

**"My favorite 'smash the patriarchy' couple."  
—Jen DeLuca, author of *Well Met***

# *The Roommate*

**An unlikely lease on love.**



**Rosie Danan**

# The Roommate



ROSIE DANAN

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*For Micah Benson.*

*You're the reason my characters get the love they deserve.*

## *chapter one*



WHEN THE MAN of her dreams ran a hand across his devastatingly handsome face and said, “I have to tell you something, and I don’t want you to freak out,” Clara Wheaton considered, for the first time, the alarming possibility that she could get dumped by someone she’d never managed to date.

She cursed her wicked ancestors as she glared at the pineapple-scented air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror of Everett Bloom’s Jeep Wrangler.

No matter how many lines she’d fed her mother’s friends back in Greenwich about “pursuing fresh career opportunities,” she’d moved across the country because part of her believed she stood a chance at winning Everett’s heart after fourteen years of pining.

“I rented my room out for the summer,” he said, the words both gentle and firm, the way someone might confess to a child that Santa wasn’t real.

“You . . . rented your room?” Clara’s response came slowly, comprehension dawning with each syllable. “The one you offered me two weeks ago?” If he hadn’t been driving, and her mother hadn’t made her memorize the etiquette of Emily Post in her adolescence, she might have lunged at him.

She’d broken the lease on her apartment in Manhattan, left behind her friends and family, and turned down a curatorial internship at the Guggenheim. All for . . . nothing?

Even compared to generations of storied Wheaton family scandals, surely this nosedive into misadventure could claim a land speed record.

The palm trees they passed along the freeway mocked her, a hallmark of the Hollywood happy ending slipping between her fingers.



She hadn't even unpacked her suitcases . . . an undigested airport pretzel still floated somewhere below her diaphragm. How could Everett already be saying good-bye?

"No, hey wait, no. I didn't rent *your* room." His signature lazy smile—the same one she'd fallen for the moment his family moved in next door all those years ago—dropped back into place. "I rented the master. The band got an offer to go on tour last minute. Nothing too wild, but we're opening for a blues band outside Santa Fe with this crazy cool sound, and Trent bought a sick van to haul the equipment . . ."

His careless words sent her straight back to high school. How many times after his social standing skyrocketed in tenth grade had Everett canceled plans with her in favor of band practice? How many times since then had he looked over her shoulder instead of into her eyes when she tried to talk to him?

No one would believe she'd earned two advanced degrees from Ivy League institutions only to end up this stupid.

"Who rented the room?" Clara interrupted his detailed description of the tour van's vintage fenders.

"What? Oh, the room. Don't worry. He's this super nice guy. Josh something. Found him on the Internet a few days ago. Very chill." He waved a hand in her general direction. "You're gonna love him."

She closed her eyes so he wouldn't see them roll toward the sunroof. No matter how many times she considered the lengths she would go to in her quest to finally win Everett Bloom's affection, she'd never imagined this.

He turned the car onto a street proudly sporting a rainbow crosswalk. "Listen, I'll drop you off and give you my keys and stuff, but then I gotta head right out. We're supposed to be in New Mexico by Friday." The last traces of apology ebbed with his words.

Clara watched his fingers, the ones she'd often imagined running through her hair in a tender caress, resume their furious beat on the steering wheel. She searched for any trace of her childhood best friend underneath his aloof veneer and came up short.

Pain burned beneath her breastbone. Somewhere in her bloodline, a Wheaton had crossed Fate, cursing his descendants to pay the price. That was the only explanation for why, the one and only time Clara had taken a leap of faith, she'd landed with a spectacular belly flop.



She dragged a deep breath into her lungs. There had to be a way to salvage this whole thing.

“How long will you be gone?” If there was one thing she’d learned from her ne’er-do-well family, it was damage control.

“Hard to say.” Everett pulled the Jeep up to a Spanish-style rancher in desperate need of a new coat of paint. “At least three months. We’ve got tour dates through August.”

“Are you sure you can’t wait a few days to leave?” She hated the note of pleading that bled into her question. “I don’t know anyone else in Los Angeles.”

A face from the past, blurry through the lens of adolescent memory, flashed through her mind before she pushed it away. “I don’t have a job here yet. Hell, I don’t even have a car.” She tried to laugh, to lighten the mood, but what came out sounded more like a grunt.

Everett frowned. “I’m sorry, Cee. I know I promised to help you get settled, but this is a huge break for the band. You get that, right?” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Look, this doesn’t have to change the plan we made. Everything I said over the phone is still true. This move, California, getting out from under your mother’s thumb . . . It’ll all be good for you.”

He held his palm out for a high five in a long-familiar gesture. They might as well have been back in homeroom cramming for the SATs. Reluctantly, she completed the unspoken request.

“L.A. is summer vacation from real life. Relax and have fun. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Fun? She wanted to scream. Fun was a luxury for people with less to lose, but like generations of Wheaton women before her, Clara resigned herself to silent fuming instead of confrontation.

If a friend had told her a week ago that they planned to move across the country and give up a better life than most people could lay claim to for a shot with a guy—even a particularly handsome guy—Clara would have invested significant energy into trying to stop them. *That’s insane*, she might have said. It’s always easy when the shoe is on the other foot. No one from Greenwich knew the consequences of an ill-conceived impulse better than a Wheaton. Unfortunately, like grain alcohol, unrequited love grows more potent with time.

Everett unloaded her bags from the back of the Wrangler and hugged her—too tight and too fast to provide much comfort. “I’ll call you from the road in a couple of days to make sure you’re settled.” He fumbled with his key ring.

Clara stared at her own hand with detachment as he pressed the small piece of metal into her palm. The urge to run, primal and nonsensical, sang under her skin.

She had two choices. She could call a cab, book a seat on the next flight back to JFK, and try to rebuild her old life, piece by piece.

Or she could stay.

Stay in this city she didn't know, live with a man she'd never met, without a job or friends, without the clout her family name commanded on the East Coast.

The Greenwich gossip hounds would salivate over her disgrace. She could already picture the headline. *No Longer "In Bloom," Careful Clara Shacks Up with Stranger.*

Not this time. She straightened her shoulders, smoothed her shirt, and ran her tongue over her teeth to ward off rogue lipstick. You only got one chance to make a first impression.

The heavy thump of Everett's car stereo pounded in her ears as he pulled out, but Clara didn't turn to watch him drive away.

Paint peeled back from the faded door when she pressed her palm against it. *Damn.* The society pages were going to have a field day with this one.

Bracing herself, Clara entered her new home the way soldiers enter enemy territory: with light footsteps, eyes mapping the terrain, and elbows tucked tight against her body.

Plush carpet muted her heeled sandals as she surveyed the living room. Without rose-colored glasses crafted by over a decade of repressed lust, the space left much to be desired.

She ran a fingertip through the blanket of dust coating a bookcase in the corner. An odor of decay wafted from abandoned take-out containers littering the coffee table. Clara tried to inhale through her mouth.

Underneath her foot, something crunched. Kicking up her heel, she identified the remains of a potato chip.

Despite the stench and the mess, the little house radiated a retro coziness that stood in direct contrast to both her family's sprawling colonial in Connecticut and the cramped Morningside Heights walk-up she'd rented near campus.

The faded wallpaper exuded kitschy charm, fighting for her affection, but she couldn't shake the crushing weight of her disappointment. Clara wiped off the seat of the sofa before sitting down.

"So this is how it feels to be well and truly fucked."

"I get that a lot," said a low voice behind her.

Clara sprang to her feet so fast she stumbled. "Oh . . . um . . . Hello." She scrambled to stand behind her massive wheeled suitcase, creating a fifty-pound shield between her and the man standing in the doorway separating the kitchen and the living room.

He leaned against the door frame. "I don't suppose you're robbing me?"

When Clara frowned in confusion, he gestured to her ensemble.

She lowered her chin and scrutinized the sleeveless black turtleneck and matching skinny jeans she'd picked out that morning. Some time in her midtwenties, she'd traded the Argyle and houndstooth of her youth for a closet full of well-tailored monotone basics. Unfortunately, it seemed black clothing, while widely considered slimming and chic in New York City, was the preferred attire of home intruders in Los Angeles.

"Er . . . no." Clara tugged at her collar, glad, in retrospect, that she'd suffered the indignity of touching up her makeup in the tiny airplane bathroom while one of her fellow passengers pounded on the door. "I'm Clara Wheaton," she said when silence lingered.

"Josh." He closed the distance between them, offering her a handshake. "Nice to meet you."

When their hands came together, she inspected his fingernails as a bellwether for his personal hygiene habits. Neat and trim. *Thank goodness.*

After five seconds, Josh raised an eyebrow and Clara released his hand with a sheepish smile.

Despite his impressive height and the fact that his shoulders had filled most of the door frame, she didn't find him intimidating. His rumpled clothes and the mop of overgrown blond curls suggested he'd just rolled out of bed. Striking dark brows should have cast him as surly, but the rest of his face resisted brooding.

He was cute but not quite handsome. Not like Everett, whose mere presence still made her speech falter after all these years. Clara accepted this small form of mercy from the universe. She'd always found it impossible to talk to handsome men.

"Nice to meet you," she echoed, adding, "Please don't murder or molest me," as an afterthought.

"You got it." He raised both hands in a helpless gesture. "So . . . I guess that means we'll be living together?"

“For the time being.” At least long enough for her to develop a contingency plan.

Josh peered into the open door of the bathroom. “Where’s Everett? He didn’t stick around to get you settled?”

Clara’s shoulders crept toward her ears. “The band needed to get on the road right away.”

“Pretty crazy, huh? Them getting invited to tour last minute?”

“Yeah.” She fought to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“Wild.”

“Worked out for me, though. I couldn’t believe the lowball rent Everett asked for on a place this nice.”

Clara decided not to mention that Everett had inherited the house, free and clear, from his grandfather and likely only charged enough to cover the taxes. She massaged her temples, trying to ward off a monstrous headache. Whether it came from stress, jet lag, or dying dreams, she couldn’t say.

The longer she stood in this house, the more real the nightmare became. She sat back down on the couch when her vision swam.

“Hey, are you okay?” Her new roommate came to kneel in front of her, the way adults do when they want to speak to a small child. Clara glanced away from where his thighs strained the seams of his jeans.

He had a spattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. She focused on the one at the very center and spoke to it. “I’m fine. Just reckoning with the consequences of a multigenerational family curse. Pretend I’m not here.”

You’d think decades of old money and carefully monitored good breeding would weed out the Wheatons’ notorious inclination toward destructive behavior, but if the recent arrest of her brother, Oliver, was anything to go by, the longer their lineage grew, the grimmer the consequences of their behavioral missteps.

Comparatively, she’d gotten off easy with an old house and a broken heart.

Josh wrinkled his forehead. “Um, if you say so. Oh, hey, wait here a minute.”

As if she had anywhere else to go.

“I think I’ve got something that might help.” He strode into the kitchen and returned a moment later to press a cold can of beer into her hands. “Sorry I don’t have anything stronger.”

Clara wasn’t much of a beer drinker. But at this point, it couldn’t hurt. She popped the top and took a deep slug. “Blech.” Why did men insist on pretending IPAs tasted good? She dropped

her head between her knees and employed a deep-breathing technique she'd observed once when accompanying her cousin to Lamaze class.

"Hey . . . uh . . . you're not gonna toss your cookies, right?"

Bile rose in the back of her throat at the suggestion. This guy was about as helpful as every other man she knew. "Perhaps you could say something reassuring?"

After a few seconds, he blew out a breath. "Your body destroys and replaces all of its cells every seven years."

Clara sat up slowly. "Okay, well"—she pursed her lips—"you tried. Thanks," she said with dismissal.

"I read that in a magazine at the dentist's office." He shot her a weak smile. "Thought it was kinda nice. I figure it means no matter how bad we mess up, eventually we get a clean slate."

"So you're telling me in seven years, I'll forget the fact that I uprooted my entire life and moved across the country because a guy who's not even my boyfriend encouraged me to, and I quote, 'follow my bliss'?"

"Right. Scientifically speaking, yes."

He had nice eyes. Big and brown, but not dull. They looked warm, like they'd spent time simmering over an open flame. *Cute but not handsome*, she reminded herself.

"Well, okay. I was expecting a banal detail about your job, to be honest. But not bad for off the top of your head." She wiped her hand across her mouth and handed him back the beer.

"Somehow I don't think hearing about my job would reassure you." He took a long sip from her discarded can.

Guess that answered the question of whether Josh was the kind of roommate who would eat her leftovers. "You're not a mortician, are you?"

He shook his head. "I work in the entertainment industry."

*Figures.* Clara immediately lost interest. The last thing she needed was some wannabe filmmaker asking her to read his screenplay.

Josh gave her a blatant once-over. "You're not what I expected."

*Well, that makes two of us, buddy.*

She'd expected to live with Everett. She'd pictured the two of them cooking dinners together, their shoulders touching as they worked side by side. She'd imagined watching action movies deep into the night like they did back when they were thirteen, only this

time instead of separate sofas they'd curl up together under a shared blanket with glasses of wine.

This house should have set the scene for their love story. Everett should have written a song in that window seat inspired by their first kiss.

Instead, she got to share a toilet with a stranger.

Clara stood up and shook off her unfulfilled wishes. "What do you mean?"

"I'm surprised a girl like you"—he gestured to her Louis Vuitton luggage—"would slum it with a roommate in a place like this."

Clara gathered her dark hair over one shoulder and smoothed the tresses. "I received the luggage as a gift from my grandmother." She lowered her eyes to the carpet. "I took the room because I'm between jobs at the moment." The lie sat sour on her tongue and she quickly swerved back into truth territory. "I've known Everett forever. When I graduated a few weeks ago he offered me his spare room."

"Oh. A graduate, huh? What were you studying?"

"I recently completed my doctorate in art history," she said with as much bravado as she could muster. As a kid, she'd dreamed about making work of her own, but eventually, she'd realized art required exposing parts of herself she'd rather keep hidden—her hopes and fears, her passions and yearning. Analysis and curation let her keep art at arm's length while using school as a way to extend the exit ramp to adulthood.

Josh smirked. "Is that like a special degree they only give out to rich people?"

Clara ground her teeth so hard she thought she heard a pop. "Let's keep the interpersonal chitchat to a minimum, shall we?"

She grabbed her purse and hunted for her move-in checklist, finding it buried underneath her airplane pillow and first-aid kit. Clara had compiled the six-page document to include all manner of questions and instructions on what to look for to know whether a new home was up to code in Los Angeles. Holding the document made breathing a little easier.

When she looked up, Josh hadn't left. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but frankly, Everett didn't tell me he had to go out of town until right now, and no offense, I'm sure you're probably nice, but this"—she gestured to the space between them—"falls a little outside my comfort zone."

"Hey, me too." He put his hand to his heart. "I've seen a lot of made-for-TV movies, you know. You're exactly the kind of pint-

sized, tightly wound socialite who goes crazy and paints the walls with chicken blood. How do I know I'm safe from *you*?"

Clara cocked her hip and stared at the over-six-foot man across from her. His threadbare T-shirt, featuring a vintage picture of Debbie Harry, barely obscured his muscular chest and broad shoulders. "You're honestly worried about me?"

His eyes sank to the move-in checklist in her hand. "Oh my God. Is that laminated?" He looked positively delighted.

"My mother got me a machine last Christmas," she told him defensively as he took it from her for further inspection. "It prevents smudging."

He pitched his head back and laughed. A loud rumble without a trace of mocking in it. "Check the water pressure on all taps for inconsistency," he read from the sheet. "This is too good. Did you write this yourself?"

"California is known for its propensity toward forest fires. You have to document pre-move-in conditions to arm yourself for possible insurance claims. The smoke damage alone—"

He laughed some more in what she deemed a rather overblown display of mirth.

Clara snatched back the sheet. "Should we discuss some house rules?"

Josh's eyes twinkled. "Like no parties on school nights?"

"You're right. *Rules* sounds a bit aggressive. I'm thinking more along the lines of guidelines for harmonious cohabitation. We might as well make the best of a bad situation."

Josh straightened up. "Of course. I'm afraid you'll need to make the first rule, though. I'm out of practice."

"Well, for instance, Everett mentioned a while back that the lock on the bathroom door doesn't work. So until we can have that fixed, I suggest we employ a three-knock strategy."

"Why three?"

"It would be easy to miss one or two knocks . . ." She spoke to the beat-up coffee table. "If you were in the shower, for example."

"Well, we wouldn't want that, certainly."

She looked up to find his whole body changed with the tilt of his lips. Goose bumps broke out across Clara's arms despite the balmy June afternoon. Josh had some kind of magnetism she hadn't noticed before. Even when she went and stood behind the couch, putting a physical barrier between them, her body hummed *closer, closer, closer*.



“Hey, listen. You don’t need to guard your virtue from me, okay?” Josh dropped the charm like someone shrugging out of a jacket. He must have noticed that the energy between them had shifted from playful to something meatier.

“I’m taken, so you’ve got nothing to worry about. I’m only living here until I can convince my ex-girlfriend to let me move back in. She’s a tough nut, but I’m sure I’ll be able to wear her down in a week or two, and then I’ll be out of your hair for good.” He broke the news in the practiced gentle tone of someone used to getting people’s hopes up and having to let them down easy.

“Oh,” Clara said, and then as she caught his meaning, “No.” She crossed her hands in an X. He had the wrong idea. Obviously. She wanted Everett. Had loved him almost as long as she could remember. She didn’t even know this guy with his ripped jeans and his bedhead. “Of course not. I didn’t think that you’d want to . . .” She waved a hand down her body and stuck out her tongue in disgust.

His eyes followed the path she’d tracked. “Wait a second. I didn’t mean I wouldn’t want to under different circumstances. You’re very . . .” He held his hands out in front of his chest like he was assessing the weight of a pair of overripe melons.

Clara’s eyes went wide.

“Oh God. I can’t believe I did that. I’m sorry. I just meant that you . . . um . . . what’s a respectful way to say . . .” He put his hands back up.

Blood rushed to her face. “I got it.”

“Right. Sorry. Again.” He shook his whole body like a wet dog. “Besides, I thought for sure you and Everett were a thing. The way he talked about you, it definitely sounded like you two had history.”

At the mention of her beloved, the faded bruises on her heart bloomed anew and throbbed. She didn’t know how much to share without seeming pathetic. She and Everett certainly had history, even if the romantic part was one-sided.

Something in the earnest set of Josh’s brows gave Clara the impression he could handle more than the sugarcoated version of her past with Everett—more than the BS stories she’d given her friends and family back east, so they wouldn’t judge her or worry about her rash decision to up and move.

For some reason, she found herself spilling her guts to this unkempt stranger. “Everett and I grew up together. Despite living on different coasts for almost ten years, we’ve kept in touch with

phone calls and visits. I don't know if you got to know him at all, but he's this amazing mix of sweet and smart and funny—"

"And he encouraged you to drop everything and move out here only to abandon you the first chance he got?" Josh arched an eyebrow.

Clara took a step back. The truth stung. "That's not exactly what happened. I know how this looks." She lowered her voice, embarrassed at how she'd let it climb in volume. "But when Everett called a couple of weeks ago and painted this picture of life in L.A., all sunsets and ocean air and people who don't have to wear mouth guards at night because they can't stop stress-grinding their teeth . . ."

A dimple appeared in Josh's left cheek.

"I know it sounds stupid, but it seemed like a sign or something. This felt like my chance. At love, adventure, happily ever after, the whole Hallmark thing."

"Let me get this straight. You, a woman who created a laminated move-in checklist, made a huge life-altering decision based on a hazy sign from the universe?"

Clara shrugged. "Haven't you ever done something stupid to impress someone you liked?"

Josh plopped down on the sofa, propped his feet on the coffee table, and crossed them at the ankles. "No. Never."

"I think you mean 'Not yet.'" Clara grabbed the handles of her rolling suitcases. "So which one of these bedrooms is mine?"