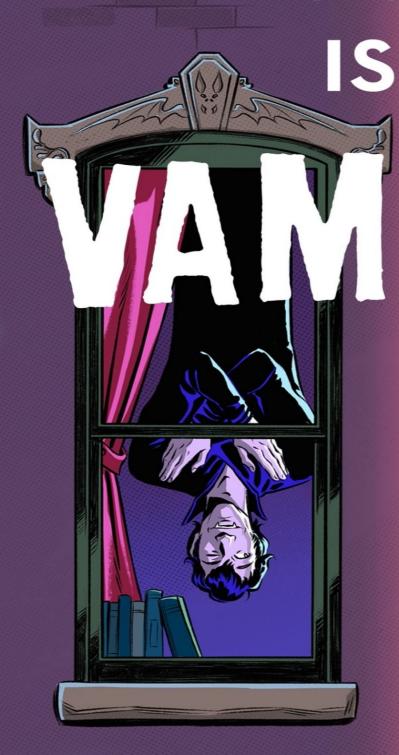
"Bloody delightful!"—ASHLEY POSTON, New York Times bestselling author of The Dead Romantics

MY ROOMMATE





Who says you can't teach an old vampire new tricks?

JENNA LEVINE

MY ROOMMATE IS A



JENNA LEVINE

BERKLEY ROMANCE New York

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Brian, who always makes me laugh, and who is always up for adopting just one more cat.



Roommate Wanted to Share Spacious Third-Floor Brownstone Apartment in Lincoln Park

Hello. I seek a roommate with whom to share my apartment. It is a spacious unit by modern standards with two large bedrooms, an open sitting area, and a semiprofessional eat-in kitchen. Large windows flank the eastern side of the apartment and provide a striking view of the lake. The unit is fully furnished in a tasteful, classical style. I am seldom home after sundown, so if you work a traditional schedule, you will usually have the apartment to yourself.

Rent: \$200 per month. No pets, please. Kindly direct all serious inquiries to fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com.

"THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS PLACE."

"Cassie, listen, this is a really good deal—"

"Forget it, Sam." That last part came out more forcefully than I'd intended—though not by much. Even though I needed his help, my embarrassment over being in this situation in the first place made accepting that help difficult. Sam meant well, but his insistence on involving himself in every part of my current situation was getting on my very last nerve.

To his credit, Sam—my oldest friend, who'd long ago acclimated to how snippy I sometimes got when I was stressed—said nothing. He simply folded his arms across his chest, waiting for me to be ready to say more.

I only needed a few moments to pull myself together and start feeling badly for snapping at him. "Sorry," I muttered under my breath. "I know you're only trying to help."

"It's all right," he said, sympathetic. "You have a lot going on. But it's okay to believe that things can get better."

I had no reason to believe that things could get better, but now wasn't the time to get into it. I simply sighed and turned my attention back to the Craigslist ad on my laptop.

"Anything that sounds too good to be true usually is."

Sam peered over my shoulder at my screen. "Not always. And you have to admit this apartment sounds great."

It did sound great. He was right about that. But . . .

"It's only two hundred a month, Sam."

"So? That's a great price."

I stared at him. "Yeah, if this were 1978. If someone's only asking for two hundred a month today there are probably dead bodies in the basement."

"You don't know that." Sam dragged a hand through his shaggy, dirty-blond hair. Messing with his hair was Sam's most obvious *I'm-bullshitting-you* tell. He'd had it since at least sixth grade, when he'd tried convincing our teacher I hadn't been the one who'd drawn bright pink flowers all over the wall of the girl's bathroom. He hadn't fooled Mrs. Baker then—I *had* drawn that aggressively neon meadow landscape—and he wasn't fooling me now.

How would he ever make it as a lawyer with such a terrible poker face?

"Maybe this person's just not home a lot and only wants a roommate for safety reasons, not income," Sam suggested. "Maybe they're an idiot and don't know what they *could* be charging."

I was still skeptical. I'd been scouring Craigslist and Facebook since my landlord taped an eviction notice to my front door two weeks ago for nonpayment of rent. There'd been nothing available this close to the Loop for less than a thousand a month. In Lincoln Park, the going rate was closer to fifteen hundred.

Two hundred wasn't just a little below market rate. It wasn't even in the same universe as market rate.

"There are also no pictures with this ad," I pointed out. "That's another red flag. I should ignore this one and keep looking." Because yes, my landlord was taking me to court next week if I didn't move out first, and yes, living in an apartment this cheap would really help me get on top of my shit, and maybe even keep me from ending up in this exact situation again in a few months. But I'd lived in the Chicago area for more than ten years. No deal in Lincoln Park this good came without a huge catch.

"Cassie." Sam's tone was quiet, patient—and more than a little patronizing. I reminded myself he was only trying to help in his very *Sam* way and bit my tongue. "This apartment is in a great location. You can easily afford it. It's close enough to the El that you'll be able to get to your jobs quickly. And if the windows are as big as this ad says they are, I bet there's tons of natural light."

My eyes widened. I hadn't thought of the lighting in the apartment when I'd read the ad. But if it did have huge, lake-facing windows, Sam was probably right.

"Maybe I'd be able to create from home again," I mused. I hadn't lived somewhere with good enough lighting to work on my projects in almost two years. I missed it more than I liked to admit.

Sam smiled, looking relieved. "Exactly."

"Okay," I conceded. "I'm at least willing to ask for more information."

Sam reached up and put his hand on my shoulder. His warm, steady touch calmed me, just as it had every time I'd needed it to since we were kids. The knot of anxiety that had taken up what felt

like permanent residence in the pit of my stomach these past two weeks began to loosen.

For the first time in ages, it felt like I could breathe again.

"We'll see the apartment and meet the roommate first, of course," he said very quickly. "I can even help you negotiate a month-to-month lease if you want. That way, if it's really awful, you can leave without breaking another lease."

Which would mean I wouldn't have to worry about getting hauled back into court by yet another angry landlord. Honestly, that would be a decent compromise. If this person turned out to be an axe murderer or a libertarian or some other awful thing, a month-to-month lease would let me leave quickly with no strings attached.

"You'd do that for me?" I asked. Not for the first time, I felt badly about how short I'd been with him lately.

"What else am I gonna do with my law degree?"

"For starters, you could use it to make tons of money at your firm instead of using it to help perennial fuckups like me."

"I'm making tons of money at my firm either way," he said, grinning. "But since you won't let me loan you any of that money—"

"I won't," I agreed. It had been my choice to get an impractical graduate degree and end up hopelessly in student loan debt with few job prospects for my troubles. I wasn't about to make that anyone else's problem.

Sam sighed. "You won't. Right. We've been over that. Repeatedly." He shook his head and added, in a more wistful tone, "I wish you could just move in with us, Cassie. Or with Amelia. That would solve everything."

I bit my lip and pretended to study the Craigslist ad intensely to avoid having to look at him.

In truth, a large part of me was relieved that Sam and his new husband Scott had just bought a tiny lakefront condo that barely accommodated them and their two cats. While living with them would save me the stress and the hassle of what I was going through now, Sam and Scott had just gotten married two months ago. Not only would my living with them hinder their ability to have sex wherever and whenever they felt like it, the way I understood newlyweds tended to, it would also be an awkward reminder of just how long it had been since I'd last been in a relationship.

As well as a constant reminder of what a colossal failure every *other* aspect of my life was.

And, of course, living with Amelia was out of the question. Sam didn't understand that his straitlaced, perfect sister had always looked down on me and thought I was a total loser. But it was the truth.

Honestly, my finding a place to live that was neither Sam and Scott's new sofa nor Amelia's loft in Lakeview was best for all of us.

"I'll be fine," I said, trying to sound like I believed it. My stomach clenched a little at the look of concern that crossed Sam's face. "No, really—I'll be okay. I always am, aren't I?"

Sam smiled and tousled my too-short hair, which was his way of teasing me. Normally I didn't mind, but I'd cut my hair pretty dramatically on a whim a couple weeks ago because I was frustrated and needed an outlet that didn't require an internet connection. It was yet another of my not-great recent decisions. My thick, curly blond hair tended to stick up in odd places if not cut by a professional. In that moment, as Sam continued to mess with my hair, I probably looked like a Muppet who'd recently stuck her finger in a light socket.

"Stop that," I said, laughing as I shrugged away from him. But my mood was better now—which was probably exactly why Sam had done it.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "If you ever change your mind about the loan . . ."

He trailed off without finishing his sentence.

"If I change my mind about a loan, you'll be the first to know," I said. But we both knew I never would.

I WAITED UNTIL I WAS AT MY AFTERNOON GIG AT THE public library to reach out to the person with the two-hundred-dollar room for rent.

Of all the part-time, not-art-related gigs I'd managed to string together since getting my MFA, this one was my favorite. Not because I loved all aspects of the work, because I didn't. While it was great being around books, I worked exclusively in the children's section. I alternated between sitting behind the check-out counter, shelving books about dinosaurs and warrior cats and dragons, and answering questions from frantic parents with tantruming preschoolers in tow.

I'd always gotten along well with older kids. And I liked tiny humans as an abstract concept, understanding—in theory, at least—why a person might intentionally add one to their life. But while Sam and I definitely thought of his spoiled kitties as his children, nobody in my life had an actual *human* child yet. Dealing with little kids twenty hours a week in a public-facing service position was a rough introduction.

Working at the library was still my favorite part-time job, though, because of all the downtime that came with it. I didn't have nearly as much free time during my shifts at Gossamer's, the coffee shop near my soon-to-be-former apartment—which was the *worst* aspect of that particular job.

"Slow afternoon today," my manager Marcie quipped from her chair beside me. Marcie was a pleasant woman in her late fifties and effectively ran the children's section. It was our little inside joke to comment on how slow it was when we worked together in the afternoon, because *every* afternoon was slow here. Between the hours of one and four, most of our patrons were either napping or still in school.

It was two o'clock. Only one kid had wandered through in the past ninety minutes. Not only was that nothing noteworthy, it was par for the course.

"It *is* slow today," I agreed, grinning at her. With that, I turned to face the circulation desk computer.

Normally, library downtime was for researching potential new employers and applying for jobs. I wasn't picky. I'd apply for just about anything—even if it had nothing to do with art—if it promised better pay and more regular hours than my current cobbled-together situation.

Sometimes, I used the time to think through future art projects. I didn't have good lighting in my current apartment, which made drawing and painting the images that formed the base of my works difficult. And while I couldn't finish my projects at the library, as my paints were too messy and the final steps involved incorporating discarded objects into my work, the circulation desk was big and well-lit enough for me to at least make preliminary sketches with a pencil.

Today, though, I needed to use my downtime to reply to that red flag of a Craigslist ad. I could have replied earlier, but I didn't—partly because I was still skeptical, but mostly because a few weeks ago I'd gotten rid of Wi-Fi to save money.

I pulled up the listing on the computer. It hadn't changed in the time since I last saw it. The oddly formal style was the same. The absurd rent amount was also the same and set off as many alarm bells now as it did when I first saw it.

But my financial situation also hadn't changed. Jobs in my field were still as hard to come by. And asking Sam for help—or my accountant parents, who loved me too much to admit to my face what a disappointment I was—was just as unthinkable as ever.

And my landlord was still planning to evict me next week. Which, to be fair, I couldn't even blame him for. He'd put up with a lot of late

rent payments and art-related welding mishaps these past ten months. If I were him I'd probably evict me, too.

Before I could talk myself out of doing it, and with Sam's worried voice ringing in my ears, I opened my email. I scrolled through my inbox—an ad for a two-for-one sale at Shoe Pavilion; a headline from the *Chicago Tribune* about a bizarre string of local blood bank break-ins—and then started typing.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]

To: fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com
Subject: Your apartment listing

Hi,

I saw your ad on Craigslist looking for a roommate. My lease is up soon and your place sounds perfect. I'm a 32-year-old art teacher and have lived in Chicago for ten years. I'm a nonsmoker, no pets. You said in your ad that you aren't home much at night. As for me, I'm almost never home during the day, so this arrangement would work out well for both of us, I think.

I'm guessing you've gotten a lot of inquiries about your apartment given the location, price, and everything else. But just in case the room is still available, I've included a list of references. I hope to hear from you soon.

Cassie Greenberg

A pang of guilt shot through me over how much I'd fudged some of the important details.

For one thing, I'd just told this complete stranger that I was an art teacher. *Technically*, that was the truth. It's what I'd studied to be in college, and it isn't that I didn't *want* to teach. But in my junior year of college I fell in love with applied arts and design beyond all hope of reason, and then in my senior year I took a course where we studied Robert Rauschenberg and his method of combining paintings with

sculpture work. And that was it for me. Immediately after graduation I threw myself into an MFA in applied arts and design.

I loved every second of it.

Until, of course, I graduated. That's when I learned, in a hurry, that my artistic vision and my skill set were too niche to appeal to most school districts hiring art teachers. University art departments were more open-minded, but getting anything more stable than a temporary adjunct position at a university was like winning the lottery. I sometimes made extra cash at art shows when someone who, like me, saw a kind of ironic beauty in rusted-out Coke cans worked into seaside landscapes and bought one of my pieces. But that didn't happen often. So yes: while technically I was an art teacher, most of my income since getting my MFA had come from low-paying, part-time jobs like this one.

None of this made me sound like an appealing potential tenant. Neither did the fact that my *references* weren't former landlords—none of whom would have good things to say about me—but just Sam, Scott, and my mom. Even if I was a disappointment to my parents, they wouldn't want their only child to become homeless.

After a few moments of angsting about it, I decided it didn't matter if I'd told a few white lies. I closed my eyes and hit *send*. What was the worst that could happen? This person—a perfect stranger—would find out I'd stretched the truth and wouldn't let me move in?

I wasn't sure I wanted the apartment anyway.

I had less than ten minutes to worry about it before I got a reply.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com]

To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]

Subject: Your apartment listing

Dear Miss Greenberg,

Thank you for your kind message expressing interest in my extra room. As mentioned in the advertisement the room is appointed in

a modern but tasteful style. I believe, and have been told by others, that it is also quite spacious insofar as spare rooms are concerned. To answer your unasked question: the room remains entirely available, should you remain interested in it. Do let me know at your earliest convenience whether you would like to move in and I will have the necessary paperwork drawn up for your signature.

Yours in good health, Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

I stared at that name at the end of the email.

Frederick J. Fitzwilliam?

What kind of name was that?

I read the email again, trying to make sense of it as Marcie pulled out her phone for her daily Facebook scrolling.

So, the person listing the apartment was a guy. Or, at least, someone with a traditionally male name. That didn't faze me. If I moved in with him, Frederick wouldn't be the first guy I'd lived with since moving out of my parents' house.

What did faze me, though, was . . . everything else. The email was so strangely worded and so formal, I had to wonder exactly how old this person was. And then there was the weird assumption that I might be willing to move in sight unseen.

I tried to ignore these misgivings, reminding myself that all I really cared about was that the apartment was in decent shape and that he wasn't an axe murderer.

I needed to see the place, and meet Frederick J. Fitzwilliam in person, before making up my mind.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]
To: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com]

Subject: Your apartment listing

Hi Frederick,

I'm super glad it's still available. The description sounds great and I'd like to come see it. I'm free tomorrow around noon if that works for you. Also, could you send me a few pictures? There weren't any with the Craigslist ad, and I'd like to see some before stopping by. Thanks!

—Cassie

Once again, I had to wait only a few minutes before receiving a reply.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com]

To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]

Subject: Your apartment listing

Hello again, Miss Greenberg,

You are welcome to visit the apartment. It makes perfect sense that you would wish to see it before making your decision. I am afraid I will be indisposed tomorrow during the noon hour. Might you be free sometime after sundown? I am typically at my best during the evening hours.

Per your request, I have attached photographs of two rooms that you would likely use with frequency should you move in. The first is of my spare bedroom as it is currently decorated. (You may, of course, change the decor however you wish should you decide to live here.) The second photograph is of the kitchen. (I thought I had included both photographs when I placed the advertisement on Craigslist. Perhaps I did it incorrectly?)

Yours in good health, Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

After reading through Frederick's email I clicked on the pictures he sent me, and . . .

Whoa.

Whoa.

Okay.

I didn't know what this dude's deal was, but he *clearly* did not live in the same socioeconomic sphere as me. It was also possible we didn't live in the same century.

This kitchen wasn't just different from every other kitchen in every other place I'd ever lived.

It looked like it belonged to an entirely different era.

Nothing in it looked like it had been made within the last fifty years. The fridge was oddly shaped, sort of oval at the top and much smaller than most fridges I'd ever seen. It wasn't silver, or black, or cream—the only colors I'd ever associated with fridges—but rather a very unusual shade of powder blue.

It perfectly matched the oven beside it.

I vaguely remembered seeing appliances like these in an old colorized episode of *I Love Lucy* I saw when I was a kid. I got an odd, disoriented feeling when I tried to reconcile the idea that an ancient kitchen like this existed in a modern apartment.

So, I decided to stop trying and moved on to the picture of the bedroom. It was big, just like the Craigslist ad said. Somehow, it looked even more old-fashioned than the kitchen. The dresser was gorgeous, made of a dark wood I couldn't identify, with ornate curlicue carvings along the top and on the handles. It looked like something you might find at an antique show. The large, floral, probably homemade quilt covering the bed did, too.

As for the bed itself, it was an honest-to-god four-poster bed complete with a lacy white canopy hanging above it. The mattress was thick and looked sumptuous and comfortable.

I thought of all the shitty, secondhand furniture in my soon-to-beformer apartment. If I moved in here I could dump it all at a consignment shop.

These pictures, and the emails, suggested that while Frederick might be a lot older than me, he probably wouldn't steal all my stuff the day after I moved in.

I could handle an awkward roommate who was maybe in his seventies as long as he wasn't going to rob or kill me.

Then again, you could only tell so much from tone in an email.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com] To: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com]

Subject: Your apartment listing

Frederick,

Okay, those pictures are amazing. Your place looks great! I definitely want to see it, but I can't come by in the evening tomorrow until around 8. Is that too late? Let me know, and thanks.—Cassie

His next reply came in less than a minute.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com]

To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]

Subject: Your apartment listing

Dear Miss Greenberg,

Eight o'clock tomorrow evening works perfectly with my schedule. I will make sure to tidy up so that all looks as it should when you arrive.

Yours in good health, Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

SAM CAME BY MY APARTMENT THAT EVENING WITH A bunch of moving boxes and two venti Starbucks coffees.

"Pull up a chair," I deadpanned, gesturing to where my old secondhand La-Z-Boy used to be. I'd sold it on Facebook for thirty dollars the day before, which was about what it had been worth.

Sam smirked and gingerly spread a flattened moving box on the ground before sitting down on it cross-legged.

"Don't mind if I do," he said.

"Thanks for bringing those over," I said, nodding at the boxes. Even if I didn't end up moving into Frederick's fully furnished room, all I planned to bring with me from this place were my clothes, my art supplies, and my laptop. Just the essentials—but I still needed boxes to pack it up.

"It was no problem," Sam said. He handed me the coffee I'd asked him for. He'd said he'd get me whatever I wanted, but I'd felt guilty about asking for the pricey rainbow-colored sugar bomb I actually wanted and just asked for a plain black coffee.

"I can't wait to live someplace with Wi-Fi again," I mused, taking a sip. I winced at the bitter taste. How could anyone actually enjoy drinking coffee black? It was something I asked myself every time I worked at Gossamer's. "I miss *Drag Race*."

Sam looked affronted. "I've been keeping you posted on the winners, haven't I?"

I waved a dismissive hand. "It's not the same." Reality television had long been a guilty pleasure of mine, and Sam's dry summaries just didn't cut it. "Anyway, you're coming with me tomorrow night, right?"

"Of course," he said. "This was my idea in the first place, right?" "It *really* was."

"If you're meeting him at eight, I should pick you up around seven forty-five. Will that work?"

"Yeah. I'll be just getting off my shift at the library." The library hosted special activities for kids on Tuesday evenings, meaning it would be all hands on deck until seven-thirty. In all honesty, I loved Tuesday nights at the library. There was usually some kind of arts and crafts—related activity, and I could pretend for a little while that creating was still a significant part of my life.

I'd made a mental note to leave out my *Sesame Street*—themed *Reading Is for Winners!* T-shirt when I started packing. The library liked us to dress up for the kids on Tuesdays.

"Great," Sam said. "If I pick you up then, we'll have plenty of time to get to the apartment. Although . . ."

He trailed off and looked down at his coffee.

I recognized that worried look. "What is it?"

He hesitated. "It's . . . probably nothing. But you should know I couldn't find a *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam* earlier today when I Googled him."

I stared at him. "What?"

"Yeah." Sam sipped his coffee, looking contemplative. "If my criminal justice clinic taught me anything it's that you should never move in with someone without looking them up first. So I tried searching for him online, figuring that with a name like *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam* I'd find him in two seconds, but . . ."

He shook his head.

That ever-present knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach cinched itself a little tighter. "Nothing?"

"Nothing," Sam confirmed. "I even checked the Cook County criminal docket. There is nothing anywhere about a *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam*." He paused. "It's like he doesn't exist."

I sat there, stunned. In an age where everything about everyone was knowable with a simple two-minute internet search, how was it possible that Sam hadn't found *anything*?

"Maybe it's a fake name he's giving to people asking about the apartment," Sam suggested. "Craigslist can be creepy. Maybe he wants to stay anonymous."

That made me feel a little better. Because that sounded plausible. I thought back to a time in college when I wish I'd thought to give a fake name to someone on Craigslist. I graduated ten years ago, and the Younker College Literary Society still wouldn't leave me alone.

"Yeah," I said. "Though if he wanted to stay anonymous, why'd he bother including an email address in the post? He could have just used the anonymous email account Craigslist automatically generates for people placing ads."

Silence stretched between us as we both pondered what all this could mean, interrupted only by the muffled sound of traffic from the street outside my window.

Eventually, I leaned towards Sam and asked, "If this guy turns out to be the next Jeffrey Dahmer, promise me you'll avenge my death?"

Sam snorted. "I thought you wanted me to go with you. If he's the next Dahmer, we'll both be screwed. Also possibly dead."

I hadn't considered that. "Good point." I thought a moment. "Maybe wait in the car. I'll text you once I'm inside. If I'm not out in thirty minutes, call the police."

"Of course," Sam said, smiling again. Only this time, his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He was always terrible at hiding his concern from me. "You know, if Scott and I consolidated some of our wedding stuff, I'm sure we could make room for you until you found something more permanent."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat at his renewed offer. "Thanks," I said, meaning it. I had to avert my eyes before adding, "I'll . . . give it some thought."