

THE ROOMMATE

Everyone knows roommates are risky. They eat all your food, steal your clothes, and leave smelly running shoes in your kitchen. Nope, I didn't much like the idea of having a roommate. My best friend, Quentin Pearson, agreed. "Jenna, roommates always lead to trouble," he said in his haughty English accent, adding, "They usually don't pay their bills, will run up your heat, and bang nails into your walls. Think about it, love."

The problem was I wanted to keep my house which was tucked in woods of north Georgia. It was the home Michael and I had bought after we'd married three years earlier. Now we were divorced, and I didn't want to leave my little abode. My meager income as an office manager for a local shrink barely covered my mortgage let alone food and other minor details.

Last Thursday Blaze appeared at my door saying she'd noticed my house and wondered if I might be interested in selling it. I told her no, but I might consider a roommate and invited her inside. She was dressed in a denim skirt and blouse, carried a large black shoulder bag, and wore work boots. She looked about my age, twenty-six or thereabouts. Her long straw colored hair had a straggly sheen to it, and her small hazel eyes darted as she spoke. She told me she was completing a degree in philosophy at the

University of Georgia and wanted a place to live. I liked her matter-of-fact way of talking. She seemed to be a woman who knew what she wanted. When I asked how she felt about living in the country--my house was about twenty miles from town and ten miles from civilization in general— she responded, “I like privacy.”

We worked out a deal and she moved in the next day.

Twenty-four hours later I began having doubts about my choice for a roommate. Riding down the two-lane to do my Saturday morning grocery shopping while odors from the nearby hog farm drifted my way, I kicked myself for agreeing to let a stranger into my house. She'd moved in while I was at work, and I hadn't seen her since. Last night I decided she was exhausted after the move and of course, she said she wanted privacy. So, I left her alone in her room where she stayed, quiet as a monk. I assumed she'd gone to sleep. This morning I was quite surprised to find her door locked. Okay, I didn't expect or want a Chatty Cathy for a roommate, but I also didn't want a hermit.

Mell's Grocery buzzed with its typical Saturday morning clientele. Mrs. Marsden, the owner of Betty's Beauty Shop, was standing at the checkout counter talking to Mell. I spotted other regulars, but I quickly gathered my week's selection of Lean Cuisine dinners, a loaf of wheat

bread, peanut butter, milk, and several cans of Friskies Buffet (seafood only for Oscar, my finicky feline). I piled the groceries into the trunk of my car and headed back. When I pulled up the gravel drive to my house, I noticed Blaze's car had disappeared. How was I supposed to get to know this person if I never saw her? Maybe she expected us to live as if we inhabited rooms in a large apartment complex. We'd come and go, lock our doors, and mumble "good morning" if we accidentally stumbled across one another. I wasn't sure I could deal with that.

After I unloaded and packed away the groceries, I went to Blaze's door. It was closed, and much to my amazement she had attached a new, shiny, make-shift lock. There must be some sort of fire code prohibiting such behavior, I thought, with a frustrated shrug.

Moments later, after I changed into my jogging clothes, a knock rapped on my front door. My closest neighbor, a middle-aged woman, who lived a quarter mile down the road, stood at my threshold with a loaf of her famous banana bread in hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Hudson," I said. My stomach growled uncontrollably in reaction to the bread's sweet aroma. "Please come in?"

She entered and handed me the bread wrapped in foil and still warm. "I made an extra loaf or two," she said as if the gift needed an apology.

I thanked her.

"I won't stay but a minute," she said, walking into the living room and sitting down. "Just wanted to make sure you were okay, being on your own and all. Harry told me to come by." She smelled of nutmeg and Wind Song perfume.

I sat down across from her on a stiff director's chair, and began straightening the newspapers and magazines that cluttered the coffee table and the floor. "I'm fine," I assured her.

"We saw someone wandering around your house this morning and thought you might need something." She looked away, embarrassed. Country people liked to respect each other's privacy. Snooping on a neighbor was definitely a no-no.

"You saw someone wandering around my house? Where?"

"Near the pond, you know. By the fence." My house faced a small pond. The fence to the left bordered the Hudson's land.

"Hunters?" I'd posted my property, but that didn't prevent some redneck from staking out a portion of my land for his murderous hobby.

“No, it was a girl. She seemed to be looking for something.” Mrs. Hudson rubbed her hands over her jeans-clad legs. Barking dogs filled the momentary silence. “She was hunched up, bent toward the ground.”

Blaze? “Was she blonde?”

“Yeah.”

I smiled, relieved. “That’s my new roommate. Her name’s Blaze Dickens. She moved in yesterday.”

Mrs. Hudson swallowed, taking in this new piece of information. “I see,” she said, rising.

I rose, too. “I’ll ask Blaze what she was doing near the pond. She probably just took a walk this morning. Maybe she was searching for four-leafed clovers. I do appreciate your concern, though.”

Mrs. Hudson seemed to hesitate. She ran her hand over her short-cropped, mud-colored hair. “Did you say she just moved in?”

I nodded.

“Uh, this probably doesn’t mean anything, but, well. . .” She paused. “We’ve seen her before.”

I was silent, but I must have looked surprised.

"I'm sure it was the same girl. I wanted to come to you then, but Harry told me to mind my own business." The scowl lines between her eyes deepened. "We try not to meddle."

"When did you see her?"

She shrugged. "I'd say about a month ago. She was there, by the pond, crawling around, not actually crawling, but squatting as if she didn't want anyone to see her. At first glance I thought she was, well, someone I might have known." She paused and looked away. "It was her yellow hair that struck me, like Harry's when he was young. I could only see her head. You say this girl moved in with you?"

"Yesterday," I confirmed. "So you see it couldn't have been Blaze you saw."

"Oh, it was the same girl all right." Mrs. Hudson spoke with a certainty that defied debate. She meandered down my front steps, smiling a pinkish-toothy grin. "Just call us if you need anything, Jenna."

I thanked her again for the bread and watched her walk away. She paused when she got near the pond and looked off in the distance as if she was trying to recall something.

What Mrs. Hudson said didn't make sense. Whatever she saw a month ago couldn't be connected to Blaze. Maybe a fisherman had come to

use the pond, maybe a blond fisherman. There were any number of explanations. Nonetheless I decided to ask Blaze about it when and if I ever saw her.

Feeling like a martyr, I resisted the pull of the banana bread and exited out the back door for my three-mile run. Quentin would be so proud of me. He nagged me endlessly about exercising. I tended take my physical health in spurts. If the weather was wonderful, I ran. If not, well. . . Today, the sun gleamed through the limbs of the trees, and the sky was so bright it nearly hurt to look at it. Small pink and white buds appeared on the wild azaleas and dogwood trees. I usually ran through the woods on a trail toward the road. Today, though, I sidetracked along the pond. Maybe I'd hit upon some clue that might explain what Mrs. Hudson saw or thought she saw.

The field grass around the pond grew to about three feet high, not too conducive to running. I slowed to a walk. A rabbit scampered up the hill and two squirrels raced after it. The smell of honeysuckle caught my attention. From this vantage point I plainly spotted the Hudson's front porch. I almost lifted my hand to wave, knowing they'd probably be watching me. I squatted down, but all I could see was the underside of the Hudson's house. Birds fluttered high up in the trees. The grass at one edge

looked matted down as if someone had been sitting there, but the person would have been too far from the pond to fish. I could think of no reason for anyone to sit perched here, gazing at the underbelly of my neighbor's house. After a few minutes, I gave up and continued up the hill and onto the road.

At nearly 6 o'clock the front door open. I'd already eaten half a Stouffer's frozen lasagna and was in the living room sprawled out on the couch.

Blaze sauntered in. She was still wearing the denim skirt and blouse I'd seen her in when I met her. I wondered if she owned any other clothes. There was dry mud on her boots.

"Hi," I greeted her, hoping she'd sit with me. "I've already eaten, but there's more lasagna in the fridge if you want some."

"No, thanks."

She turned and was about to enter her room when I said, "Did you take a walk this morning?"

She stopped and glared at me. "No."

A chill ran down my spine as if the devil had touched me. I shook the feeling off. "My neighbors thought they saw you."

"What neighbors?"

“An older couple who live on the other side of the pond. They kind of watch out for me, sorta treat me like a daughter. They never had any children of their own. Anyway, they thought they saw someone. I just assumed it was you. But apparently they thought they saw someone about a month ago, too. Must’ve been their imagination.”

She continued to eye me. Her eyes looked hard, icy. She blinked as if to come back from wherever she’d been, turned, unlocked her door, and entered her room. Oscar tried to beat her through the closed door, but he didn’t make it. A moment later the lock clicked behind her.

Good grief. A shudder ran through my body. Had I said something to offend her? This was one weird lady.

That night I tossed and turned. The moon shone like a spotlight through my bedroom window. A creak sounded on the staircase. Oscar lifted his head in the direction of the noise. Another creak echoed along with the sound of a footstep. Moments later Blaze appeared at the entrance to my bedroom door. She stood in the dark, not moving. I didn’t budge. Oscar stayed on the edge of my bed with his ears raised, alert. My heart thundered in my chest. Mom’s ancient grandfather clock chimed downstairs-- one, two, three. Blaze stepped toward my bed. Her golden hair gleamed where the moonlight flickered from the window. Oscar let

out a low growl. Finally, she stepped back from my door and crept down the stairs. After she left, I realized I had been holding my breath.

The next day, I met Quentin, for a drink. I told him about Blaze.

"I don't like it one bit," Quentin said. "Why'd she slither into your room in the dead of night?"

"Maybe she got scared. It's awfully quiet out in the country. All you can hear for miles are the whippoorwills."

Quentin started to protest.

"Or maybe she's a sleep walker. Who knows?" I shrugged, not wanting Quentin to know how frightened I'd been last night; besides there probably was a simple explanation.

Quentin shook his head in disgust and drank from his beer. "You're making excuses, Jenna. She sounds blimey to me. Why does she lock her door like that? She's hiding something."

"She said she likes privacy." My Chardonnay tasted bitter.

"Living with you isn't the best place in the world for privacy, now is it, love?" Quentin was referring to my notorious bent for curiosity. I was always getting into trouble, sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

"What should I do? Ask her to leave."

He fiddled with the pierced earring in his right ear. "I would."

Quentin took another drink from his beer and eyed a nice-looking man dressed in a dark suit, who sauntered up to the bar. Quentin shot me a sheepish grin when he saw me watching him stare at the man.

“Or,” I added with a smile, “you could move in with me.”

Quentin giggled. “What would the Hudson’s make of that?” He paused as if considering the prospect.

“Yeah, it’d definitely cramp your style, too. No new lover every other week.”

“Hey, I thought we were talking about you and your daft roommate.” He turned back to the man at the bar with a sniff.

“Don’t tell me Stephen’s moving out.” Stephen was Quentin’s latest lover. This one had only lasted three weeks.

“I knew it was a mistake in the first place.” He swallowed the rest of his beer. “So what are you going to do about this Blaze chick?”

“If only I could get into her room.”

“Don’t you dare.”

I winked at him and drank more wine.

“For God sakes, Jenna, it’s none of your business. Just tell her to leave.”

When I arrived home, Blaze's car was parked in the drive, and she, I presumed, was locked in her room.

I ate a peanut butter sandwich and crawled into bed. For the first time since I lived in that house, I latched my bedroom door. Sometime later I awoke to a strange sound. I rose and peered out the window. A dark shadow moved across the backyard and an owl hooted from somewhere in the large oak tree. I plopped down on my pillows and stared at the ceiling. Oscar scratched at the closed door to get out. I released the animal and walked downstairs. The clock read 4:15 a.m.

No sounds came from Blaze's room. I knocked but didn't really expect an answer. If Blaze were there, surely she'd be sound asleep. After a few minutes I returned to my bed, lay there for quite some time before finally drifting off to a fitful sleep.

On my way to work that same morning, I noticed Patty, the Hudson's chocolate lab, scratching at their gate. She was locked outside. I stopped, opened the gate, and admitted the animal who showed her appreciation by licking my leg.

I walked up to the Hudson's house to let them know I had admitted their dog. I knocked. No answer.

“Mrs. Hudson,” I called through the screen window. She was usually there or out back somewhere.

Having been in charge of Patty when the Hudson’s made their annual trip to the touristy alpine village, Helen Georgia, each October, I retrieved the spare key under the flower pot in their carport and opened the house. There I found Mr. and Mrs. Hudson, sitting on their thread-bare couch, hand-in-hand, heads slumped and blood dripping from their mouths. Three china tea cups sat on the coffee table in front of them as if awaiting a leisurely breakfast. I stared momentarily at Mr. Hudson’s neatly pressed pajama shirt and Mrs. Hudson’s white terry robe. No one had to tell me they were dead. A small photo rested on the table. I recognized the child in the picture and raced out the door.

Once in my car I called the Jackson County police then I returned to my house.

While waiting for help to arrive, I located a screwdriver and a small knife and fiddled with the lock on Blaze’s door. I’d never broken into a room before, but this didn’t look too difficult. Surely the lock would give with the right amount of jiggling. My hands trembled while I worked. I kept glancing around for Blaze. Her car remained where she’d left it the day before, but no sound came from her room.

Ten minutes later the lock gave way and I entered. Her bed was made and looked as though she'd never slept in it. The closet was empty. No suitcase, no boxes of books, nothing. The bathroom, spotless. When I peered around more carefully, I found one of the pine floorboards scratched and loosened. With the screwdriver, I pried the board upward. Underneath, I found a small stationery box full of yellowing photos. A young child with long blond hair appeared in each snapshot except one. In that one a twenty-something couple stood hand in hand. The woman in the picture had a sad smile, her mud-colored hair uncombed; the man's corn-silk blond hair was slicked down, but an unruly cowlick stood out on the right side, something Mr. Hudson had never lost.

It didn't take the police long to find Blaze. She was floating face down in my pond. She'd apparently drowned herself right after she murdered the Hudson's. She was still wearing the denim skirt and blouse and carrying the large black shoulder bag which I later learned contained a .32 caliber pistol.

I showed the police the box with the pictures inside. Later they discovered that Blaze was the Hudson's natural daughter. She'd been given up for adoption right after her birth. According to neighbors and friends who knew Blaze's adopted family, the child often appeared with

welts on her arms and legs. But she was always quiet, well-behaved, and kept to herself.

As for me, I sold my house.