

If All Else Sails

A NOVEL



EMMA ST. CLAIR

USA TODAY bestselling author

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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

If All Else Sails

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A Quaint Little Murder Cottage

Josie

I am standing outside of what could best be described as a quaint little murder cottage, wondering if, instead of going on vacation with my brother, I'm about to die.

Jacob's cheerful recorded voice comes over the phone I'm pressing to my ear. Again. This time, I do what I almost never do because I'm not a heathen. Or a boomer.

I leave a voicemail.

"Jacob, hi. It's Josie—the sister you seem to be pranking right now. Why am I here? Where *is* here? I double-checked the address, but this cannot be the site of any kind of vacation. I did not pack to defend myself against a serial killer. Where are you? Call me back. You've got my number. Use it. Preferably now."

I immediately follow up with a text, which reads CALL ME NOW in all caps with no punctuation. My brother will know the lack of a period or a neat row of exclamation points means either I've been kidnapped or I'm really and truly angry.

The message doesn't show a read receipt. It just sits there. Delivered.

Concern fissures through me. Maybe Jacob was in a wreck. Maybe he fell asleep at the wheel and drove right off one of the bridges on the way here. Maybe he's dead somewhere and my last message to him was full of snark and anger.

Or . . . maybe my mind sometime jumps too quickly to the worst possible scenario.

A less morbid and much more likely explanation is that Jacob got caught up working. Like always. He could have gotten a last-minute meeting with a big client. Or a potential client. An up-and-coming college football star poised for NFL greatness. Or a basketball player having a great year with endorsement offers coming in hot. He could have left the office late and gotten stuck in DC commuter traffic.

Or maybe he met a woman. Difficult, considering it's not quite noon, but with Jacob's charm, I've found that anything is possible.

I know what my best friend would say. Toni would tell me I shouldn't have driven two hours to an unfamiliar address just because my brother held out promises of a fun trip together.

Never leave the house without your underwear or your boundaries, I can practically hear her saying.

But when it comes to my brother, I understand the concept of boundaries; I just can't seem to apply them.

I scan his text from yesterday, searching for any clues I might have missed.

The Super Summer Sibling Extravaganza is upon us! Pack a bag for warm weather and maybe swimming. Comfy clothes. Maybe one or two nice things, but this will be casual. Address in the next text. Don't look it

up on Google Street View! TOMORROW AT 4 PM.

Yes—that’s all the information he gave me.

And yes, after packing this morning, I adjusted the GPS to take me on the most scenic route from Fredericksburg to Kilmarnock, a small town on what’s known as the Northern Neck. I even resisted the urge to look at the Google Street View, a decision I now regret. Because I definitely would have asked questions.

What if . . . he isn’t coming?

“You’re being ridiculous. He’ll be here,” I say out loud, like voicing it into the world will make my brother appear. He doesn’t.

That doesn’t mean he *won’t*. But my worry expands, braiding with the excitement and nervousness of being in a new situation. While packing, I shoved down my anxious thoughts, stuffing them away like I stuffed half my closet into my suitcases—just in case.

Adventures are fun! I told myself while carefully rolling my shirts and lining them up in neat rows at the bottom of my rolling bag. *So are surprises! You are a woman who lives for excitement!*

I didn’t come close to convincing myself. But I packed. I came.

And now, as I stand on a driveway made of crushed oyster shells, baking in this sweltering oven of a June day, I wish I were back in my comfy but cramped apartment, working my way through my summer reading list. This year, I’ve decided it will be comprised entirely of books written by women—from the Brontës and Jane Austen to Toni Morrison and Madeleine L’Engle, whose young adult books I’ve always loved.

But no—I chose to leave the cocoon of home to find out

what's behind Door Number Three. Which is apparently the sad little cottage in front of me, desperately in need of an extreme home makeover. Or a bulldozer. The siding, which may have been cream once upon a time, is now the color of a load of whites thrown in the washer too many times. Most of the wood trim is rotten. I'm no roof expert, but this one looks like it's one heavy rain away from collapsing.

If I squint, it's almost cute. More like it *had* been cute and is now disappointed by its owner's lack of upkeep. The front looks like a face—the windows its sad eyes above the half circle of frowning glass inlaid in the door.

The property, however, is gorgeous, with a swath of lush green grass fringed by pines on either side. The real star of the show is the glittering water behind the house, complete with a dock and a sailboat, which looks to be in much better shape than the house.

Parked near a structure that's somewhere between a stand-alone garage and a metal shed is an old Bronco. Definitely not Jacob's. He prefers his cars new and sleek and shiny. Lots of dollar signs and detailing involved. This SUV looks as though it's been restored, but that's not Jacob's thing either. I briefly wonder if the car's owner is inside the house watching me, but I see no sign of movement. The place has the abandoned vibe going on.

Abandoned but also the perfect hideout for a serial killer.

I give the sad little house a wide berth, walking toward the water as I swat away birdlike mosquitoes and wipe the sweat-stache off my upper lip. By the time I get there, my shirt clings damply to every part of me. The dock is sturdy, if a little splintered, the deep navy gleam of water almost inviting. Almost. A small dinghy motors past, driven by an older man with two little girls in pink life jackets. They all wave.

I wave back, like this is my dock. My sailboat. My little murder cottage.

The name painted in neat script on the side of the sailboat reads *QUINTessential*. The *quint* in all caps is likely some inside joke because I don't get it. Frankly, it's a disappointing boat name. Aren't boats supposed to have clever names—like *Nauti* & *Nice* or *Little Boat Peep* or *Signed, Sailed, Delivered?*

I pull out my phone—still nothing from my brother—and take a few pictures of the water and then the boat. I stop just shy of climbing aboard. I've never been on a boat this size and I'm itching to explore. It's a little longer than the dock, just tall enough that I can't see much of the deck. I'm spurious but not one for trespassing, so I turn and snap pictures of the back side of the cottage, which really should have more windows considering the view.

When I walk back across the lawn, three birds rocket away from a hidden nest under the cottage's sagging eaves. I come to an abrupt stop when a lacy curtain flutters in one of the windows. My heart leaps into my throat.

Is someone in there watching me?

I mean, it *could* be Jacob. He did send me the address. But he wouldn't be hiding in there. He would have run out and given me a bone-crushing hug—his specialty.

I also can't actually picture my brother stepping on the porch of this place, much less spying on me from inside.

As a cloud passes in front of the sun, I take another picture of the little house. You know—just in case it's evidence in the event of my disappearance or death.

The phone vibrates in my hand, and I don't bother with greetings when I see Jacob is calling.

"Tell me you're the one watching me from inside the creepy murder cottage."

He sputters a laugh. “The what?”

“You know—the sad little white house that’s falling apart and might be haunted or home to a serial killer. The one whose address you sent me last night. The one I’m standing outside of, hoping it doesn’t collapse when the wind blows.”

“It’s that bad, huh?” His voice sounds strained.

I close my eyes. Breathe in and out slowly for a few counts. Reopen my eyes just in time to see the curtains flutter again. “If you don’t know the condition, that means you aren’t here.”

It also means he isn’t the person inside watching me. I scan my surroundings as I take a step back toward my car.

“I . . . am not there.”

Disappointment curdles all the happy hope I’ve been holding on to since his text last night. So much for the Super Summer Sibling Extravaganza. And any trust I had in my brother.

When I speak, my voice holds the icy depth of a walk-in freezer. “Jacob, whose house is this? And where are you?”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got the whole drive back home to hear it,” I say, striding toward my car.

“Don’t go yet,” he says quickly.

“Give me a reason not to. A *good* one.”

“The thing is,” he continues, ignoring my questions, “I need to call in a favor.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “A favor.”

By my secret count—*secret* because you’re not supposed to keep records of wrongs by people you love—the favors are already stacked high on my side and somewhat lacking on Jacob’s part. We are as unbalanced as a single person on a seesaw. If anyone should be calling in favors, it’s me.

Jacob is the gas giant at the center of our family’s solar system. My parents and I don’t even wait for him to ask us to jump

or say how high. We just stay ready, knees bent and muscles flexed.

Is it a bit of a trauma response to Jacob coming *this close* to dying when he was twelve? Probably.

But even before that, he was the golden boy of the family. Almost losing him simply elevated his status. It also brought us all closer. And if we're a little lopsided in terms of who runs the show, there are way more toxic family issues we could struggle with. My parents have escaped his orbit the last few years after buying an RV, trading in my childhood home for something a little more manageable, and spending most of the year motor-ing around the country. I think they're in South Dakota right now. Or was it South Carolina? Possibly just the South. They're hard to keep up with these days.

Which might be the point.

In my older brother's defense, though he's a wee bit self-focused, Jacob is a decent guy. He's generous. Goofy. Bighearted. Able to make friends anywhere. Loyal.

Usually loyal.

"You see—"

Jacob's explanation is interrupted by sirens. I registered them a few minutes ago, soft whines in the distance. But now they are loud, pealing cries. Two cop cars turn and speed down the driveway, kicking up clouds of dust behind them as they head straight for me.

"Any idea why the police are here?" I ask.

He groans. "Oh no. He didn't. He wouldn't."

"He *who* wouldn't *what*?"

I've never been arrested, never considered running from the police, but find myself slowly backing away as the cruisers pull to a stop.

A swarm—okay, it's just two—of cops throw open the doors,

leaping out like I am the fugitive they've been chasing for days. Not a confused elementary school nurse who might be trespassing as some kind of favor to the man formerly known as her brother.

One cop looks barely old enough to be out of high school, and the other has eyebrows so bushy they deserve their own zip code. They're thicker than his mustache, which is saying something.

"That," Jacob says, as the cops point what looks to be one gun and one taser at me, "is probably because of Wyatt."

Ah, I think, as the cops order me to drop my weapon—a.k.a. my phone—and put my hands up. *Wyatt*.

It all makes sense now.



The Fine Line Between Detained and Arrested

Wyatt

“Would you mind signing this too?” one of the cops says. He’s young enough to still have a gleam in his eye and pink in his cheeks when he adds, “For my wife.”

I take the proffered index card he pulled from his uniform. Then he hands me a permanent marker from a different pocket. While I’m scrawling my signature, I wonder what he’ll pull out next. Maybe a protractor or a little clutch of paper clips, like he’s some kind of human clown car stuffed with office accessories.

The worst part of my job as a professional athlete has always been signing autographs. Actually, any kind of interaction with fans leaves my mouth tasting like I’ve just downed day-old burned gas station coffee. All I want is to play hockey and be left alone. But apparently that’s too much to ask.

It usually takes me about four hours to come down from the anxiety high I experience after any public event I’m forced to attend. Especially after a game, though it’s worse when I run

into fans unexpectedly.

At restaurants. In parking garages. Wandering the grocery store.

It's gotten so bad that one whiff of a permanent marker is enough to trigger a mild PTSD response and a three-day migraine. I think I feel one coming on now.

I play hockey well, and love everything about the game, but it's a job. One I happen to excel at.

Or . . . did before my injury.

Regardless, no one is going around asking dentists to sign their bras because they do the best fillings. So, the fame that comes standard with my job has never quite made sense to me.

I briefly consider asking the cops to sign my T-shirt just to see how *they'd* react.

But I have no desire to prolong this encounter. (Also, I can't remember how many days it's been since I showered, and I doubt my shirt smells fresh.) I just want the police to go and take the trespassing paparazzi with them.

I've been standing for too long without my crutches. More slumped against the doorframe than standing, sweating profusely. Something must be wrong with the air conditioner or the thermostat. I've been sweating through my clothes all day, then the air kicks on and I'm freezing. Until I start sweating again.

I hand back the marker and everything I've signed. The young cop stares at the note card, shaking his head. "Thanks, man. This is . . . this is awesome."

It's a four-by-six index card with the illegibly scrawled name of a person who happens to play hockey. *Not* awesome. But I keep my disagreement silent.

"You'll be back next season, right?" This question is from the older cop, the one with a mustache and thick, bristly eyebrows

reminiscent of Bert from *Sesame Street*.

He glances down at my splinted foot, the one hovering just off the ground.

“I don’t know.”

Both men look as though a second head has just sprouted from my neck. I shouldn’t have answered at all because this only invites more questions. The arch of my foot gives a hearty throb.

“At least it was just your foot and not your knee,” the younger cop says, suddenly an expert in sports medicine. “When I tore my ACL in the championship football game—”

He’s winding up to tell me about a game that probably happened in high school, but thankfully, my phone buzzes in the pocket of my baggy athletic shorts. It’s been buzzing, but I ignored it, choosing the autographs as the lesser of two evils. Also, I’m on day six of avoiding my mother’s calls. I am simply not in the frame of mind for her kindness and her . . . mothering.

Now, I slip the phone out of my pocket and hold it up, not even looking to see who it is. “I need to take this.”

I try to force the words *It’s been a pleasure* out of my mouth but they’re logjammed inside me, never to emerge because they aren’t true.

“Thanks again,” the older cop says, hesitating as he backs down the front steps. Like he’s hoping I’ll change my mind and invite them in for coffee. I wave and let the cheap screen door slam as I reach for my crutches, hobbling over to slump on the couch with my foot up on the wobbly coffee table.

I frown down at the phone screen. It’s not my mother. But it’s another person I’ve been avoiding. He’s called three times in the last ten minutes. With a sigh, I answer.

“Jacob,” I say dryly. “Color me surprised to hear from you.”

My agent and best friend skips the pleasantries. “Color me surprised to hear your voice. I wasn’t sure you still knew how to

operate a phone.”

“Muscle memory.”

He chuckles—not a real laugh because I know those. This is a Professional Jacob laugh. I almost cave and tell him right then that I miss Friend Jacob. His job has fully polluted his personality, like he stepped into a sports agent skin a few years ago and now it’s fused to him.

“Look, I know you’re not thrilled with me. I get that you’re tired of my calls. Even if I care and just want what’s best for you,” he says.

“Debatable,” I mutter.

“But you don’t have to take it out on Josie.”

The mention of his younger sister throws me. My brain shifts into spin cycle as I try to make sense of the context. But it’s a spin cycle with a down comforter and two towels, making my thoughts off-balance and wonky.

“I—What?”

“A few minutes ago, Josie and I were on the phone and she said the police pulled up. I assume you called them.”

My eyes flick to the front window where the cops are just now climbing into their cruisers. “Are you saying *Josie* was the one creeping around my yard taking photos?”

“I seriously doubt she was ‘creeping around’ your yard. You didn’t recognize my sister, man?”

No.

I didn’t. And it floors me.

I remember the last time I saw Josie—of course I do—two years ago at dinner with Jacob’s family when I was fresh off the worst personal and best professional year of my life. Josie’s hair was the shortest I’d ever seen it, the brown waves just barely dusting the tops of her freckled shoulders. Her eyes barely skimmed over me when she said hello. And I stared too long

and too hard, hoping she might notice me.

She said two words to me that night: *That's good*. It was after Jacob spent far too long bragging about me moving from the Appies, a beloved AHL team in North Carolina, to the even more beloved and higher-paying NHL team in Boston.

Josie's tone was polite but cool, tempered with years' worth of mistrust and dislike. Same as always.

And I remember every word she's ever spoken to me. Just like I remember every one I've said to her, all of which somehow came out of my mouth wrong.

I'm aware people call me a grump—both the ones who know me personally and the ones who interact with me professionally. I guess the description fits, though I'd say it's more that I'm a very reserved guy in a very public profession. I just want to skate. But you can't play hockey at the highest level without dealing with the press and fans and people.

So. Many. People.

I think back to the woman I watched wandering my property earlier, the one I assumed was another reporter, looking for a story. Long brown hair tucked through a baseball cap. Baggy, nondescript khaki shorts. A T-shirt and flip-flops. Sunglasses. She had her phone out, taking pictures of the dock and the back of my house.

I assumed she was an overeager reporter who'd figured out where I was hiding and showed up to hound me about my injury and plans to come back to Boston.

That was Josie?

Which means . . .

"You'll have to hang on," I tell Jacob, heaving myself to my feet and grabbing my crutches.

"Dude," he says, voice pitching higher as I secure the phone between my ear and my shoulder. "You didn't let them *arrest*

her, did you?”

“Detain,” I mutter, heading for the door. “They said they were just going to *detain* her.”

But *detain* sure looks a whole lot like *arrest*. I can barely make out Josie’s head in the back of one of the cop cars.

I hang up on Jacob’s string of expletives because I can’t operate crutches on stairs with the phone.

Moving as fast as I can in my current state, I fly outside, knocking the screen door right off its hinges. It lands in the yard. But I don’t care. My only focus is on flagging down the police cruisers carrying the last person on the planet I’d want arrested—or detained—because of me.



It's the Honey

Josie

Despite my vehement protests of innocence, I am—for the first and hopefully last time *ever*—wearing a pair of handcuffs in the back of a police cruiser, sweating profusely.

To be clear, I'm not talking metaphoric sweat. Jail time is not a legitimate concern of mine.

I don't *think*.

No, I am sweating literally and to an embarrassing degree because Officer Eyebrows left the car engine off with only the front windows down while they were getting Wyatt's autograph.

At least, that's what it *looks* like they're doing. I'm only able to twist so far with my hands cuffed behind my back. My line of sight can just barely make out Wyatt with a permanent marker in hand and a permanent scowl on his face while the officers stand on the porch with goofy smiles.

It's so very Wyatt. Just like this whole experience.

At first, when the two cops jumped out of their vehicles and ordered me to drop my weapon and put my hands up, I chalked their overzealous response up to boredom. I drove through the postage-stamp town of Kilmarnock, and it's made up of about four blocks of adorable storefronts, boasting antiques, restaurants, and things branded with the word *rivah*. A trespassing call is probably the most exciting event the cops have had in months.

I figured Wyatt would clear this up a little more quickly. We've known each other for years through Jacob. Disliked each other for just as long. But this is taking it a bit too far. A prank gone wrong sounds even less likely than a misunderstanding. Wyatt is not known for his sense of humor. And the handcuffs digging into my wrists don't feel like a joke.

What I know for sure is that when my brother gets here, he'll kill Wyatt, and I will kill my brother.

Killing isn't really my style, though, so maybe instead I'll find one of those zoos where you can pay to name a cockroach after your ex before it's fed to a monitor lizard or something.

I'll submit both Wyatt's and Jacob's names.

When Officer Eyebrows passes my door and climbs into the front seat, reality sinks in.

I'm so confused I barely register the relief of the AC blasting as he turns on the car. "Wait—you're actually arresting me? He didn't, I don't know, decide to drop the bogus charges?"

"Sorry, hon," Officer Eyebrows says, putting the cruiser in Drive.

"I *know* him," I say. "My brother is his agent."

"I'm sure he is. Make sure you hold on back there. Might be a little bumpy."

A lovely suggestion when my hands are cuffed behind my back.

I'm honestly stunned. Wyatt saw me walking around this—his?—yard. Called the police on me. And is letting them drive me away.

I know the man never liked me, but *this*?

There's always been something hostile between us, ever since the very first time Jacob brought Wyatt home from college for the weekend. If it were a one-time incident, maybe I could write it off. Consistently, though, Wyatt finds a way to ruin things: my self-esteem, my birthday dinner, my college graduation. You know—little things like that.

Still, Wyatt and I are not quite Taylor Swift “Bad Blood”-level enemies, so I don't understand this sudden escalation to having me *arrested*.

Before now, our interactions have been snarky, though minimal. We give each other a wide berth, even if I'm always half aware of his gray eyes piercing into me, like he's watching for me to make a mistake.

Jacob has always defended Wyatt, a fact that chaps my hide. Where's the sibling loyalty? *You just don't understand him*, my brother has said more than once.

What's not to understand? The man is some kind of egotistical sports player who has the attitude of a honey badger with a hangover. And for whatever reason, he seems bound and determined to make me suffer every chance he gets.

“Do you mind not kicking my seat?” the cop asks.

This only makes me want to kick it harder.

Look—I'm not normally the kind of person who enjoys bucking authority. In our family, that's always been Jacob's role, where I'm more of a rule follower. Not quite a people pleaser, but maybe with people-pleasing tendencies. I've always been polite to police officers in the brief interactions I've had with them. Which is probably why, even though I've gotten pulled

over twice for speeding, I've only ever driven away with warnings.

But after spending at least ten minutes in a hot car, I am plumb out of politeness.

"Oh, sorry." I don't even attempt to sound sorry or soften the bite in my tone. "I'm just trying to avoid smashing my head into the window. But if you don't mind the legal ramifications of me getting a concussion while in custody, that's cool."

He slows down. He also glares at me in the rearview mirror.

Then his eyes suddenly widen, those massive eyebrows shooting upward. Without warning, he hits the brakes. Hard enough that I actually do hit my head—my face, really—on the wire mesh separating the front and back seats.

"Was that really necessary?" I ask, but he's out of the car, leaving the door wide open as his boots crunch on the driveway.

And of course, he turned off the car, which means the air flow stops. Again.

I wiggle to look out the back window, wondering if I have an imprint of the partition on my cheek.

"Oh, *now* you want to come outside," I grumble when I see Wyatt standing in the middle of the driveway, talking animatedly to both cops.

I'm shocked to see Wyatt leaning on crutches. Did he get injured? I didn't hear about it, but I also don't follow hockey. Jacob knows I've never been the least bit interested in updates on his clients. Especially Wyatt. I think it kills Jacob a little bit that I don't get starstruck.

He doesn't understand or know *why* I have an aversion to athletes. No one does. And I'm not about to start explaining.

Still, considering his friendship with Wyatt, an injury seems like something Jacob might have mentioned.

All three men look toward the cruiser I'm in, and when their gazes fall on me, I tilt my chin up in the universal dudebro signal for *What's up*. Best I can do in handcuffs.

"Come on, Wyatt," I mutter. "Before I melt into a puddle, tell the nice officers of the law this is all just a misunderstanding so I can get out of here."

And that's exactly what I'll be doing the moment I'm freed: getting out of here.

I also plan to have a strongly worded conversation with Jacob because *what was his endgame here?* Why am I here at Wyatt's murder cottage while my brother is nowhere to be found? You can't have a Super Summer Sibling Extravaganza without both siblings.

Wyatt is still having what looks like a heated discussion with the cops. Speaking of heated . . . a bead of sweat rolls down the center of my spine. People are always going on about why you shouldn't leave pets in hot cars—not even for five minutes.

But what about innocently accused trespassers? Don't I have at least as many rights as a dog?!

Maybe I can sue Wyatt for emotional damage. If the officers leave me here much longer, I'll tack heatstroke onto the list. I may not have known about the crutches, but Jacob did brag to me about Wyatt's latest contract with Boston. He is *perfect* lawsuit material. And my school nurse salary could do with a little boost.

The two officers suddenly turn and walk toward the cruiser I'm in. Wyatt does not move, but continues standing in the driveway, leaning on his crutches, staring at me. Even from here, I can see the hard clench of his jaw.

Like *he* has any reason to be frustrated.

Then again, he always looks caught in a state of frustration. Or constipation? Maybe for all these years, I've misread Wyatt's

expression as open disdain when really, he just has a wicked case of IBS.

If so, serves him right.

Officer Eyebrows scuttles over to open my door. You know it's bad when hot summer air entering a car brings relief. I sag toward the doorway and don't even fight Officer Eyebrows when he takes my elbow and helps maneuver me out of the cruiser. A lot more gently than when he put me in.

"So sorry about this," he mumbles.

"Which part are you sorry about—leaving a human being in a hot car on a summer day? Or putting me in handcuffs when I haven't done anything? Maybe both?"

I shake off his hand and close my eyes, leaning against the car.

I don't think I really understood the extent of *how* hot it was—or the impact of those minutes in the back seat—until this moment. My stomach roils, and I hope I don't throw up.

But if I do, I'm aiming for Officer Eyebrows's shoes.

"I'll remove the cuffs if you could just turn around."

I crack open my eyes as the younger cop steps forward, looking slightly panicked. Moving makes me feel a little woozy, so I stay leaning against the car, turning to give him my back. My cheek presses against the warm metal as my stomach dips and clenches.

"All good," he says as he slips off the cuffs.

Are we? I almost ask. *Are we really all good?*

I pull my arms forward, rubbing my wrists. I need water. And maybe an ice bath. Somehow I doubt Wyatt's little murder cottage has this amenity.

"He decided not to press charges after all," Officer Eyebrows says, and I shoot a glare Wyatt's way.

He's standing about twenty feet behind the second cop car,

leaning on his crutches and still looking disgruntled. Not apologetic, the way a normal human would. But almost angry, like this whole thing is my fault.

“Can *I*?” I ask.

The officers stare at me blankly for a minute. “Can you what?” the younger one asks.

“Can I press charges?”

“Press charges for what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for being left in the back of a hot car while you collected autographs?”

Busted. They exchange a glance. Then they laugh, as though they think I’m joking. I am not.

“What do you want us to do, honey?” Officer Eyebrows asks. “It was a misunderstanding, and now it’s all cleared up.”

It’s the *honey* that does it.

“I *do* want to press charges,” I say, hopefully loudly enough for Wyatt to hear me. “For attempted negligent vehicular homicide. And false imprisonment.”

The string of words pulled straight from a patchwork collection of *Law & Order* jargon sound halfway legitimate. Again, the cops exchange glances, the corners of their lips turned upward.

Apparently, I’ve got a future in stand-up comedy.

A fat bumblebee buzzes past my ear, and a laughing gull careens in slow circles overhead.

I am suddenly reminded of precisely how thirsty I am. And how dizzy. I slump back against the cruiser and wipe sweat from my face.

“Do you need to sit down?” the young guy says, and when I shake my head, black dots crowd my vision. “You don’t look so good.”

I don’t *feel* so good. My stomach churns again, and a spike of

pain drives through my head. I don't need my nursing degree to tell me what this is: dehydration mixed with overheating. Standard summer fare when you're left in the back of a closed vehicle for ten minutes and it's nearing one hundred degrees out.

But knowing what it is doesn't slow the effects, and my vision goes hazy. Turns out, knowing is not half the battle. Or if it is, it's not the important half.

My mouth feels dry, my tongue thick as I try to speak. "I think I . . ."

My words slur, then trail off altogether as I slump, the black dots returning like an angry swarm of bats.

I'm going to pass out, I realize, half a second before the bats fully block out the sun. The last thing I'm aware of is Wyatt's voice, closer than it should be, as strong hands grab my shoulders to break my fall.

About the Author



Emma St. Clair is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author who loves sassy heroines, witty banter, and love stories with heart and humor. Her books have sizzling chemistry while keeping the bedroom door closed. She has an MFA in Fiction and lives in Katy, TX (go Tigers!), with her hubby, five children, and Great Dane. Her favorite place to write is tapping on her phone while on the elliptical machine. No Emmas have been hurt in the writing of these novels (yet).



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