



RUTH BUCHANAN

UnSeasonable

A NOVEL OF SISTERHOOD, STORMS, SUNBLOCK,
AND THE OCCASIONAL CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

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Ruth M. Buchanan

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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, 2019

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0261-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Lisa, the good child.

1

Ann had missed all the warnings. She'd been lulled into complacency by a quiet summer managing the Van Smythe estate. She'd forgotten how often smooth sailing is just the calm before the storm.

When her phone rang that December afternoon, the last thing on Ann's mind was her sister Rachel's spate of ongoing mini-dramas. Ann stood in the open barn door, enjoying a particularly beautiful Florida afternoon. The lush winter sunlight pooled in liquid gold down the center aisle, where the farrier was hooking Duster—a tall, bay warmblood—in cross ties. Both farrier and horse were bathed in a soft buttery glow.

The air wasn't quite crisp. It never was this far south, even during the winter—at least, during what the rest of the continent called winter. Fortunately, the furnace-like blast of summer had faded to something more manageable, though the dew point still left the afternoon air rather like walking through a warm bath. Most people wouldn't consider this appropriate first-day-of-December weather. But Ann was Florida born and bred. Stringing white twinkle lights down the barn's center aisle while sporting a tank top felt perfectly natural.

Ann usually didn't answer the phone without checking the caller, but she'd been distracted by thoughts of setting up her Christmas tree. Depending

how her schedule went, she might have time to buy one and trim it over the weekend. That way she'd have the whole month to enjoy it. If she'd realized it was her sister on the line, Ann may have let the call go to voicemail.

As it was, she'd been expecting a call from Duster's owner and had snapped open her ancient flip phone before checking the caller ID. The next thing Ann knew, a high squawking pierced her ear, loud enough for Duster and Moss to hear. The former flicked his ears forward, and the latter stood, turning toward Ann with raised eyebrows.

Ann waved a hand reassuringly and settled on a nearby tack box in the wide barn aisle. Pushing wisps of brown hair back under the sides of her cap, Ann crossed one booted leg over the other and settled in. Rachel calling in a panic wasn't anything new, especially now that the wedding was a mere three weeks away. At this point, it was pretty much full panic mode all the time.

But with Rachel's fiancé Ian now handling day-to-day emergencies and their mutual friend Lynn helping plan the wedding, Ann had been enjoying somewhat of a Rachel Reprieve. Not that she didn't love her sister. She did. She'd loved her back when they were growing up, and she loved her now that they were in their mid-thirties. But honestly. It was just...some days Rachel was *very Rachel*. This was one of those days. Ann could already tell. "I'm here," she sighed into the phone.

"Something interesting happened at the dermatologist today." From the wobble in Rachel's voice, Ann could tell that *interesting* meant *bad* and that she was now locked in for all the grisly details. It could

be worse. It could have been the gynecologist.

Ann decided to get in front of the train before it jumped the tracks. "Rachel, listen. Moss is finishing up shoeing Duster, so I'm here for at least another fifteen minutes." She glanced at the clock hanging in the rafters of the center aisle, partially shrouded by a drift of dusty spider webbing. "I could meet you at Stu's after that." She could do with a breakfast burrito from Stu's Diner. And perhaps an order of hash browns. Perhaps even a double order. After all, it was Christmas. A time of feasting.

"Make that twenty," Moss said. He shot Ann a grin over his shoulder from where he was bent low, Duster's rear hoof turned upward against his thigh. He turned his attention to the task and hammered away.

"No time for Stu's," Rachel said. "I'm already on my way over. I need your help with something."

"You're coming here?" Ann pinched the bridge of her nose. She hoped this wasn't relationship drama. Ann had already bought her bridesmaid's dress, along with heels so high they should come with a permit. All she had to do was lock down a dance partner for the reception, and she'd be totally set. Providing Rachel didn't sabotage herself between now and then. Rachel would never do better than Ian. If this wedding fell apart, Ann would be stuck taking care of her sister forever.

"Why don't you give me a hint?" Ann wasn't sure she wanted one, but it was best to know what she was dealing with so that she could best formulate a plan before her sister arrived.

"I think I might be dying."

2

Ann's head snapped up. "You *what?*"

"I just got a biopsy!"

Was that all? Trust Rachel to phrase it in the most dramatic way possible. "Where?"

"At the dermatologist's office."

Ann closed her eyes. "I mean where on your body."

A pause. "You can't tell anyone." Rachel's tone shriveled.

Ann glanced at the clock. She should be sympathetic, but she wished her sister would get to the point. "Rachel, come on."

"Fine." She dropped to a whisper. "On my right buttock."

Ann must not laugh. It would be wrong, especially with her sister so worked up. There was just something about the way Rachel said *buttock*. "On your—"

"Yes, OK. Are you happy? I had a suspicious growth *on my right buttock*. Dr. Santos took this little melon baller and scooped it out, and now I have a stitch."

A stitch. On her right buttock. Ann closed her mouth, rolled her lips in, and bit down. If she laughed now, Rachel would never forget.

"Hello?" Rachel sounded annoyed. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, but you have to stop saying *buttock*."

Nobody's going to take you seriously."

"Cancer is serious, Ann."

"I know that. But you don't know that you have cancer. It's just a biopsy. It might be negative."

"It might be positive!"

Fair enough. "When do you get the results?" Ann stepped out of the barn, moving beyond Christopher Moss's range of hearing. A soft, warm breeze floated in from the nearby paddock, playing with the loose brown wisps that had escaped from Ann's cap. She reached up to tuck them in.

"Two weeks," Rachel huffed. "Can you imagine?"

"Well, you have plenty to keep you busy in the meantime." *Namely the wedding.*

"Yes," Rachel said absently. "I'll need new clothes. And you'll have to loan me a hat until I have time to buy a few of my own."

"Wait, what—"

"Because of the sun!" Rachel shrilled.

Ann heard fumbling and the distant beep of a car horn. "Are you using your Bluetooth?"

"Of course!" Rachel snapped. "I'm not a moron. Now pay attention. Skin cancer is caused by harmful UV rays. Because of our pale skin, people like you and me are more susceptible, Dr. Santos said. You really do need to make an appointment to get yourself checked. I'm getting you a referral. And we should both avoid direct sunlight as much as possible."

This would probably be a bad time for Ann to remind her sister that she worked outside. She definitely wouldn't mention that she was standing in a shaft of warm winter sunlight this very moment. She didn't need Rachel driving directly into a telephone pole.

"You should start wearing hats and long sleeves all the time, which I'm going to do when I'm outside for car line after school. But I don't have time to buy one tonight, so you'll have to loan me one."

"Will reindeer antlers on a headband count? Because I definitely just bought a pair yesterday." Ann wanted to put them on the horses one by one, take pictures, and send them to her clients. They loved corny stuff like that. To be honest, so did she.

Rachel didn't seem to have caught the magic. "Ann. Please take this seriously."

"You could go buy a hat right now," Ann pointed out. *Instead of coming here.* She knew better than to say the last bit aloud, but Rachel probably picked it up. No one picked up on subtext quite like an English teacher.

"No, I told you. I need your help with something."

"With what?"

"Do you have any measuring tape?"

Ann was almost afraid to ask. "Why do we need measuring tape?"

Someone tapped on her shoulder, and she turned to find Moss standing behind her. Quite without her permission, her heart gave an unexpected thump.

Moss pushed his baseball hat back, revealing a thick crop of dark hair meeting in a deep widow's peak. Swiping his hand across his forehead and resettling his hat, he stepped back and shifted his gaze toward the front paddock, obviously waiting for her to wrap up her call.

Ann wasn't sure she'd ever stood this close to Moss before. From here, she could discern a webbing of fine lines at the corners of his brown eyes, no doubt brought on by years of squinting against the Florida sun. Two deep smile lines bracketed his mouth.

"Rachel, I'll call you back. I need to talk to the farrier." She snapped her phone shut. Rachel was safer with her full attention on the road. "Sorry about that," she said as Moss turned back. "Thanks for your patience."

"No rush. I'm enjoying the view." Whether he meant the view across the lawn or the company, he didn't say. Before she could ask, he hooked a thumb toward the adjoining property. "I'm just headed over to Askren's next anyway."

Ann *tisked*, and the two shared a moment of mutual, silent eye rolling.

The Askren property, adjacent to the one Ann managed for the Van Smythes, was separated by a fence line owned and ostensibly maintained by neighbor Tom Askren. The Askren operation was a bone of contention in the neighborhood, with Tom refusing to pay for the repairs necessary to keep it in working order and resisting any suggestions for upkeep as "meddling." His fence line was not in ill repair for lack of funding. The man was loaded. He bought quality horses, trained them in low hunter jumper levels, and flipped them for a profit. He was all about maximizing earnings while minimizing his expenses. A Scrooge if ever there was one.

Ann had first met him back when she'd worked full-time at the nearby Cherrywood Farms. He'd stopped by one afternoon to ask about borrowing Cherrywood's backhoe. She'd walked away from the encounter sincerely hoping their paths would not cross again, though considering the size of the local equestrian community, she doubted she'd be so lucky. She never dreamed that one day she'd quit Cherrywood to take on full-time management of the

property right next to his.

"I changed the set of the front shoes and brought the toe back a little on Duster's hind foot," Moss was saying. "That should help with the interfering you mentioned. Also, I didn't mean to eavesdrop on your phone call, but I have a measuring tape." He hooked a thumb toward his rig. "If you want."

"It's fine." She likely had one rolling around in the bottom of her tack box. "I wouldn't be able to give it back until I see you next month."

"We could make it sooner." He slanted her a look from under the brim of his hat, his brown eyes liquid, so tranquil that she thought for a moment she'd mistaken the mood. Then he smiled. The creases beside his mouth deepened. Her heart thumped twice.

This wasn't the first time he'd signaled his interest, and she'd seen enough to know that he was a hard worker, a gentleman, and a true Christ-follower. He was also terrible at flirting, though the results were often endearing. She liked that and many other things. Ann just wasn't sure about the timing. She was just now establishing herself in her new responsibilities. Was this the right time to risk a pleasant and mutually beneficial working relationship over a possibility?

Before Ann could formulate a response, a series of loud beeps signaled the gates to the property swinging open. Seconds later, Rachel's little car came jouncing around the bend in the lane with steady speed, grim and purposeful. Even from this distance, Ann could see Rachel's red curls bouncing.

"She's coming in hot," Moss observed, eyes on the plume of dust.

Rachel's car skidded to a stop in front of the barn.

Ann sighed. "Always."

3

Fortunately, Rachel waited until Moss had left before she started saying *buttock*. Not that Moss would have minded. He probably would have laughed.

Before Rachel really got rolling, Ann held up a hand, nodded toward the carriage house, and cocked an eyebrow. "I'm hungry. Shall we order some dinner?"

"Yes, fine," Rachel fell in step beside Ann, the low heels of her sensible black pumps sinking in the sandy Florida soil. "We can do the measuring while we wait."

Again with the measuring. "What are we measuring, exactly?"

"Your moles."

"My—"

"Yes, your moles." Rachel waved an impatient hand. "I know you have some big ones on your back, Ann. I saw them last summer. And I've already had mine measured today." She fished a slip of paper from her pocket and waved it. "Dr. Santos wrote down the sizes of two suspicious ones for me so that we can measure them periodically and keep track."

Ann stopped abruptly. "We?"

"Yes, *we*. Who else is going to measure the moles on my back?"

Ann halted. "Um, perhaps your future husband?"

A deep blush rose from Rachel's collar, flooding her face all the way to her flame-red hair. "I'm not

going to ask Ian to *measure my moles*." She whispered the last few words. From her tone, you'd have thought Ann suggested she dance burlesque.

"Why not?" Ann took the steps up to the carriage house two at a time, stomped the mud from her boots, and toed them off just inside the door.

"It's embarrassing, for one." Rachel stepped out of her heels. She pulled the door shut behind them and followed Ann toward the kitchen. "For another, it's not modest. They're on my *lower* back!"

"How low?"

Rachel frowned, pointing to the outward curve of her posterior.

Ann snorted. "Ian's going to see a lot more than that soon."

"Yes!" Rachel flailed her hands. "*I know*. And that's fine, but he hasn't seen anything yet. That's the point!" She leaned forward, braced her elbows on the butcher's block in the center of the kitchen, and shoved her hands backward through her hair. Curls bounced everywhere.

Ann slid a bowl of mini candy canes away from Rachel's flailing arms before turning to open the drawer where she kept the takeout menus. Which reminded her. She should get the boxes of Christmas decorations down from the attic before she went to bed. Even in winter, the best time to brave a Florida attic was after the afternoon heat had faded. "But surely for health purposes Ian wouldn't object—"

"Oh, yes," Rachel said sarcastically, "because the first thing I want to show Ian is definitely my *weird moles*."

Ann laughed. She flicked aside the top menus and rooted for Rachel's favorites. In a way, she understood

where Rachel was coming from. She couldn't imagine asking Moss to measure her moles without feeling hideously embarrassed. Then again, Rachel and Ian were engaged. She and Moss weren't anything.

Behind her, Rachel sighed tragically. "Ann, listen. *Of course* I'm going to have Ian take over measuring once we're married. But that's weeks from now—"

"Which isn't technically very long," Ann pointed out, turning back with a handful of menus. How much could a mole grow in a month? Even a cancerous one?

"Even so. I don't want to spring it on him right away. I mean...I want him to enjoy the good parts before we get down to stuff like measuring each other's moles."

"The good parts?"

Rachel snatched a menu and swatted Ann with it. She turned it sideways and started fanning herself. "Don't be inappropriate. You know what I mean."

This was fun, but Ann sensed she should ease up. "What do you want to order?" She spread the remaining menus on the butcher block in front of Rachel. Rachel reached for them, but stopped short when her phone started buzzing.

With any hope, it would be Ian, and Rachel would jet off to see him, leaving Ann to a quiet dinner and maybe even a nap between barn chores and night check. She might even find time to finish putting up the lights in the barn. Ann loved the holiday season, but living in Florida, she had trouble remembering it was Christmas without visual reminders.

"It's Lynn," Rachel said, swiping her thumb to accept the call from their friend. "Lynn! You'll never guess—" but she broke off abruptly, eyes widening and gaze snapping to Ann's. "What? You're kidding!"

If this had anything to do with murderers, possible murderers, suicidal students, stalkers, or potentially cancerous moles, Ann was going to apply to enter the witness protection program. But it wasn't any of those things. It was something much worse. Something Ann dreaded possibly more than Rachel did. And that was saying something. She locked gazes with her sister and raised her eyebrows.

"It's Tobias," Rachel confirmed.

Ann groaned.

Rachel nodded, one hand clutching her phone while the other came up to grip the curls at the base of her neck. "Lynn says they just announced it." It was official. Hurricane Tobias is headed this way.

4

They drove separately to Stu's Diner, Rachel in her little car and Ann in her truck. They arrived to find that Lynn had already secured a table. Though it was only December first, Christmas decorations were on full display, and some jokester had hung mistletoe right in the center of the main aisle. Ann dodged it neatly on the way to their favorite spot near the brick wall at the back.

"Did you get gas?" Lynn asked as Ann slid into a seat.

"Stopped on the way over." Task one complete. Now she just had to move the dressage letters, jump standards, and poles into the shed. Then do about six thousand other things.

"Lines were already getting ridiculous!" Rachel dropped into a chair, fanning herself.

Lynn nodded. "Alex and Ethan are pulling down the storm shutters and making sure we have all the nuts and bolts." Which meant her husband and son would probably not be joining them for dinner. "No sense repeating last year's hurricane season debacle, when we didn't realize someone had stolen half our shutters until it was too late, and all the plywood was already sold out." Fortunately, that particular storm had been downgraded to a Category 1 right before it hit, and they'd only had to deal with flooded streets

and a few downed branches here and there.

How well Ann knew the frustration of hurricane supplies going astray. That was why she had double checked her plans for the property at the very beginning of the Atlantic hurricane season. She stocked up early on supplies for herself and the horses—to the extent that she could, of course. Some things couldn't be stored long-term, which is why she'd be waking up early tomorrow to fit in a run to the feed store for extra feed and shavings. After that she'd bring the hanging water buckets in from the paddocks, then do everything else.

This wasn't how she'd been planning to spend the first week of December—or any of her December, as a matter of fact. Hurricane season supposedly ended November thirtieth. A hurricane at this time of year, while not out of the realm of possibility, was definitely unseasonable. Peak activity generally occurred in September and October, with everyone tending to let down their guard around Halloween. She'd stopped worrying about hurricanes weeks ago.

Florida hadn't had a hurricane in December—or even the threat of one—since Ann could remember. Which is why when she'd heard last week that there was a storm brewing in the Atlantic, she'd barely paid attention, figuring it would blow itself out. In truth, many storms that became hurricanes often came nowhere near them, and even the ones that did often wobbled, petered out, or passed them by without doing any damage. Generally, hurricane season was a lot of fuss and bother, a tempest in a teapot. Not that Ann ever complained when it was. She'd rather over-prepare for a dud than under-prepare for a howler.

Still. No need to panic just yet. Tobias was still

barely a Category 2, and though their local area was well within the Cone of Probability, it was hard to be scared of a storm called Tobias. It wasn't exactly a name that inspired awe.

That was the thing about hurricanes, though. Even the most ridiculous-sounding storms could flatten entire cities, and in order to be ready in time, preparations had to start in earnest before anyone knew exactly where the storm would land. It was maddening. Ann was already tired just thinking about it.

"Which is why you need a smartphone," Rachel was telling Ann. "That way you can set up alerts, and your phone will let you know as soon as a warning is issued." She brandished her own phone in her sister's face.

"It probably wouldn't be a bad idea." Lynn poured a glass of ice water and pushed it across the table toward Ann.

They were probably right. Still, a little corner of Ann's heart resisted. To upgrade to a smartphone simply cut against her grain. Yet as much as Ann hated the constant interconnectedness smartphones foisted upon their owners, with the sort of job she had, she really could use an upgrade from her flip phone.

She kept the weather page as her home screen on her laptop, but most days she was out the door before sunrise and didn't sit down again until dusk. She played the radio in the barn, but half the time, her brain tuned it out. She couldn't deny that weather alerts on the go would certainly come in handy. She just couldn't bear the thought of spending that kind of money on a delicate piece of technology destined to fall into a water bucket or be stepped on by a horse. Not to