

"This modern take on the Hepburn classic *Roman Holiday* is a quick, fun, slow-burn romcom." —Abby Jimenez, bestselling author of *The Friend Zone*

WHEN IN ROME



a novel

AUTHOR OF *THE CHEAT SHEET*

SARAH ADAMS

*When in
Rome*



A Novel

Sarah Adams



Dell
New York

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About the Author

“I was born with an enormous need for affection, and a
terrible need to give it.”

—Audrey Hepburn

Chapter 1

Amelia

This is okay, right? I'm okay?

I take a deep breath and wrap my fingers a little tighter around the steering wheel.

“Yes, Amelia, you’re okay. You’re fantastic actually. You’re just like Audrey Hepburn, taking your life into your own hands, annnnd...you’re talking to yourself...so maybe not completely okay, but given the circumstances, semiokay,” I say, squinting at the dark road outside my windshield. “Yes. Semiokay is good.”

Except, it’s completely dark, and my car is making this noise that sounds like loose coins tumbling around a dryer drum. I’m not a car whiz, but I’m thinking that’s not a good sound for it to be making. My favorite little Toyota Corolla, the car that has been with me since I was in high school, the car I was sitting in when I first heard my song on the radio at age eighteen, the car that I drove to Phantom Records and signed my recording deal ten years ago is reaching its expiration date. It can’t die, it still has the smell of my old volleyball kneepads ingrained in the fabric.

No, not today, Satan.

I rub the dashboard like there might be a hidden genie inside waiting to pop out and grant me three wishes. Instead of wishes, I'm granted the loss of cell service. The music I'm streaming cuts off, and my Google Maps is no longer registering the little arrow that's supposed to lead me out of this middle-of-nowhere-serial-killer-backwoods road.

Yikes, this feels like the start of a horror film. I think I'm the girl in the movie people yell "you're an idiot!" at, while popcorn crumbs leak from their greedy smiles. Oh geez, was this a mistake? I'm afraid I left my sanity back home in Nashville along with my iron gate and Fort Knox security system. And Will, my fabulous security guard who posts up outside my house and stops people from sneaking onto my property.

Earlier tonight, my manager, Susan, and her assistant, Claire, downloaded me with information about my upcoming, jam-packed schedule for the next three weeks before we leave on a nine-month world tour. The problem is, I just finished my last day of a grueling three-month tour rehearsal. Almost every day of the last three months has been dedicated to learning the concert choreography, stage blocking, solidifying the set list, rigorous exercise, and rehearsing the songs, all while smiling and pretending that inside I didn't feel like a rotting compost pile.

I sat silent as Susan talked and talked, her long, slender, perfectly manicured finger scrolling endlessly across an iPad screen full of schedule notes. Schedule notes I should feel excited to hear. Honored to have! But somewhere in the middle of it, I...shut down. Her voice took on the Charlie Brown *wah, wah, wah* tone and all I could hear

was my own heart thumping in my ears. Loud and painful. I went absolutely numb. And what scared me the most was that Susan didn't even seem to notice.

It makes me wonder if I'm too good at hiding. My days go like this: I smile this way at this person and nod. *Yes, thank you.* I smile that way at that person and nod. *Yes, of course I can do that.* Susan gives me a script perfectly crafted by my PR team and I memorize it. *My favorite color is blue, much the same as the Givenchy gown I'll be wearing to the Grammys. Why yes, I do owe much of my success to my loving and devoted mom. A day doesn't go by that I don't feel incredibly blessed to have this career and my amazing fans.*

Polite, polite, polite.

A hot splotch of tears falls onto my thigh and I realize I'm crying. I don't think I'm supposed to be crying thinking of those things. I'm a two-time Grammy winner and I have a signed contract for ninety million dollars with the top record label in the business, so I shouldn't be crying. I don't deserve to be crying. And I definitely shouldn't be in my old car in the middle of the night driving frantically away from everything. The list of people I'll be letting down runs through my mind like a scroll, and I can barely withstand the guilt. I've *never* not shown up for an interview before. I hate disappointing people or acting as if my time is more valuable than theirs. At the start of my career I vowed I would never get a big head. It's important to me to be as accommodating as possible—even if it hurts.

But something about Susan's parting words tonight wrecked me. "Rae,"—because she prefers to call me by my stage name rather than my real name, which is Amelia—"you're looking tired. Get some extra

sleep tonight so you won't be puffy in the behind-the-scenes photos of the *Vogue* interview tomorrow. Although...the exhausted look is trending again..." She looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling and I half expected God himself to beam down an answer to her concerning the bags under my eyes. "Yeah, forget I said anything! It'll stir sympathy from your fans and bring a little more buzz."

She turned and left—her assistant, Claire, pausing only briefly to toss me one last hesitant glance over her shoulder. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something, and I found myself desperately hoping she would. *See me, please.*

"Good night," she finally said and then left.

I sat in the ringing silence for so long wondering how I let myself get here. And how do I crawl out of this shell I've accidentally created? This hollowed-out feeling started to find me a few years ago, and I'd hoped it was because I was sick of the L.A. lifestyle and needed a change. I packed up and moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where I could still be around the music business scene, but not quite as high-profile living. It didn't work. The hollowness followed me.

Some people turn to family for questions like that, some turn to friends, and some turn to Magic 8 Balls. But I turn to the one person who never lets me down: Audrey Hepburn. Tonight, I closed my eyes and skipped my finger over my collection of Audrey DVD cases (yes, I still own a DVD player) while playing a game of eenie-meenie-miney-mo until I landed on *Roman Holiday*. It felt cataclysmic. In the movie, Audrey plays the part of Princess Ann, who was feeling much like I have been—alone and overwhelmed—and she escapes into the night to explore Rome. (Well, more like meanders into the

night since she's loopy on a sleeping sedative, but that's neither here nor there.)

And suddenly, that was it. The answer I'd been looking for. I needed to get away from that house, from Susan, from my responsibilities, from absolutely everything, and escape to Rome. Except, Italy is way too far to travel when I head out on tour in three weeks, so I settled for the nearest Rome that Google Maps could give me. *Rome, Kentucky*. Exactly two hours away from my house with a lovely little bed-and-breakfast in the heart of its town according to Google. Perfect place to get my shit together and overcome a breakdown.

So I went to my three-car garage, passed the other two expensive vehicles I own, and pulled the tarp off the sweet, old car I've kept tucked away for the past ten years. I started her up, and I drove off in search of Rome.

And now I'm on a creepy back road and I think some of the emotional numbness is wearing off because I'm beginning to see how ridiculous this idea is. Somewhere in heaven Audrey is looking down with her halo and shaking her head at me. I glance at my phone's glowing screen. The words *no service* are pasted where the signal bars usually live, and I swear those words are somehow blinking at me. Taunting me. *You made a bad choice. Now you get to be the next story on Dateline.*

I swallow and tell myself that I will be totally fine. No problem. Everything is good. "Dry your tears and kick this gloomy attitude in the pants, Amelia!" I say out loud to myself because who else does a girl talk to when she's alone in the car in the middle of a mental breakdown?

I only need my car to keep moving for another ten minutes until I emerge out of this scary-as-shit back road and arrive at the little town B and B. Then, I will happily allow my car the dignified death she deserves—where there are streetlights, and hopefully not Hillbilly-Joe-Serial-Killer waiting to dump my body in a ditch somewhere.

But, oh, would you look at that? My car has taken on a new sputtering sound and is jolting...literally *jolting* like this is the early 2000s and I installed hydraulics. All I need are purple lights under my car and I'm set to time travel!

“No no no,” I plead with my car. “*Don't do this to me now!*”

But she does.

My car comes to a stuttering, highly undignified halt on the side of the pitch-black road. I frantically try to start the engine again, but it's not having it. A series of clicking noises is all it makes. My hands are still tightly clamped on the steering wheel and I stare out into the unmoving night as realization settles over me. I tried to make it on my own without Susan's help for *one* adventure and I failed on the first night, two hours in. If that isn't the most pathetic thing you've ever heard, I don't know what is. Sure, I can sing on a stage in front of thousands, but I can't do something as simple as drive myself one state over.

Since there is nothing I can do but sit in my car and wait until morning when the sun is up and I can clearly see if anyone is holding a bloody chainsaw in my direction or not, I lay my head back against the seat and close my eyes. I let defeat take me. Tomorrow morning, I'll find a way to call Susan. I'll have her send a car and I'll force myself out of this melancholy mood.

Knock knock knock.

I scream and jump in my seat, bumping the top of my head on the ceiling. I look out the window, and oh shit, there's someone standing outside my car! This is it. This is the moment I will get murdered, and after the true story of my death airs on *E Hollywood News*, all I will be remembered for is my grisly cornfield demise.

"Everything all right? Do you need help?" comes the muffled voice of the man outside my car. He beams a flashlight through my window, temporarily blinding me.

I hold my hands up to shield my eyes from the light, and also obstruct his view so he doesn't recognize me. "No, thank you!" I yell through my closed window, my heart beating wildly against my ribs. "I'm fine! I-I don't need any help!" Definitely not from a strange man in the middle of the night.

"You sure?" he says, finally realizing he was piercing my eyes with his flashlight and turning it away from my face. He has a nice-sounding voice, I'll give him that. Sort of rumbly and tender at the same time.

"I'm sure!" I say in a cheery tone, because everything around me might be falling apart but at least I still know how to muster up pleasantness. "Got everything under control!" I make the okay sign with my hand for added measure.

"Looks like your car broke down."

I can't admit to that! I would basically be telling him that I'm a sitting duck. *My phone's out of service, too! Would you like for me to step out so you can abduct me or would it be more fun for you to break the window yourself? Choose your own adventure!*

“Nope. Just...taking a break for a minute.” I smile tensely, keeping most of my face turned away, hoping he won’t realize a performing artist worth millions is sitting in this beat-up Corolla.

“Your engine is smoking.” He shines the flashlight on the dense cloud of smoke billowing out from under the hood of my car. That can’t be good.

“*Oh...yeah,*” I say as casually as possible. “It does that sometimes.”

“Your car engine often smokes?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say louder and perkier than before.

“Right.” He’s clearly not buying my story. “Look, I think you need to get out. It’s not safe to stay in a smoking vehicle.”

Ha! He’d like that, wouldn’t he? Well, there is no way in hell I’m getting out of this car. Even if he has a nice-sounding voice.

“No, thanks.”

“I’m not going to murder you if that’s what you’re thinking.”

I gasp and look out at the darkly silhouetted man. “Why would you say that? Now I really think you’re going to murder me.”

“Thought so,” he says, sounding irritated. “What do I need to do to prove I’m not a murderer?”

My forehead creases as I think about it. “Nothing. There’s no way you can prove it.”

He grunts softly and walks to the front of my car, standing in front of the lights. I can see him now, and *wow*. Hillbilly Joe sure looks a lot like Wilderness Ken. He’s wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt. His sandy blond hair is cropped shorter on the sides but has

a bit of play on the top. A scruffy short beard covers his strong jaw, and let me tell you, it pairs nicely with the wide shoulders, lean body, and biceps that jump enticingly when he knocks on the hood of my car. The entire effect is...rugged in a way that makes me wish my air-conditioning was working.

“Can you pop the hood so I can make sure nothing is on fire?”

Uh-uh. Sorry, but no. Sexy or not, there’s no way I’m opening that hood. What if he...well, honestly, I know nothing about cars and have no idea what he could do to make this situation worse, but I’m sure he can do something.

“Thanks, but I don’t need your help! I’ll wait until morning and call a tow truck,” I yell loud enough for him to hear me.

He crosses his arms. “How are you going to call a tow truck? We don’t get cell service out here.”

Well, shoot. He’s got me there.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure it out. You can go back to wherever you came from now.” Probably a nearby bush where he’ll be waiting to pounce on me the second I’m out of my safe vehicle. And yes, I realize I’m being a little over-the-top paranoid, but when you’re used to stalkers trying to climb the gated fence outside your house, pose as a plumber to get past your security guard, and/or send you locks of their hair asking you to place it under your pillow at night, you tend to develop a sense of paranoia toward strangers. Which is why I should have NEVER left my house alone. I need to accept the fact that I’m not just *me* anymore and never will be again.

Wilderness Ken doesn’t walk away. He returns to my window and leans down again, one hand firmly planted above my door, showing me just how ample his wingspan is. “A smoking engine is not good.

You need to get out. I promise I'm not going to hurt you, but you will be hurt if this car goes up in flames. I promise I'm a trustworthy person."

"That's what all the murderers say...before they murder someone."

"Met a lot of murderers in your time?"

One point for Wilderness Ken.

I smile and try to sound as kind as possible. "Sorry but...can you just go away? Really, I don't mean to be rude, but...you're sort of making me nervous."

"If I go away, will you get out?"

I laugh a stunted laugh. "Definitely not now! Where did you come from anyway?"

The man nods toward the other side of my car and doesn't sound at all impressed when he says, "You're in my front yard."

Oh.

I turn, and sure enough, I'm pulled over in a front yard. *His* front yard apparently. I can't help but smile at the cute house. Small. White. Black shutters. Two lights beside the front door, and a hanging swing on the front porch. Large expansive land around it. It looks homey.

"I think I already know the answer," he says, "but do you want to come in and call someone? I have a landline."

I laugh so loud at his suggestion that he winces. Oh dear, that was rude. I clear my throat. "Sorry. No. Thank you...But no," I say it solemnly this time.

"Fine. Suit yourself. If you need anything and decide I'm not a killer, I'll just be in there." He gestures toward the house and rises to

his full height again. I watch as he crosses his long front yard and his shadow disappears into the house.

After he shuts his front door, I sigh with relief and sink into my seat, trying not to worry about the smoke still streaming from my car's engine, or how freaking hot it is in here, or that I'm hungry, or that I really need to pee, or how disappointed Susan will be with me once she realizes I'm not showing up to that interview in the morning.

I'm not okay. Everything is definitely *not* okay.