

AUTHOR OF THE CHEAT SHEET AND WHEN IN ROME

SARAH ADAMS

# PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT





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*A NOVEL*

SARAH ADAMS



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To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.  
—Audrey Hepburn

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Annie*

I am convinced dating was created by an evil villain to torture humanity. Dramatic? Not in the least. For introverts like me with social anxiety, the process of dating is equivalent to waxing your bikini line. Menstrual cramps on day two of your cycle. An emergency dental procedure you weren't expecting—and guess what: they're fresh out of novocaine.

"Again, I'm so sorry about the beer," I say to the man sitting across from me.

"It's fine," he says in a clipped way that means it's absolutely not fine.

This is not going well. Not that it has ever gone well for me in the past, but this time it really isn't. I think turning a man off in the first ten minutes of a date is my new record. Because John, the man sitting across from me with a sopping-wet, beer-stained polo and khakis from the drink I accidentally knocked across the table onto his lap, looks ready to bolt. Can't blame him.

Why did I think I could do this? It's been years since I dated, and even back then I never liked it much. I'm a person who avoids attention at all costs. Who can't think of a single thing to say when a man sitting across from her is intently staring at her.

Again, I ask myself, Why are you here, Annie?!

Oh right. It was the brownie. Well, first it was the realization that even after opening the flower shop my mom had always dreamed of, the nagging something-is-missing feeling still pesters me. So I decided it's time to put a plan in motion to settle down with my perfect someone—because that's the only box left unchecked in my life. And since I've been drooling over John (the man my sisters and I always refer to as Hot Bank Teller), I thought he might be the perfect candidate for the job.

The job in question has very strict criteria based on the bursting-with-love marriage my parents had. One, he must live in town and have roots here in Rome, Kentucky; two, he must have a stable job; three, he must be kind and also be supportive of my career; and four, he must want a family.

Those are the only things that matter to me.

So the last time I went to the bank to deposit a check, I used up my Once-a-Year Extroverted Moment and asked him if he'd like to go out sometime. He miraculously said yes, and I spent the next week recuperating from the stress and anxiety I suffered in asking.

Anyway, when I proposed meeting somewhere a little outside of Rome to have fresh scenery (and keep our nosy, single-stoplight town out of my business), he suggested Peppercorn, a nice restaurant about thirty minutes away. And when I looked it up, Yelp said this place has an excellent giant brownie. It doesn't get better than that.

The dessert is literally the only reason I'm still sitting here on this painfully awkward date.

I wish I could text my sisters right now and ask them what to do. But that requires them actually knowing I'm on a date, which would open me up to the sort of attention I've been trying to avoid. The very minute my sisters find out about my quest to find a husband—everyone else will know too. I would really hate to have Mabel (the woman who's like a grandma to me) attempt to set me up with every



eligible bachelor she knows. So I'm keeping it a secret—like most things in my life.

The only reason I'm pushing through my terrible social anxiety now is because I'm fully confident that marriage is the Thing that's missing. I wish I could call my parents to get their opinion, but because they died when I was three, that will never be an option. So instead, I'm following in their footsteps. Happily married by the age of twenty-eight. That gives me just under a year to find the person I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Too bad I have to date first.

I smile up at John, hoping that's going to lessen his annoyance at wearing my drink. But I'm Annie Walker: shy, socially anxious, introvert extraordinaire who senses this man doesn't want to spend another second in my company. And that makes my smile feel like a wobbly grimace. I imagine it resembles a snarl. My nostrils might even be flaring.

I can't do this.

John clears his throat and tries his own attempt at a casual smile. Admittedly, his is better than mine. "So...what's it like owning a flower shop?" He sounds bored.

I want to unzip my skin and run my bones all the way to Mexico. My heart is racing, and this swanky restaurant is too loud. I don't belong here. My sisters, Madison and Emily, however, would love it.

"Annie?" John prompts again when I don't answer right away.

Right! Conversation. You can do this, Annie. No need to clam up because the man asked you about a topic you actually like. Flowers. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

I swallow and prepare for my answer. "Um—it's fun." John waits a moment and then tips forward slightly, clearly expecting me to say more. "Really fun," I tack on to appease his desire for a sentence with a higher word count.

I would elaborate, but now the only thing swirling around my brain is the reproductive cycle of flowers (which I find deeply

fascinating), but I have a distinct feeling that John is not the type to marvel at life science. So I clamp my mouth shut again.

“So it’s...really fun?” he asks and I nod. “Well, good.” He breathes in deeply and then settles back in his chair and looks away. We bathe in uncomfortable silence. This would prompt most people to say something—anything—but not me. I freeze up even more. The weight of carrying on a conversation is too heavy for my shoulders.

I am the quiet one in my family. The one with her nose always in a book because she prefers worlds where she doesn’t have to interact with other humans. It’s so much easier to read about relationships than to foster them. Less dangerous too. I can’t offend anyone written into a book. I can’t say the wrong thing. And book characters don’t make judgments about me.

When John pulls out his cell phone and starts scrolling, I realize I have to take a stab at some sort of conversation, or this night is going to be over before it starts. “So, John,” I begin, and then during the next ten minutes I pretty much black out as I blabber nonstop, only regaining consciousness as I’m finishing up with, “And that’s why the primary purpose of the flower is reproduction.”

“Wow. Okay. That was...a lot of information about flowers,” he says with an expression resembling something close to haunted. Clearly my stab at conversation went right through him, and he’s bleeding out.

I smile timidly and glance around for our waitress. It’s so busy in here she hasn’t been around to take our order after getting our drinks. I could really use an interruption right about now.

Nothing.

“So—uh—do you at least have any hobbies?” he asks.

Oh geez, “at least.” I’m already so far off his dating radar that he’s looking for an *at least* to redeem me in some small way.

I clench the fabric of my dress under the table. I do have a hobby—but even my sisters don’t know about it, so I sure as crap am not

going to share it with this man who looks like spending time with me is causing him physical discomfort.

“Flowers sort of are my hobby as well as my career.”

“Right,” he says blandly because I’ve once again shut down any conversational avenues. Why am I like this? I need to talk. Ask him questions! Why can’t I think of any? My brain is a whiteboard, polished clean.

But he’s tapping his finger on the table now and looking away from me.

In a fit of panic, I blurt the first thing that comes to my head. “I want to get married.”

Oh look, I’ve finally said something that gets John’s attention.

He stares at me, open-mouthed and in shock, because, yep, I just mentioned marriage during a date that was already tanking.

Trying to recover, I tag on, “Oh no, not to you!” My smile fades when I see his face contort. “Well, maybe to you. Who knows? If things go well tonight anything can happen.” Now I realize I’ve made it sound like we’re absolutely going to bed together tonight, and John has to pleasure me well enough to win me over. Super.

“Sorry—no, I didn’t mean you have to be good at you know what...for me to marry you. I’m sure there’s a learning curve when it comes to that sort of thing.”

Now his face drains of all color because I’m making this so much worse. John blink, blink, blinks at me, completely at a loss for how to respond. There’s no salvaging this date.

“Will you excuse me, John? I need to use the bathroom.” And regroup. And possibly climb out the window and run away.

He’s so relieved he will be exempt from my company for a few minutes that he eagerly nods. “Yes, take your time!”

I stand on wobbly legs and walk across the restaurant, irrationally feeling like everyone in here is staring at how awkwardly this dress fits me. It’s my sister’s dress, so it’s a little long on me. It hugs all my curves like it’s supposed to but then drowns my knees and hovers

midcalves, unlike where it hits on Emily, just above her knees. She wears this dress on her many successful dates because she doesn't have an ounce of social anxiety. I stole it out of her closet and stowed it away in my purse so she wouldn't notice when I left our house and ask where I was going. I didn't have anything of my own to wear because I never go on nice dates (I haven't been on one since three years ago, when one progressed very similarly to this one).

I would have taken a dress from my other sister, but Madison is the size of a spritely fairy, and there's no way any of her dresses would get over my hips.

After what feels like a mile-long walk, I make it to the bathroom and sink back against the wall. The automatic hand dryer goes off at my shoulder, making me jump out of my skin and shriek.

"All right, Annie, pull yourself together. You can do this," I say while scooting away from the hand dryers and pulling my phone from my purse. I swipe across it to open a text conversation with my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Amelia. She's the only person who knows I'm on a date tonight.

Ever since Amelia (you might know her as Rae Rose, world famous pop star) came to town a little over a year ago and fell in love with my older brother, we've had an instant bond I can't quite explain. Like she was always meant to be in our family. And despite the fact that she's new to the family, I trust her in a way that I don't trust many other people. Which is why I text her now.

ANNIE: HELP!!!!

AMELIA: Oh no! Not going well?

ANNIE: I spilled my drink on him. And then told him I want to get married.

AMELIA: Yikes! Do you like him that much?

ANNIE: No, I hate him.

AMELIA: Hmm, confusing. Can you bail?

ANNIE: No! That's so rude!

AMELIA: Em and Maddie are coming over in a few minutes. Just tell him you had something come up and then come hang out with us!

ANNIE: I can't do that to him after spilling a drink on him and then insinuating he has to please me in bed or he won't make the marriage cut.

AMELIA: Oh my gosh. So much to unpack there.

ANNIE: I'll just eat fast. Don't start a movie without me.

AMELIA: Good luck!! Bring me home a brownie. They have the best.

—

I steel myself in the mirror, smooth back my long blonde hair (which at least looks really pretty thanks to Emily's curling wand, which I also stole), and then step out of the bathroom.

Unfortunately, I arrive back at the table just in time to hear John finishing up a phone call that he doesn't intend for me to hear. "Yeah, I'm telling you she's so unbelievably boring. And just sort of awkward and weird. Like zero personality." He listens to the person on the other end of the line. "I mean, yeah, I guess she's prettyish, but I don't even want to try to hook up with her tonight because she's so dull. So just call me in five minutes with an emergency. Okay, yeah. Thanks."

My cheeks flame. The lady at the table next to us heard the whole thing and gives me Pity Eyes. I hate Pity Eyes. I'd rather she'd laugh. I can handle laughter. My siblings are professional teasers, so I've been conditioned to laugh my way through life. Pity—no.

I breathe in through my nose so I don't cry—because that would really be the icing on the cake, wouldn't it?—and walk backward several steps. I count to five, and once I'm composed enough, I make a loud reappearance.

“I’m back!”

John shifts and adjusts his napkin, a new bright smile on his face (most likely so he can be convincingly sad he has to leave after his emergency call). “Great. Do you know what you want to order?”

“Probably just a brownie,” I say more to myself than to John before the corner of my eye catches a couple entering the restaurant. I look up and do a double take.

It’s...the pirate.