasperating. Not that Rachel opposed the match solely on those grounds. Sharon was young, impressionable, and slightly immature—a description that wasn't too far off from Lee himself, come to think of it. So in a sense, they were a good fit.

But still.

Lee was *marrying someone*.

And he hadn't even talked to her about it.

"Rachel?" Lynn's voice cut through the haze.

"I'm fine." Rachel picked up the invitation, fitted it back into the envelope, and jammed it into her bag.

"Wait—" Ann propped her elbows on the table and leaned forward. "You're *fine*?"

"Of course I'm fine."

Ann slitted her eyes. "There's no way you're fine."

Lynn topped off Rachel's coffee and pushed the jug of cream across the table. "Honestly, Rachel, it's OK if you need to talk it out. We know what a surprise this must be for you."

Rachel shook back her hair, red spirals tumbling. Ignoring the swooping sensation in her stomach, she affected a light laugh. "Honestly, guys, I'm fine." She swirled cream into her coffee, checking for the perfect shade of tan. "As you're both so fond of reminding me, Lee is a grown man who can make his own decisions. So if he wants to get engaged and plan a wedding without consulting the person who loves him most in

the world and has his best interests at heart, then so be it." Rachel lifted her coffee and sipped, the picture of nonchalance.

Ann leaned back in her chair and expelled a loud breath toward the ceiling.

Lynn searched Rachel's eyes, brow creasing.

"Yes?" Rachel asked archly. She sipped her coffee, slurping noisily into the heavy silence.

Ann leveled her gaze on Rachel. "There are so many things wrong with what you just said that I don't know where to start."

"Do tell." Rachel would not allow herself to be drawn into this debate. Didn't they realize that the first Resolution was at stake? Maybe they did, and they were testing her.

"Are you honestly sitting there and saying that you love Lee more than his own mother does?" Ann snorted. "More than his own *flesh and blood*?"

"I certainly love him *better*," Rachel shot back. "I'm not the one who virtually abandoned him when he was growing up and left him to raise himself. I never stole his car and tried to sell it for parts so that I could buy drugs."

Lynn lifted a finger. "Rachel does have a point. But I don't think this is the argument we need to have right now." She glanced back and forth between the sisters, holding eye contact with each in turn. "I think we can agree that everyone at this table cares about Lee and wants him to be happy."

"I certainly do." Rachel thwacked her mug against the tabletop with more force than she'd intended. "But how can I know what's best for him when I can't even figure out what's best for myself?"

"That's true." Ann shocked them all by agreeing



with Rachel. "Although I think we all know what would be best for you at this point, and that would be to put poor Ian Smith out of his misery."

"I'm sorry," Rachel interrupted, her face going hot, "but when did we change the subject?"

"I haven't changed the subject. If Lee and Sharon can go from zero to engagement in a matter of weeks, the least you could do is admit that you want to date Ian."

A fine mist broke out on Rachel's forehead. She picked up a coaster and fanned herself. Maybe Lynn wasn't the only one starting menopause.

"How many dates have you two been on?" Lynn smiled as if she knew a secret. "Two? Three?"

"None," Rachel said flatly. She fiddled with the coaster.

"I'd say at least two." Ann ran the tips of her fingers back through her hair, smoothing flyaways into her ponytail.

"Those weren't dates," Rachel defended.

"But you have been seeing each other," Lynn clarified.

"I wouldn't call it 'seeing each other.'" Rachel over-exaggerated the air quotes. "I just helped serve food at the soup kitchen where he volunteers because they were shorthanded one day and he couldn't find anyone else to fill in. And, sure, I happened to stand next to him the entire time because he was serving potatoes and I was serving peas—"

Ann held up her index finger. "Date Number One. Didn't it last like four hours?"

"You're being ridiculous."

Lynn's tone was speculative. "Four hours of chatting...over food...sounds like a date to me."

“Yeah, because most people on dates wear hair nets and plastic gloves.”

“Did he pick you up and drive you home?”

Rachel ignored Ann’s pointed question. “Then he and his partner Garcia volunteered to help as security on the night of the school’s Christmas Festival, but that’s only because Yolanda Martinez asked if anyone from the precinct could be on hand to help with parking and traffic and he said yes—”

Ann interrupted. “And then Garcia invited you to stop in at her family Christmas party afterwards, where you sat in a corner and talked to someone for the entire night—oh wait, who was that again?”

“Ian Smith, wasn’t it?” Lynn clarified, obviously enjoying herself.

The traitor.

“Enough.” Rachel sliced her hand through the air, annoyed as much with them as she was with herself for rising to the bait. “Those weren’t dates.”

Ann coughed a word that sounded suspiciously like *denial*. At a sharp look from her sister, she shrugged. “Whatever you say, Rachel.”

“Look.” Rachel rummaged in her bag. She pulled out her Resolutions Notebook, flipped to the first page, and held it outward as if she were a librarian conducting story time. “What does this say?” Her tone had gone razor thin. Had any of her students been in Stu’s Diner, they would have had the sense to duck and cover.

“Resolved,” Ann read aloud, squinting. “To stop reading into situations and creating groundless, alternate storylines in my head.”

Lynn pushed her hair from her forehead. “But Rachel, this *isn’t* in your head. Ian Smith has told you

repeatedly that he likes you.”

“False!” Rachel cried.

The two women stared at her.

“He only said it once,” she said in a small voice.

Ann sighed and threw up her hands.

Rachel swiped sweat from her upper lip. “And that was way back when we first met. Before I acted like a crazy person.”

Ann snorted. “Which time?”

Lynn shook her head. “Ann, that’s hardly helpful.”

Ann leaned back in her seat and signaled for the check.

“Listen,” Rachel said. “I’m done operating on assumptions. You two should know better than anybody. That sort of thinking never gets me anywhere.” She slapped the notebook shut and slid it back into her bag. “Aren’t you always telling me not to assume things? Well, here’s one thing I will not assume. Until the day Ian Smith has ‘the talk’ with me, I will not assume that there’s anything more between us than friendship.”

“Boo,” Ann commented.

Lynn tilted her head, studying Rachel thoughtfully. She pulled her wallet from her purse and counted out her portion of the bill. This she handed over to Ann. “I don’t know, Rachel. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I think you’re misapplying your first resolution in this case.”

Rachel shrugged. Only time would tell.

~\*~

On the first Sunday of the new year, Rachel settled

into her seat and opened her Bible for the sermon, giving herself a mental pep talk. She would pay attention, take notes, and stay focused—no matter what. She pulled her Resolutions Notebook from her bag and opened to a fresh page, scrawling the words *Sermon Notes* across the top.

Of all the resolutions, this seemed the most straightforward and achievable. It was certainly the easiest to track. At the end of the year, she would hand the notebook to Lynn with a smile, watching as her friend flipped through pages of detailed sermon notes. She could almost taste the triumph. Caught in her vision of glory, Rachel missed the text. “What did he say?” she hissed to Lynn’s husband Alex.

“We’re in John 14 to start,” Alex murmured, “but Galatians 5 is the primary text.” He gestured toward the front of the sanctuary, where Rachel noticed the texts prominently displayed on a screen above the pastor’s head. The title of the new sermon series starting that day blazoned across the top of the screen: *The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Believer*.

Ignoring Alex’s pitying *tsk-tsk* sounds, she happily scrawled her notes, thrilled at the serendipitous timing of a new series the very day she instituted her resolution. She didn’t want to read into anything, but this couldn’t be coincidence.

In books there are always signs: symbols, warnings, portents, and foreshadowings. She’d often felt disappointed that life didn’t follow such patterns. Now, however, in seizing control of her personal growth and seeking real change, anything seemed possible. Even signs.

These resolutions were going to work. She would change, and that change would bring results.

### 3

Rachel's phone buzzed, working its way sideways toward the edge of her nightstand. She rolled over and peered through one squinty eye, inwardly berating herself for forgetting to switch it from vibrate to silent before falling asleep. She palmed the phone and tilted it sideways.

Fortunately, it was a text alert rather than a phone call, which meant this likely wasn't an emergency. Whatever it was, she could deal with it in the morning. Peering to see if the text came from Ann, Lynn, Lee, or even—heaven forbid—her boss, Yolanda Martinez, Rachel saw instead that the text came from an unknown number. Pushing up on her elbow, she disconnected the phone from its charger, drawing it close to her face. She shut her eyes for a moment against the blue-white glow. Then she rubbed her eyes, opened them as tiny slits, and peered at the message.

*Hey girl.*

Ugh. Stupid wrong number.

Or wait—was it a wrong number?

She sat up. It really could be anyone. What if—

No. She wouldn't do this. She *wouldn't*. Not so soon after making the resolutions.

Fighting against every instinct in her body, Rachel swiped her thumb across the screen to delete the text.

*This message thread will be deleted, her phone informed her. Are you sure?*