

SARAH ADAMS

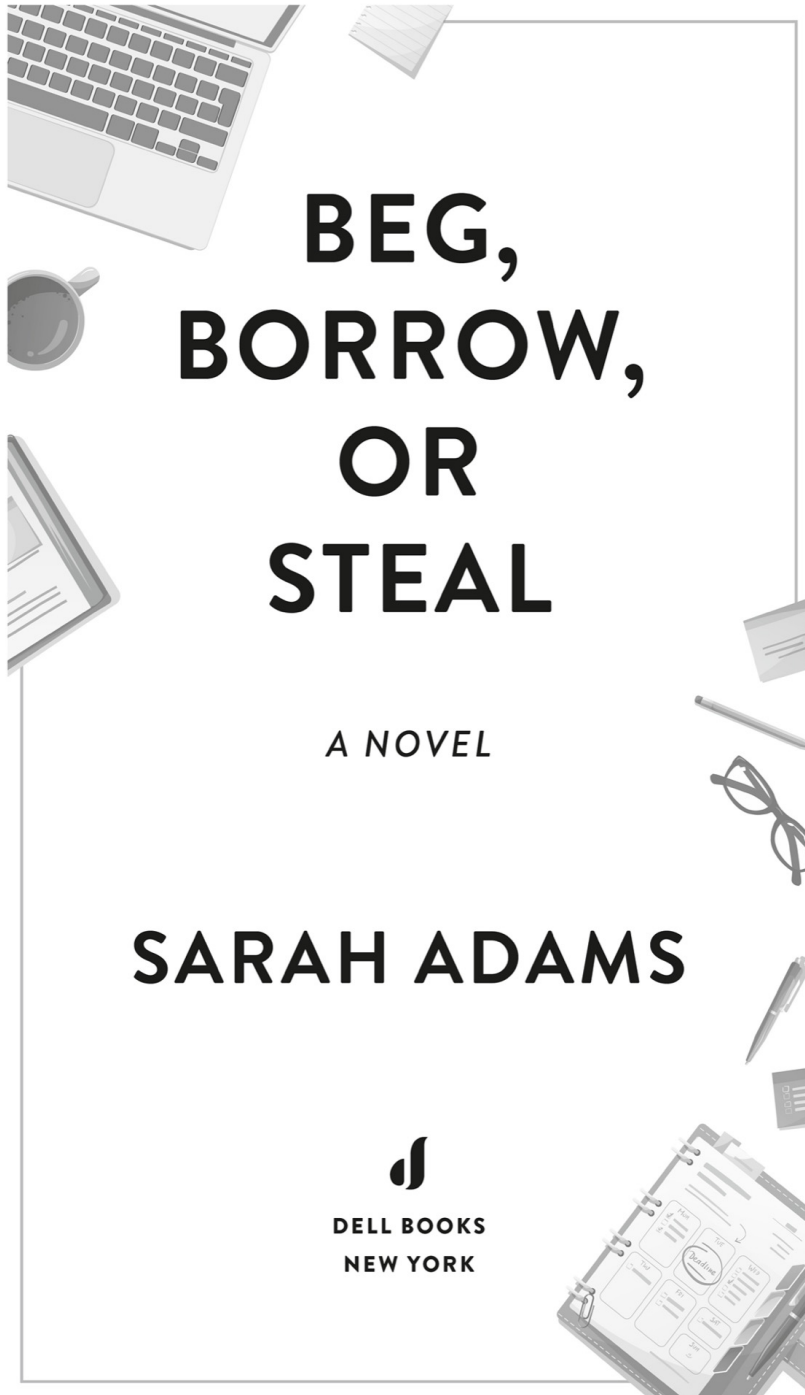
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE RULE BOOK AND *PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT*

BEG, BORROW, OR STEAL



BY SARAH ADAMS

Beg, Borrow, or Steal
Practice Makes Perfect
When in Rome
The Cheat Sheet
The Rule Book
The Temporary Roomie
The Off-Limits Rule
The Enemy
The Match



**BEG,
BORROW,
OR
STEAL**

A NOVEL

SARAH ADAMS



**DELL BOOKS
NEW YORK**

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Published in the United States by Dell, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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ISBN 9780593723692

Ebook ISBN 9780593723708

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

Interior art credit: TatyanaYagudina, zhanna © Adobe Stock Photos

Book design by Sara Bereta, adapted for ebook

Cover art and design: Sandra Chiu

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Hello, little honey bees.
You glorious, sharp-edged, perfection seekers.
You've been working so hard, holding everything together; come sit down
with me for a while and take a load off.

The best thing to hold onto in life is each other.

—Audrey Hepburn

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND CONTENT WARNING

Dear reader, I am so excited for you to meet Emily and Jackson! If you are the kind of reader who prefers to know the heavier topics and potential triggers before you begin reading, please be advised that there are themes of grief and mild accompanying depression, as well as the portrayal of a narcissistic parent. However, I have written these topics with great care and in such a way that is meant to bring comfort rather than pain. Likewise, if you prefer to read closed-door romances and would like to modify this story so that you are not involved in the details of their intimacy scenes, chapters 25 and 32 should be skipped. Happy reading!



FROM: Emily Walker <E.Walker@MRPS.com>
TO: Jack Bennett <J.Bennett@MRPS.com>
DATE: Tue, Dec 19 6:34 PM
SUBJECT: IMPORTANT!

Dear Jack,
I heard through the grapevine that you're moving. I just wanted to be the first person to tell you...don't forget to take all your crap from the break room. Specifically: your disgusting dark roast coffee beans.
All my worst,
Emily

FROM: Jack Bennett <J.Bennett@MRPS.com>
TO: Emily Walker <E.Walker@MRPS.com>
DATE: Wed, Dec 19 6:38 PM
SUBJECT: IMPORTANT!

Dear Emily,
It's clear my impending departure has left you in a sour mood. But don't worry, you'll find happiness again someday.

Don't be afraid to cry when you need to, because just like the poster you have hanging in your classroom claims, *all feelings are important.*

Wishing you better taste,

Jack

CHAPTER ONE

Emily

I don't care who you are, when you live in a town the size of your thumb, if you don't like the way your hair turns out at the salon, you stuff it deep down and never acknowledge it.

And that's exactly why I prefer to take matters into my own hands and not allow circumstances to ever reach that point. I tend to speak my mind, and have it bite me in the ass too often, so I know if I tell Virginia that I hate my hair after this appointment, she'll never forget it. By noon, she'll have told everyone in our zero-stoplight town that I'm her pickiest, most unappeasable client. The roasting and poking will start immediately, and by five-thirty when I go to The Diner, someone will pop up out of nowhere and say, *Are you sure that booth is good enough for you or would you like the one we reserve for the queen?*

And it won't stop there. From that day on, they'll put a plaque on the table that reads TABLE RESERVED FOR QUEEN EMILY, and nothing I do or say will get them to remove it.

And if it seems like I'm overreacting, please know this is the very same town that started a petition last year, complete with smear campaign, to encourage my youngest sister (who was twenty-six years old at the time, mind you) to stop dating Will Griffin because they thought she was too good for him. He won them over in the end (*Annie + Will forever*), but the petition with the final tallies is framed and hanging in The Diner alongside the picture of Dolly Parton posing with the town. And I do mean the

majority of the town. They heard she had stopped in for lunch while passing through, and one person called another who called their cousin who called their best friend who called their aunt's boyfriend, and they all showed up for one huge group photo.

Moral of the story: *Never underestimate what the town of Rome, Kentucky, is capable of.*

The smell of bleach singes the insides of my nostrils as Virginia—one of only three stylists in the area—combines the powder lightener with the creamy developer right beside my face. She's mixing that stuff so slowly a baby could do it faster, but I keep this thought to myself by picturing the terrifying treasure chest I've created in my mind where I lock up all my most antagonistic thoughts. It's made of black steel and has sharp metal prongs all over it. The thing is deadly and made for keeping the peace in my day-to-day life.

"Well—I don't like to gossip," Virginia begins, weighing in on the conversation beside us that Hannah (the other stylist) and her client, Shirley, are having about the reason our packages have all been delivered late this week. Shirley has been the receptionist at the elementary school where I teach for over twenty-five years. She eats gossip like multivitamins.

Virginia continues, "But I did happen to see a certain someone leaving Brad's house the other morning."

Brad is our mailman, if it wasn't obvious.

Everyone other than me in the salon gasps. I'm too busy staring at the bowl of lightener that's not going to mix itself as Virginia lazily sways it in front of my face. The sassy grin aimed at the other ladies tells me she has no intention of putting any sort of hustle into my highlighting process.

"You don't mean...?" Hannah taunts, pausing with scissors in one hand, and in the other, a thin section of Shirley's white hair, held at a ninety-degree angle—pre-snip.

"Yes," Virginia states meaningfully with a vicious small-town twinkle in her eye. Take a picture right now and this would serve as the perfect image to describe Rome, Kentucky.

"But she's *married*."

“Not for long. When Hayes gets wind of what his wife has been doing with the sexy mailman, I expect we’ll see Evelyn’s clothes flung all over the yard and the neon boxers Brad is always giving us a peek of strung up the flagpole.” She pauses and frowns. “Truthfully, though, I don’t think Brad and Evelyn would make such a bad match.”

As fun as this is (and I don’t mean that sarcastically because I can get down with some juicy gossip along with the best of them), I happen to know that the lightener already painted on the back of my head and tucked into foils is getting dangerously close to frying the hair right off my scalp. I need Virginia to get this second bowl applied ASAP so she can start rinsing out the back while the front processes. I’m naturally a dark-blond and prefer my highlights to blend seamlessly—not shine so bright they signal extraterrestrials.

The bowl weaves in front of my face again, but I intercept it this time and balance it in my lap to whisk the hell out of this cream. As all good and unbearable perfectionists know, if you want something done right, you mostly have to do it yourself.

Virginia doesn’t even spare me a glance. She’s used to me by now. The whole town is. When they see Emily Walker coming, they hand whatever it is they’re doing over to me and dive out of the way. Usually with a smile because they know I’ll do it in half the time and with the precision of a military special ops agent.

I finish mixing and hand the bowl over my shoulder to Virginia, who is knee-deep in speculation about what could have caused Evelyn to stray in her marriage. My next victim: the stack of messy foils on the workstation. I pre-fold each piece, handing them up one by one as Virginia paints the last of the lightener onto the front of my hair. There wasn’t much left, so thankfully she finishes quickly, and while the front processes, she spritzes water into the back foils and towels them off.

I tune out as the salon talk show moves through the lives of various town citizens, airing everyone’s dirty laundry with a bit of *but it’s not my place to judge* sprinkled on top just in case the good Lord is listening.

Madison, my sister just below me in age who is currently living in New York working on her culinary degree, will be angry that I'm not paying enough attention to relay all of the tasty on-dits to her later, but I'm too lost in my head, thinking of all the tasks I can get done now that I'm officially out of school for the summer and no longer have a class full of spunky—yet delightful—second-graders to teach every day. I don't like to leave loose ends, so I cleaned out my classroom on the last day of school even though most of the other teachers will clean theirs out over the next few days. In the past I would go and help them, but I'm not allowed to anymore. They banned me after last year, saying they didn't need a drill sergeant with a clipboard telling them how to efficiently pack up their rooms. *Fair enough.*

So with the school year officially behind me, I can focus on tasks closer to home:

- Help Mabel repaint the porch railing on her inn
- Finish writing the last chapter in my romance novel
- Contact the city about the pothole on Main Street
- Call Annie's Internet provider and haggle for a lower price

The last one is more fun than chore for me. Annie, the most tenderhearted out of us four Walker siblings, mentioned the other day that she was dreading making that call, so I gleefully offered myself up as tribute. There's nothing I love more than going head-to-head with a salesperson.

And believe it or not, I'm not the oldest sibling of our bunch. That title belongs to Noah—but part of me wonders if my parents were too sleep-deprived somewhere along the way and forgot that I was actually born first based on how laid back he is in comparison to me. Too bad my parents are dead, so I can't ask them. Actually there's no one I can ask about my family history now because as of November, my grandma—the woman who raised us after my parents kicked the bucket—died too. Everyone is dead. *Dead, dead, dead.*

And yes, I do like to throw startling little facts like those into conversation whenever I can because shock is always preferable to pity.

The last guy I dated seemed really freaked out when I delivered the dead-parents line with a smile on my face. But these days, I'm happily single by choice. (There's also a chance that I'm single because I'm an unlovable porcupine and got tired of the constant rejection...but that thought is terrifying, so I slip it inside my Metal Treasure Chest of Doom and leave it there right next to the memory of my first and only love shattering my heart.)

Virginia tips my head back into the million-year-old plastic salon sink to rinse and shampoo my hair. Rather than relaxing, I spend the entire time convincing myself my neck isn't going to snap. And it's not until I'm back in the salon chair and Virginia is plugging in her blow-dryer that I hear the name that has me doing a mental spit take.

"Well, I've got my own bit of news to share. Did y'all hear about Jack Bennett?" I doubt Shirley realizes that with that one name she has successfully stopped my heart.

"The sexy teacher from the elementary school where you both work?" asks Virginia, her eyes a little too bright. They're downright zesty.

Jack Bennett, aka my archnemesis since college who moved away four months ago, is supposed to be getting married today to a woman who I happen to think is completely wrong for him. But that's beside any sort of relevant point.

"Yes. Well, turns out, he's not getting married today after all. The entire wedding was canceled a few weeks after he moved away with her! How strange is that?"

My stopped heart resuscitates only so it can dramatically flatline once again.

Jack isn't getting married today?

This can't be true...

A rumor. It's just a rumor.

But why am I hoping it's true?

Hannah perks up and abandons all pretense of styling at this point when she angles her body toward us. "What do you think happened? It had to be something big to call off a wedding after moving away together."

Jack. Isn't. Married.

"I'm not sure exactly, but rumor has it that they're not even together anymore," says Shirley, so proud to have delivered this fresh slice of meat directly into salivating mouths. "But I know that Jack is the nicest guy, so it's hard to believe he would have cheated or anything like that."

And that's the thing, isn't it? Everyone feels this way about Jack. He used to swoop in each day draped with kindness, charming smiles, perfect hair, and eclectic outfits that somehow always worked on him. He was excellent at playing the part of a Mr. Rogers wannabe. *Maybe if Mr. Rogers had tattoos and was secretly a devil.*

Jack truly was great to everyone. Everyone besides *me*. I'm the only one who's seen Jack's true colors—who knows that under his cozy cardigans, he's a conniving jerk.

Like any good hostile relationship, our animosity wasn't built on one single moment but rather a collection of many, many little ones that have snowballed into something greater. And now, after a decade of interacting, we have collected so many we could open a museum full of hatred memorabilia.

Hannah cuts her eyes to me, and I realize I'm not breathing. It must have something to do with the fact that despite how much I hate, hate, triple-hate him...I've sort of missed him too. I know, it makes zero sense, and I don't even like to consider it.

"Do you know anything about what happened, Emily?" asks Hannah. "He teaches in the same grade as you, right?"

He *did* teach in the same grade as me, but he had his last day at Rome Elementary just before winter break, after which he moved to Nebraska with his fiancée. A substitute teacher took over for him the rest of the school year. The day he left, he made his rounds and said goodbye to everyone in the school. *Except for me*. A thought that still needles me for unknown reasons. Of course he didn't say goodbye, why would he? We weren't friends. We were enemies. Enemies don't pal around with a heartfelt goodbye.

All eyes are on me now, and listen, I truly do hate Jack with all my heart, but...for whatever reason, I also don't want to talk shit about him when he's not present. Not because I'm protecting him, but because I'd rather do it to his face where he can react. It's more fun that way.

I shrug and carry a tone of someone who's convinced there's nothing to see here. "This is the first I'm hearing about it. But then again, I try to avoid interacting with Jack as much as possible."

Virginia laughs. "You and only you, hon. I've only seen him a handful of times, but that man is *fiiiine*, and if I shared a classroom wall with him, I'd be the first one lining up to get a shot with that bachelor."

"You're welcome to him as far as I'm concerned," I say, standing up from the salon chair even though Virginia hasn't dried or styled my hair yet. "But you'll have a long drive ahead of you. He lives in Nebraska now." Even if he were still here, though, I doubt he would have gone out with her. The teachers tried plenty of times to get Jack to socialize outside of school, but he always had a perfectly constructed excuse at his fingertips for why he couldn't make it. For a guy who was so kind and friendly, he didn't seem to actually want friends.

It's good he's gone. I'll never have to arrive early to school to beat him to the best parking space again. Or debate over which beans to use in the break room coffeepot. No one will fight me over dress-up days and say that attending school as your favorite literary author is "a buzzkill" and push for Wacky Tacky Day instead. (Yes, parents, we hear that dress-up day is a nightmare, but the kids love it, so they win. Take it up with Principal Bart.)

Honestly, the only thing I regret about the day Jack left is that I went outside thinking I'd...I don't know...say one last cutting remark to him or something; instead, I had to watch Jack drive off in his stupidly nice SUV, not receiving so much as a glance in my direction. Not even a salute or the bird out his window. But really, it's better he didn't stop to acknowledge me. What do you even say to someone who you've feuded with since college? *It's been nice hating you?*

Thanks to this conversation, an uncomfortable feeling is crawling all over me. I need to get moving.

“Where are you going?” Virginia asks in dismay when I hand her my cape. “You can’t leave yet. You look like a wet goat with your bangs sticking to your forehead like that.”

“Flattering—thank you,” I say with a forced laugh as I smooth the front of my cream knit tank top and tug down the legs of my Levi’s jeans so they are no longer creating the wedgie of the century. I eye my damp hair in the mirror and sigh when I see that she’s really not wrong. I have the kind of hair that’s not truly curly or straight. It hovers in some strange, lazy middle, and when it’s wet, it looks wild. Left to air-dry, it’s borderline feral. I usually straighten it or put a few wanded curls throughout, but today, I just want out of here.

“I’m short on time thanks to y’all’s juicy gossip,” I say with an indulgent smile. “I’m gonna grab some coffee and then get going with my day.”

“Busy one?” Virginia asks.

Shirley laughs. “Emily’s never not busy.”

She isn’t wrong, but most important (or less depending on how you look at it), I just want to get moving so I can stop thinking about Jack Bennett and wondering if he’s okay after his failed engagement—even though I’ll never see him again. Even though I often would have chosen to pluck my eyelashes out one by one instead of interacting with him. Even though he didn’t say goodbye to me.