

Chapter 1

I take pride in the fact that I'm smart about people. With one look, I can tell whether a person is going to be cool or a jerk. Take my father, for example. His droopy eyes and mouth tell you that the guy's a loser, a quitter. It was obvious that he was the type to leave his family. My mom should have seen it coming.

So when I first met my college roommate, I was really disappointed. His name was Darryl. He had beady little eyes and thin lips. I thought he was self-centered and sneaky. And probably a creep. But that wasn't even half the story.

Darryl stood at the door to our student apartment. He had a gym bag in one hand.

And a large backpack was slung over one shoulder. He brought the bag inside and set it down.

“Here. Let me help you with that backpack,” I said.

“No!” he shouted.

“Okay, okay.” I backed off.

“My name is Darryl,” he said.

“I’m Nick.” I reached out to shake his hand, but he just looked at me.

“I’m glad to be with you. You are a safe person,” he finally said.

A safe person? What an odd thing to say.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Russia,” he said.

“You’re a long way from home. Is Darryl your real name?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t be able to pronounce my real name,” he said. Then he smiled at me. “I am glad we are going to the same university.”

I’d like it better if I had another

roommate. But then I thought about my mom. “Give people a chance,” she says. So I asked him if he wanted to get something to eat. But Darryl said he wasn’t hungry. That was fine with me.

Earlier that day, I’d met a nice guy named Mike. We’re both studying computer animation. Maybe I’d run into him.

That night I had a weird dream. Darryl had this strange contraption. It was made up of wires and tubes. He was speaking into it, using some strange language. It didn’t sound like Russian to me.



It was the next morning. Darryl was gone before I woke up. He must have had an early class. I was thinking how nice it was to have the place to myself. That’s when there was a knock on the door. It was a girl. The first thing that caught my eye was her long, bronzed legs. She also had a wide forehead,

which I associate with being honest. Her eyes were a deep, warm brown. I knew she was someone special.

“I’m Kara,” she said. “I’m from the apartment building across the way. Would you mind if I came in for a few minutes? I need to borrow your window.”

“The window?” I asked as she came in and walked past me. “Sure. Come right on in,” I said sarcastically.

She set down a bag full of tools. “I’m just going to drill a hole in the wall of the building outside your window. Is that okay? I’m setting up a clothesline,” she said.

“Is that allowed?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said. “It’s part of living green. The school encourages students to line-dry their clothes rather than use an excess of energy.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her. “You’re not from around here, are you?” I asked.

“No. I’m from Arizona,” she said.
“Why?”

“That explains your nice tan, plus the fact that you’re totally insane.” I laughed. “I can’t imagine putting up a clothesline in the foggiest city in the country. It’ll take your clothes a month to dry. But what the heck. It’s still a great idea.”

“Why would you say that if you don’t think it’ll work?” she asked.

“Because without the clothesline, you never would have knocked on my door. And now we can get to know each other.”

“Wow! You don’t waste any time,” she said with a smile. She had a great smile.

Kara showed me how the clothesline device worked. There were two plastic casings that held either end of a cable. A casing would be mounted to the building outside each of our windows. First we mounted the casing on my side.

“Now I just have to do the same thing on my side,” she said.

“How are you going to get the cable from one building to the other?”

“I’ll hold one end and toss the other end to you,” she said. “The buildings aren’t that far apart. It’s only about fifteen feet.”

“Have you got a good arm? It’s three stories down if you miss,” I said.

“I won’t miss,” she said confidently. Then she went to her apartment.

A few minutes later, I saw her open her window and wave. “Ready?” she called out.

“Ready,” I said.

Then she tossed her end of the cable, and it sailed through my window. In fact, it landed right in my hands. “Perfect,” I called out to her.

“Of course,” she said. Then she came back to my apartment.

“Now, that’s a clothesline,” I said. “We should celebrate. Let’s see. I have bottled

water and ...” I looked around. “And granola bars,” I said as I grabbed a box off the kitchen table.

“Don’t you have some studying to do?” Kara asked with a grin.

“Yeah. But it can wait,” I said. “Right now I want to know everything about you. Your major. What you like to do for fun. And most important, why you came all the way to San Francisco for school.”

At that moment Darryl came in. When he saw Kara there, he looked alarmed. Then he turned to me. “She must leave here. She is not a safe person,” he said in a low voice.

“Are you out of your mind?” I said.

“Excuse me?” Kara said to Darryl.

“Please,” Darryl insisted. He looked like he was about to panic.

“Take it easy,” I told him. “Maybe you’re the one who needs to leave.” What a jerk. I was going to throw him out. But when I grabbed his shoulder, a shock ran through

my fingers and up my arm. “Ow!” I yelled.

“What did he do?” Kara asked.

Darryl gave me a pitiful, pleading look. In a few moments the pain had faded from my hand and arm. I stared at him, wondering if I’d imagined the shock. “Let’s get out of here,” I said to Kara.

We went to her apartment.

“Why did you let that guy push you around?” Kara asked.

“I felt sorry for him,” I said.

“I think he might be unstable,” Kara said. “You should think about getting a new roommate.”

“Maybe I should give him a chance,” I said. “I don’t really know him yet.”

She leaned closer to me. “If you wait, he might do something even crazier,” she said.

“You might be right,” I said.

By the time I got back to my apartment, I’d decided to take Kara’s advice. I would call student housing and ask for another

roommate. But Darryl seemed to be reading my mind. I hadn't been there five minutes when he begged me to let him stay.

"I'm sorry to make you miserable," he said. "But please don't make me go. I will have to be leaving soon anyway."

He looked so anxious and sad that I felt myself giving in. "Really? Why?" I asked.

"I have family problems," he said. He stood up and grabbed his backpack. "I have to go now. I'll see you later."

It was nice having the place to myself all morning. I called Kara and asked her if she wanted to hang out tomorrow. She was such a cool girl. I knew we'd have a lot of fun together.

I was just starting my homework when there was a knock on the door. There were two serious-looking guys in suits. They looked like brothers.

"We're campus security," one of them said. "We're looking for Darryl."

While he was talking, the other guy went over to Darryl's bag. "One of the professors is missing some important papers," he said. "They're in a black backpack. Have you seen anything like that around here?"