



Forget  
this ever  
Happened

*by Philip K. Dick Award-Nominated Author*

**CASSANDRA  
ROSE CLARKE**

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CASSANDRA ROSE CLARKE

“[A] trippy, twisty SF mystery...  
Original and compelling.” —*Booklist*

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*For Rozi Ayers, lover of the real-life Indianola*

## CHAPTER

# One

## CLAIRE

Claire climbs out of the back seat of her parents' car and stands on a cracked driveway surrounded by brown grass. The air smells of oil refineries and dead fish. After a moment's hesitation, she shoulders her backpack like a soldier preparing for war.

Her mother has already pulled Claire's suitcase out of the trunk. She leans against the car and squints at the squat, pink brick house waiting at the end of the drive. "You'll have fun," she says. "Living on the beach."

"We're not on the beach."

"You're close enough." A pause. "Grammy says my old bike is still in the garage. It's only about a ten-minute ride."

Claire doesn't answer. She assumes time has distorted her mother's memory. There's nothing about this house, with its peeling shutters and straggly flowerbed and patches of bare soil, that suggests the beach.

Claire's mother walks up to the front door and rings the bell. In the shade of the porch, she pushes her sunglasses up on her forehead. Claire hangs back in the hot sun. Her mother doesn't look like she belongs here: She's too sleek, too polished, too fashionable. And yet

*here* is exactly where she grew up. Twenty years ago, Claire's mother bounded down that sidewalk and rode her bicycle through the shabby little town of Indianola and lived, in one way or another, an entire childhood and adolescence. Claire can hardly imagine it.

The door swings open. Behind the screen, Grammy's face appears, powdery with makeup. She still wears her hair like it's the sixties.

"You're late," she says.

"There was a wreck on the highway." Claire's mother taps her foot. "Could you let us in? It's sweltering out here."

Claire knows it won't be any cooler inside. The house was built before air-conditioning, and Grammy never bothered to install it because Grammy never bothers with anything that would bring her into 1993.

Grammy unlatches the screen and retreats into the potpourri-scented darkness. Claire's mother pushes her way in first, quick and impatient—Claire knows she gave up her Saturday to drive her down to Indianola, and she's probably thinking of all the household chores she needs to take care of, all the work she brought home with her from the real estate office. Claire follows her in, down the narrow hallway, into the living room. It's like stepping into a cave. The curtains are drawn tight over the windows and the air is hot, like Claire expected. Stuffy. A metal fan rotates in the corner, casting an arc of moving air that's not nearly wide enough to encompass the whole room.

"I'm going to put you up in the blue room." Grammy shuffles over to her chair and collapses into it. Her skin is pale beneath her makeup, and there are dark circles under her eyes that Claire has never seen before. "That was always your favorite, wasn't it?"

“Sure.” Claire is lying; she’s never had a favorite room. Her family usually stays at the Days Inn when they visit Grammy. It has air-conditioning.

“Let’s drop off your things. I really want to get back on the road by two o’clock.” Claire’s mother bustles down the hallway. Grammy watches from her chair, her glasses reflecting the light of the floor lamp. She doesn’t offer to help because she can’t help. That’s the entire reason Claire is here: Her grandmother is sick with some sort of chronic disease that leaves her constantly exhausted. She insisted that Claire stay with her this summer, even when Claire’s mother offered to scrape together the money to hire a live-in nurse.

The door to the blue room is the only one open in the hallway, and the room itself looks as it always has. Dusty sheer blue curtains. A twin bed with a tattered blue quilt. A desk weighed down by an old-fashioned typewriter and stacks of ancient ledgers. A vanity with an arch of lightbulbs and a cloudy mirror. A framed photograph of a mansion on the wall, black-and-white, with a palm tree growing in the front yard. Inset in the frame is a metal label that reads *Sudek Mansion, 1890*. But the Sudek family, Claire’s family, has never owned a mansion, as far as Claire knows. She asked Grammy about it once when she was younger and got yelled at for her trouble. Just another unpleasant Grammy memory.

Claire’s mother opens up the closet, drags out the fan, plugs it in. It switches on immediately at high speed, stirring around the hot air. A trickle of sweat drops down Claire’s spine. It’s going to be a long, lonely summer.

“Do you need any help unpacking?” Claire’s mother looks over at

Claire, her hands on her hips. Claire can tell by her expression that she expects the answer to be no.

Claire shakes her head.

“Good. I’m really going to have to hustle to get back.”

Claire tosses her backpack on the bed, next to her suitcase.

“I wrote down all the numbers you might need.” Claire’s mother pulls a sheet of paper out of her purse, folded into a tight square. She hands it to Claire and Claire unfolds it. There they are, all the numbers.

“You’ve got her doctor, the local hospital, the closest neighbors—the Freytags, you remember them? Plus I wrote down the number for the grocery store. Maybe they do deliveries.”

“I doubt they do deliveries,” Claire says.

“Well, I’m sure Grammy will let you borrow the car.”

Claire doubts that too, but she doesn’t say anything.

Her mother taps her foot, frowning down at the list. “I don’t think I’m forgetting anything. You can always call the house if something comes up. You have the credit card we gave you?”

Claire nods.

“*Only* for emergencies. Grammy agreed to pay you an allowance each week, so you spend that on yourself.”

“I know, Mom.”

Her mother draws her into a hug. The fan blows dust across them both. For a moment Claire thinks she can smell the sea.

“Have fun this summer,” her mother says.

“Impossible,” Claire says.

Claire expects her mother to chide her, but she only sighs again, and brushes Claire’s hair away from her forehead.

“Nothing’s impossible here,” she says, and her voice is very far away.



Claire stays in her room after her mother leaves. She hangs up a few of her blouses but realizes she finds the prospect of unpacking too depressing. This isn't a weekend visit: It's an entire summer. She has to give up her life in Houston for three months. No one-dollar nights at the skating rink. No afternoons stretched out in the sun at the neighborhood swimming pool. No concerts. No trips to the mall. No late-night drives with Josh, the one boy who's ever given her the time of day.

All her freedom—gone. Wiped clean away. Sometimes she thinks her mother does these sorts of things on purpose, like she doesn't want to let Claire be a teenager, like Claire has to skip straight ahead to adulthood. Claire is pretty sure her mother just sees her as live-in staff and not a daughter at all. But Claire isn't a nurse, for God's sake! What if Grammy falls and can't get up, like the lady in the commercial? What if she has to go to the hospital? Worse, what if she *dies*?

Claire shudders. She barely remembers the CPR class she took a couple of summers ago. And yet here she is, having to care for a relative who may as well be a stranger, all because Grammy refused to let her mother hire a professional, and Claire's mother, who usually never lets anyone tell her what to do, actually went along with it.

Claire peers through the curtains, past the grime on the window, and out at the front yard. Everything looks dead. The fan hums in the background.

Sighing, she turns and pulls clothes out of her suitcase until she finds her Walkman. It still has the cassette that Josh gave her, with all those darkly dreamy gothic bands. She's been listening to it nonstop since the end of the school year, ever since she found the cassette waiting

for her in her locker, wrapped up in a sheet of notebook paper. *Lovely Claire* was written across the front in fancy looping script.

Claire sprawls out on the bed and stares up at the globe lamp hanging from the ceiling. Old-fashioned. Everything in this house is old-fashioned. She closes her eyes, loops on her earphones, and hits play. The music erupts mid-song. She can barely understand the lyrics, but maybe that's the point. The fan cools her skin. Maybe she can stay like this until August, trapped in a coma of music and heat.

A knock at the door.

Claire sits up and pulls off her earphones. Grammy walks in without waiting for permission.

"You aren't going to unpack?" Grammy asks, steadying herself against the doorframe.

"It's too hot."

Grammy snorts. "You'll get used to it."

Claire doesn't say anything.

"I thought I'd show you the kitchen. Your mother said you can cook?"

Claire shrugs. "I had to learn. She and Dad are never home."

"Well, that's more than she can say for herself at your age. Come along."

Claire tosses the Walkman aside and follows Grammy out into the hallway. It's like walking through water. The air fills her lungs and stays there.

The few times Claire has been to Grammy's house before, it was always Christmas. The house looks empty without strands of garland and a blinking tree shimmering with tinsel. Claire imagines she'll get used to seeing it this way. The thought depresses her.

The kitchen looks empty too. Claire isn't sure she's ever seen it when it isn't stacked with dishes and pots and pans, when her mother and aunt aren't bustling around getting dinner ready.

"Just wanted to show you where everything is, so there won't be any confusion later." Grammy opens up drawers and cupboards and points things out as she talks. Her movements are slow and shaky and weak. Claire feels a pang of sympathy despite her annoyance with this whole situation. It's not Grammy's fault she's sick, and it's not necessarily Grammy's fault that Claire doesn't know much about her either. Her mother certainly hasn't gone out of her way to make sure Claire ever had the chance to really speak with her own grandmother.

"Pans are here," Grammy says. "Dishes. Silverware. Pantry. The stove is gas, you have to light it with a match." She pulls a box of matches off the windowsill next to the sink. "Do you know how to do that? I'm sure your mother has the finest electric range in that tacky eyesore she calls a home up in Houston."

"Yes, I know how to do it." Claire shivers with annoyance.

"I don't want you burning the house down."

"I won't." The annoyance turns to rancor: How hopeless does Grammy think she is?

Grammy nods with satisfaction. "I like to eat dinner around five thirty. You can do what you'd like until then, assuming you've finished any chores. Watch out for the vermin. We've got rats out here and if you touch one you'll get a disease."

Claire doesn't answer. Grammy surveys the kitchen, wisps of hair falling into her eyes. She doesn't brush them away. "There are some things in the pantry," she says. "Mrs. Freytag got them for me. Let me know when you need to buy more groceries."

Claire nods.

“I’ve got to take my pills three times a day.” Grammy points at a divided plastic pillbox sitting on the windowsill next to the matches. “One with each meal. Nasty things, but the doctor insists, and I want you to make sure I don’t forget.”

“Okay,” Claire says.

“I’m not used to being sick.” Grammy stares at a blank spot on the wall beside the refrigerator. “Not used to it one damn bit.”

Claire doesn’t know what to say. She waits for Grammy to elaborate, to give her some hint as to how she should respond, but instead Grammy turns and shuffles out of the kitchen. A minute or two later, the television switches on, flooding the house with the roar of applause from an afternoon game show. Claire opens up the pantry: cans of tuna and cream of mushroom soup, some noodles, some boxed cereal, a loaf of bread. Claire shuts the pantry. The TV jangles in the background. It’s so hot, Claire can hardly think straight.

She doesn’t want to be inside this house anymore.

There’s a door next to the kitchen table that leads to the back patio. Claire slips out. A breeze blows in from the direction of the Gulf, cool and salty, and so it’s actually cooler out here than in the house. It’s probably even cooler on the beach.

Claire steps off the patio and walks over to the garage. It’s not attached to the house; it must have been built later, thrown together with leftover parts. Claire heaves the door open. The air inside is hot and stifling and smells faintly toxic. Grammy’s old Chrysler Cordoba lurks in the shadows. A string hangs down from the ceiling, and when Claire pulls it, the garage floods with yellow light. There’s not much space to move around the car, since the garage is filled with stacks of boxes and

rusting tool parts, but Claire picks her way around the perimeter as best she can, mindful of spiders and scorpions and diseased rats.

She's almost to the back of the garage when she spots the end of a handlebar poking out from behind a cardboard box of moldering books.

"My ride." Claire's voice bounces around strangely inside the garage.

She takes a deep breath and climbs up on the box of books, balancing herself as best she can. The bare lightbulb and the square of sunlight don't reach all the way back here. The shadows crawl over her feet. She imagines a rat sticking its pointy face out of the darkness and biting her.

Still, a bike is better than walking, especially in a Texas summer. So Claire grabs hold of the handlebars and lifts. For a moment nothing happens, but then the bike jars loose. One of the boxes crashes down and its contents scatter across the floor—all yellowed school papers covered in an unfamiliar scrawl. Claire tugs the bike all the way free and wheels it out of the garage. Then she goes back in and cleans up the papers, shoving them haphazardly into the box. Her aunt Susan's name is written across the top of them all. Claire doubts her own mother even keeps her report cards, even though she makes A's every semester.

The bike waits for her out in the sun, although it's so coated in dust it doesn't even gleam. Plus the tires are flat. Figures. Claire swipes the dust off the seat, and her hand comes back coated in a layer of gray grime. Maybe there's a bike pump buried somewhere in the garage, although given the way the summer's gone so far, she's not banking on it.

"Hello there!"

The voice comes out of nowhere, musical and bright like a wind chime. Claire jumps and looks over her shoulder.

A girl in a yellow sundress stands at the end of the driveway, a basket tucked in the crook of her elbow. She lifts her free arm and waves wildly, like she and Claire know each other.

“Are you Claire?” she calls out.

“Yes?”

“I’m Audrey.” The girl has the same fresh-faced look as the pretty cheerleaders at Claire’s school, all pink glossy lips and wavy blond hair. She strides forward and sticks out a hand. Claire takes it, aware suddenly of the sweat on her palm. But Audrey doesn’t seem to mind. She just smiles more brightly and shoves the basket in Claire’s direction.

“I live down the road. Your grandmother told my mom that you were going to be staying with her this summer, and I thought, wouldn’t it be just *grand* if we became best friends? There’s hardly *anyone* my age around here. We only have one hundred kids at the high school.”

“Oh.” Claire feels like she’s under some kind of attack. She takes the basket gingerly on both sides. It’s full of cookies wrapped in plastic Baggies.

“I made them myself. I’m in the Future Homemakers of America.”

Claire is somehow both shocked and not surprised at all that such a club exists in Indianola.

Audrey smiles even wider. “What clubs are you in at your school?”

“Uh.” Claire looks down at the cookies again. “I’m not really in any clubs.” She hesitates for a moment. “I won second place in the science fair, though.”

“Oh, that’s great!”

Claire feels pathetic. Back in Houston she was proud of the fact that

she didn't join any clubs. It made her one of the cool kids; Josh didn't join any clubs either. But it's clearly different here, and when faced with the prospect of this long, empty summer, she isn't willing to alienate Audrey with her non-joining ways.

"Anyway," Audrey continues. "I have a car, so if you ever need me to drive you anywhere, feel free to call. I stuck my number in the basket." She points. "It's on the welcome card. Oh, and I know you're probably busy with unpacking and everything, but I'd be so *happy* to give you a tour of Indianola if you'd like." She beams with pride. "I was the official tour guide when Governor Richards visited last year, so I've got practice."

"Oh, okay."

They stare at each other. The Gulf breeze stirs Audrey's hair around her bare shoulders.

"Is that your bike?" she asks.

Claire glances down at it. "Yeah, well, it was my mom's. I need to find an air pump—"

"I have one at my house. You can borrow it." Another bright grin. Claire feels both welcome and unnerved.

"Sure, that would be great." Claire shifts her weight. The basket of cookies is heavy. She looks down the driveway at Grammy's house, squat against the pale sky. The rest of the afternoon stretches out in front of her, and the idea of spending it inside that hot, stifling house is not remotely appealing.

"Hey," Claire says, and turns back to Audrey, who smiles at her again. "About that tour. We could do it now, if you like. I'm really not busy and I'd like to get to know the town and everything, since I'll have to take care of my grandma."

Audrey claps her hands together and lets out a delighted squeal. “Oh, I was *hoping* you’d say that.”

Claire slides the cookie basket up her arm and pushes the bike back into the garage. Audrey stands on the driveway with her hands on her hips, watching her. Still unnerving.

“Let me just drop the cookies off,” Claire says.

“Oh, I’ll come with you!” Audrey says. “I’d love to say hello to Mrs. Sudek. She’s such a sweet old lady.”

Claire doesn’t say anything. *Sweet* isn’t the word she’d have used to describe her grandmother.

They go into the house. The room swims as Claire’s eyes readjust to the darkness. She sets the cookies on the kitchen table. Audrey walks down the hallway like she’s been here before.

“Mrs. Sudek!” she calls out. “It’s Audrey Duchesne!”

Grammy’s sitting in the living room chair, the TV blaring. She looks up at Audrey and blinks like she isn’t sure what she’s seeing. “Ah,” she says. “Hello.”

“Claire and I are going on a tour of the town.” Audrey loops her arm through Claire’s, startling her.

Grammy doesn’t smile. “Very well. Be back by five.” But she’s looking at Audrey as she speaks, her eyes narrow and appraising. Claire can see the resemblance to her own mother, who’s certainly turned that expression on Claire plenty of times. Especially in the last few years.

But Audrey either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. She swings around, taking Claire with her, and leads her outside. Claire feels like she’s caught up in a tornado that’s whirling her away from Grammy’s house. Audrey leads her down to the driveway to a little blue two-door, the glass in the windows coated with a layer of salt. Claire crawls into the

passenger seat. The car is very clean. No sand, no crumpled receipts. It looks brand-new.

“Indianola’s not very big.” Audrey cranks the engine and the air-conditioning roars on with it, already set at full blast. “So this won’t take *too* terribly long.”

Claire nods. All Claire knows of Indianola is this neighborhood and the Days Inn on the highway and the convenience store where her father always stops to buy gas. They only come out here every other year at Christmas. Eight visits total, and even those visits were in and out, Claire’s mother corralling them back to Houston as quickly as she could. The town itself, then, is a mystery, nothing more than a name on her grandmother’s address.

Audrey weaves through the neighborhood. The houses are spaced out, isolated, as if each wants to pretend the others don’t exist. They pass by a sprawling whitewashed suburban-style mansion and Audrey says, “That’s my house. You can come by whenever you like.”

Claire nods, although something niggles at the back of her thoughts. She swears she’s never seen that house before—

The thought vanishes, replaced by a memory of a walk after Christmas dinner two years ago, Claire and her mom strolling past a house twice the size of all the others on the street.

Claire rubs her forehead.

A few minutes later, they’re on the main road leading into town. No one’s out; Claire doesn’t blame them, not in this heat. They pass by a seafood shack and a shop selling cheap swimsuits and sunglasses.

“That road leads down to the public beach,” Audrey says, pointing. “It’s nice enough.” They drive along, past a strip mall and the grocery store, which is smaller than Claire expected. There’s a gas station,

Alvarez Quick-Mart, the same name as the one on the highway where her father stops for fuel. They pass another one a few moments later, with the same orange-and-white sign. This one is next door to an exterminator. A big sad-looking cockroach lights up, its neon washed out by the sunlight. *Alvarez Bros. Exterminators*, the sign says, then below it, in smaller letters: *All manner of vermin, no exceptions.*

“Is this the same Alvarez who owns the gas stations?” Claire asks.

Audrey glances at her. “Oh yeah, they own half the stuff in town.” She turns down another side street. “They even opened up a video store last year, so we *finally* have a proper one. I used to have to rent videos from the grocery store. Does Mrs. Sudek own a VCR?”

“No way. It’s weird enough she has a TV.”

Audrey laughs. “Well, they rent them out. I can show you, if you like.”

Claire shrugs. The road narrows. It’s lined with old houses that have been converted to shops and restaurants. One of them has a painting of a pizza on the sign, and the word *Arcade* glowing in the window.

“Oh cool,” Claire says. “An arcade.”

Audrey glances at it and tosses her hair. “If you’re into that sort of thing. Here, there’s the video store.”

It’s attached to a motel, old-fashioned-looking, the *NO* in the vacancy sign switched on. The video store just says *Alvarez Video* and there’s a poster for the *Twin Peaks* movie in the window.

“Wow, awesome,” Claire says, and for the first time since her mother announced how she’d be spending her summer, she sparks with excitement. “They’ve got good stuff. The Blockbuster by my house just has popular crap. You know? Cartoons and rom-coms.”

“The Alvarazes are very successful,” Audrey says, a little primly. “Do you want to see the beach? It’s just a little ways down the road.”

“Sure.”

They drive on, and Claire starts feeling better about her summer in Indianola—making the best of the situation, the way her mother told her to do on the boring drive down. There’s an arcade and a beach and a cool-looking video store and Audrey, even if she is too perky. Maybe these three months won’t be entirely wasted.

The beach appears suddenly, the road diving off into the dunes. Audrey parks the car so that it faces the water and they sit in the air-conditioning, watching the waves roll in.

“This summer’s going to be wonderful,” Audrey says. “Don’t you think? The beach, the video store, the two of us! We’ll have such fun.”

“Yeah.” Claire nods. The roar of the AC covers the roar of the Gulf. She can’t shake the sudden feeling, stupid as it is, that Audrey was rooting around inside her head. “Totally.”

## CHAPTER

# Two

## CLAIRE

Cicadas whine from their invisible hiding places in the trees. Claire repositions the standing fan so that it blows directly on her like a blast of static. She found the patio outlet this morning while she was sweeping grass off the cement, and now that's it the middle of the afternoon she's grateful. It really is noticeably cooler out here in the sea breeze than it is trapped inside Grammy's house.

Claire has been in town for three days. Audrey's driven her to the grocery store to buy a few toiletries she left at home, but Claire hasn't had time to go swimming at the beach with her or really hang out. The chores Grammy mentioned on the first day take a lot more time than Grammy led her to believe. Already Claire has cleaned the house from top to bottom, in addition to cooking Grammy's meals, helping her in and out of bed, and bringing her the little white pillbox three times a day. No wonder Grammy refused to hire a nurse. What she really wants is a maid.

At least Claire has this afternoon to herself. Finally.

She switches on her Walkman and arranges a sheet of stationery on the old encyclopedia she's using to write on. She found the stationery

in her bedroom, buried deep in the desk. It's old, with swirls of blue flowers and a yellow tint to the paper. She thinks Josh will appreciate it. He likes old things.

*Josh, she writes, leaving off the Dear because it sounds too girlfriend-y. I've been listening to the tape you gave me. It's great! I really*

She stops and lifts her head and stares out at the empty backyard, keeping one hand pressed against the stationery so it doesn't blow away. The music doesn't quite cover up the hum of the fan. She doesn't know how to describe this music. She has to make it clear that she *appreciates* it, but not that she thinks it's too heavy or dark (which she kind of does).

She turns back to her letter.

*like the fourth song ("Prelude to Agony"). The lyrics really speak to me.*

She reads over what she wrote and feels revolted. She scratches out *speak to me*, digging the pen in so deep, the words completely disappear.

*captures what it's like to*

Claire sighs. She thought it would be easier to write to Josh, since then she could think about what she's going to say before she says it, but it turns out that she thinks too much. Maybe she ought to call him. But then Grammy would ask about the charges, and she'd probably tell Claire's mother about them, and it would be a whole big *thing* and just not worth it. Plus, what if Josh doesn't want her calling anyway? Definitely not worth it, then.

The wind picks up, smelling of the sea. Claire can't hear it over the music, but she can see it knocking the palm trees around. Something ripples in the grass—a shadow, a dark quick movement.

It stops.

That's when Claire knows that it's not some trick of her eye. She stays still, watching the dark spot in the grass. It's too big to be a rat. A rabbit, maybe? A little thrill of excitement goes up her spine. She never sees wild animals in Houston. Well, not anything interesting, just birds and maybe a nutria if she goes to the park.

The shadow twitches again. Claire reaches down and turns off the cassette. She pushes her earphones down so they loop around the back of her neck. The fan pushes her hair away from her face.

Out in the grass, the shadow lifts its head.

At first Claire isn't clear what she's seeing. The head is reptilian, gray scales glittering in the sun. But it's too big to be a lizard or a snake—

An alligator? Are there alligators around here?

She freezes. The excitement evaporates. She remembers a school trip she took last year, out to the Big Thicket, and how the guide warned them about alligators as they were racing down the banks to the river. "Don't get too close," he shouted over the shrieks and giggles of delight. "If you hear it hiss, you need to back away!"

Claire isn't sure if she's too close right now. Slowly, she gathers up the encyclopedia and her stationery and pen. Maybe she can dart inside and call animal control. Grammy probably won't want an alligator in her backyard.

She stands up, moving slowly, not taking her eyes off the alligator.

It hisses.

Claire drops the encyclopedia. Her letter to Josh flutters across the patio.

And then the alligator stands up.

Those are the only words Claire has for it—the alligator *stands up*, on two hind legs, like a person.

It's about two feet tall, its body covered in thick, glossy gray fur, the scales of its head scattering around its shoulders. A tail curls around its legs, flicking out at the end, catching the light of the sun.

A red scarf is draped around its neck.

Claire doesn't move. She considers the possibility that she's hallucinating. But then the creature lifts one hand, the fingers too long and curving in arthritically at the last joint. It points at Claire.

"Girl," it says, in a low hissing voice.

Claire screams. Blind with panic, she runs into the house, where she slams the door shut and jams the lock into place. The window beside the door is still open, the wind stirring the curtains. She can see the creature—the *monster*—staring at her through the mosquito screen.

She shrieks again and bangs the window shut. The monster still stares at her. She knows she has to close off the rest of the house, but her fear has her rooted in place.

"What's *going on* out here?" Grammy shambles into the kitchen, her hair mussed from her nap. "Screaming and carrying on—I need my rest."

"Look!" Claire shouts, jabbing her finger at the window. "*Look.*"

Grammy doesn't answer right away, and for one terrifying second Claire is certain that Grammy doesn't see it, that she's having a breakdown, that maybe this is the reason her parents shipped her out here, she's having a breakdown and they know and don't want to deal with it because it would interfere with their perfect, modern lives—

"Oh, hell," Grammy says. "They aren't supposed to get this close to town. You'll need to call the exterminator."

Silence.

“*What?*” says Claire.

Grammy inclines her head toward the window. “The monsters. Probably not the most accurate term, but it’s what we call ‘em. They’re a nuisance around here. Not dangerous really, not unless you provoke them.” Grammy narrows her eyes at Claire. “You didn’t provoke it, did you?”

“I don’t—I don’t think so?”

Grammy peers out the window. “Oh, probably not. It’s just staring at the house. Damn things. Call the exterminator, they’ll come clear it out for us. The number’s next to the phone. I’m going back to my nap. My joints are hurting too much for this excitement. Wake me up when you’ve got dinner ready.” She moves to go back to her bedroom. Stops. Looks over her shoulder. In the sunlight her skin is chalky and pale. “You probably want to stay inside until the exterminator gets here. We try to keep our distance from the things.”

“Planning on it,” Claire says shakily.

Grammy nods and leaves the kitchen. Claire turns back to the window. The monster is where she left it, standing amidst the yellowed overgrown grass, swaying like it’s being blown by the wind. She stares a few moments longer, waiting for something to change. Waiting for something to make sense. Nothing does.

She goes to the kitchen phone.

A list of phone numbers is written on a piece of paper with an oil company’s logo plastered on the bottom, the handwriting faded and old. The exterminator is four numbers down.

Claire steals another glance at the monster. It’s still there. Hasn’t moved.

She dials. The phone rings two times.

“Hello, Alvarez Exterminators. How may I help you?” The woman on the other end sounds bored. Claire takes a deep breath.

“I have a, uh, a *monster*”—she cringes as she says it—“in my backyard and, uh, I was told to call—”

“How big is it?” the woman asks.

“What? Oh, I dunno, I—two feet, I guess?”

“Did it speak?”

“Um.” Claire leans up against the wall. She wonders if she fell asleep out in the heat and this is all some weird nightmare. “Yes? It pointed at me and said *girl*.”

The woman makes a clucking sound. “And the address?”

Claire tells her.

“Very well. I’ll have someone out there in about ten minutes.” She hangs up before Claire can say anything more.

For a moment, Claire listens to the dial tone, hoping it will wake her up. But it doesn’t.

She sets the phone back in the receiver. Then she goes to the window, and her heart leaps: The monster’s vanished. But no—after a second she sees that it’s just crouched down in the grass again. Her letter to Josh is still out there, her pen and papers scattered across the patio. She’ll have to start over. And figure out some way to tell him about the monsters that doesn’t make her sound insane.

She digs her nails into her palms, even though she doesn’t really think she’s dreaming. Her dreams are never this vivid. They tend to happen in black-and-white.

Claire closes the blinds. Then she goes around to all the other doors in the house and locks them. She turns on the TV with the sound down low so that it won’t disturb Grammy. There are only two stations out

here, both local stations that crackle with static. Neither show anything interesting, but she leaves *The Golden Girls* on to have some noise in the house. Her head buzzes. She's come to this house every other Christmas for the past seventeen years and not once has she seen a monster. Not even heard someone *talk* about them.

She thinks about her mother during those trips, fussing in the car as her father drove the family down the highway. Her brother would turn on his Walkman right away, but Claire didn't always feel like listening to music, and sometimes she listened to her parents' conversation instead. *I hate going to this place*, her mother would always say, flipping through the magazine in her lap. *You know how it is*.

Her father grunted in reply.

*You know how it is*. Claire always took that to mean that Indianola was dull and backward, a time capsule stuck in the 1960s. Or that her mother hated the way Grammy insulted their life in Houston, complaining that Claire's mother had to be the breadwinner, that she didn't have time to maintain a proper home.

But maybe her mother meant something else. Maybe she meant monsters.

Monsters her mother didn't even bother to warn her about when she dropped Claire off. Although that would be like her, wouldn't it? She was probably too wrapped up in some client or other to mention it.

Claire kicks at the ottoman sitting in front of the chair and it skitters across the room, just as the doorbell rings.

She switches off the TV and goes to answer it. She expects a middle-aged man in coveralls, or maybe a priest, but instead she finds a girl her own age, tall and pretty and brown-skinned, with tangled black hair and dark liner around her eyes. She holds a big metal cage.

“You called about a monster?” she asks.

“You’re the exterminator?” Claire blurts it out before she can stop herself.

“Yep. Julie Alvarez.” She holds out her free hand. Claire shakes it. Julie grins at her. “Did you just move in or something? Isn’t this Mrs. Sudek’s house?”

“I’m her granddaughter. I’m helping her out this summer.”

“Oh. Tight.” Julie shifts the cage from one hand to the other. “So where is it? Out back, I guess? I didn’t see anything when I drove up.” She jerks her thumb over her shoulder, toward a big white van with a plastic sculpture of a cockroach perched on top.

“Yeah. Out back. You can come through the house.” Claire holds the door open and Julie shrugs and walks in. She’s not wearing a uniform, just hot-pink shorts and a Nirvana T-shirt knotted at the waist. Not what Claire expected at all.

Claire leads her through the house. When they get to the kitchen, Claire opens up the window blinds, her heart pounding. The monster’s still out there, the scaly curve of its head poking out above the grass.

Julie sets the cage on the floor and presses one hand against the window, peering out. She gives a nod like this is all familiar to her. “And you said it spoke?” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a notepad. “Says here it called you *girl*?”

“That’s what I thought it sounded like...” Claire’s voice trails off. The way everyone, from Grammy to the receptionist on the phone to this girl Julie, is treating the monster like a normal everyday thing just convinces Claire further that she’s having a breakdown.

“No, that’s good.” Julie smiles at her again. It’s a nice smile, genuine and warm. Not like Audrey’s weird strained smile. *Audrey*. She didn’t

say anything about monsters either. “If it can talk to you, that means I can talk to it. Should have it cleared out within the next few minutes.”

“It won’t hurt you, will it?”

Julie looks up at her. “We’ve got an arrangement.”

Claire doesn’t know what that means: Julie has an arrangement? Or the town does? Is that why no one’s ever said a word about the monsters to Claire before? But Julie doesn’t explain, only opens the door. Heat rushes in. Through the window, Claire sees the monster stick its head up.

“Hey there,” Julie calls out, swooping down to pick up the cage. She ambles outside and pulls the back door shut, but Claire can still hear her, her voice muffled and fuzzy. “You know you’re not supposed...” And then Julie moves too far away from the house, and her words become too indistinct.

Claire leans up against the window, her chest tight. Julie drops the cage in the grass. Stands with her hands on her hips. The monster lifts its head a little higher and bares its teeth. Claire tenses, certain the monster’s going to attack—but no, it’s only speaking.

Julie gestures at the cage. The monster stares at her. She crosses her arms over her chest, hitches her shoulders. Points at the cage again. The monster doesn’t move. She throws her hands up. Her voice raises, loud enough that certain tones seep through the window, but not so loud that Claire can make out what she’s saying. Claire realizes that she’s no longer frightened, exactly. She watches the window like she’s watching TV, with a morbid, confused fascination. Julie’s trying to negotiate with a monster, with some—*animal*. Claire doesn’t think there’s any way this can work, and yet it’s clear that Julie has done this before.

Julie crouches down in the grass. The monster perks up its head

and tilts it at her. Julie slaps one hand down on the top of the cage. Points off into the distance. Shrugs.

And then, to Claire's amazement, the monster trundles into the cage.

Julie closes the latch without any rush. She picks the cage up with one hand and sets it down on the patio. The monster's curled up inside like a cat, head resting on its claw, staring forlornly off into the distance.

The door opens and Claire jumps away from the window.

"Christ, it's hot out there." Julie wipes her forehead. "Not much better in here, though. No offense."

"My grandma doesn't have air-conditioning."

"Aw, suck." Julie points her thumb toward outside. "Anyway, I got it. I'll haul it off to the power plant. I'm not sure why it was down here. They aren't supposed to come into town. Part of the deal, you know?" She shrugs.

Claire stares at her. She understands each individual word, but all strung together like that they become gibberish. Power plant? Deal?

Julie's staring at her and frowning. Heat rushes into Claire's cheeks. She looks down at her hands. Her heart's beating a little too fast, even though she's not scared anymore.

"You didn't know, did you?" Julie says.

"What?" Claire looks up at her.

"About the monsters? You said you're just here for the summer?" Julie shakes her head. "This stupid town. They expect everyone to just *know* when they pass the city limits." She rolls her eyes.

Claire stares at her. "No," she finally says. "No one ever told me anything. I mean, I'd been coming here for Christmas, and my mom grew up here—"

“Oh, well, it would’ve had to be Mrs. Sudek who tells you.” Julie shifts her weight from foot to foot, looking antsy and uncomfortable. “The farther you go from town, the more you forget.”

“Forget?” Claire stares at her.

“The monsters, yeah. I don’t know how it works. Just that people who leave, when they come back—we have to remind them. And no one does because everyone in this town’s an asshole.” She sighs. “Basically, we’ve got these monsters that live out in an old power plant on the edge of town. They’ve been here since forever, pretty much. Way back in the day they made a deal with the townspeople to stay on their own spot of land.”

“But—” Claire shakes her head, trying to piece everything together. “So they’re *endemic*? Just in Indianola?”

“Dunno,” Julie says. “Probably not, since they aren’t anywhere else around here.”

“So where did they *come* from? They had to come from somewhere!”

“Yeah, no one really knows. They’ve just sort of—always been here. That’s what my dad told me. Anyway. They aren’t supposed to come into town, but sometimes one of ’em disobeys. I’m authorized to round ’em up and take ’em back to the power plant.”

“Power plant,” Claire says slowly. “So...but...maybe *that’s* where they came from?”

“Nah, they moved there in the thirties, I’m pretty sure.” Julie shrugs. “No big deal. Makes it easy to stay away from them, you know?”

The world’s been invaded by dream logic. Monsters living at a power plant, people losing their memories. Were there monsters back in Houston, and Claire can’t remember them, now that she’s come here?

She feels dizzy and sick. She wants to talk to Josh. He'd tell her the truth. He'd tell her if monsters were real or not.

"They shouldn't bother you again." Julie smiles. "And if they do, all you've got to do is give me a call."

Claire nods. She thinks she might throw up. The world's been uprooted. The rules are broken. She understands nothing.

## CHAPTER

# Three

## JULIE

The girl living at Mrs. Sudek's place is pretty cute. Innocent-looking. Sweet. Like she spends all her time studying and worrying that she's not going to make straight A's on her report card. Julie wonders if she'll see her around again. Probably. It's a small town.

"I could pay one of you to hang out in her yard," she says to the monster. "Then I'll definitely get to see her again. What do you say to that?"

The monster's still curled up in its cage, which she strapped into the front seat. She's supposed to stash them in the back of the van, but sometimes she lets them ride shotgun. This one's not particularly chatty.

"Girl," it says, in that low hissing voice they all have.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a girl, she's a girl." Julie pulls up to the blinking red stoplight at the edge of town. "Figures I'd have to take shit about it from y'all too." She guns the van forward, out toward the highway that leads back into civilization. Only one direction out of town, unless you have a boat.

"Girl," the monster says.

“Christ, learn a new word.” The van’s the only car out on the road. People don’t drive this stretch of Highway 316 that often, since it takes you past the power plant where the monsters have made their home. Instead everybody takes Comal Road around the bayou, even though it adds about thirty minutes to the trip. “Is this some new trick?” she asks, glancing over at the monster’s cage. “Learning one word so that you qualify for sentience and I have to waste time hauling you back to the power plant?”

“Girl,” the monster says.

Julie sighs. Honestly, she still hasn’t bothered to learn all the rules and bylaws governing the relationship between the good people of Indianola and the monsters who made this spot of Texas their home; no one else in town seems to care, and Julie has big plans to get the hell out of Indianola as soon as she graduates. What do you need to know about monsters once you leave the county limits? Nothing, that’s what, because nothing is exactly what you’ll remember about the stupid things anyway.

The monster turns around in the cage and settles its head down on its paws. Weird that it had gotten so far away from the power plant—the ones who can’t talk usually stay close, since they’re considered vermin and can be exterminated. *A threat to the human population*, that’s what the official documents say. Julie doesn’t like the idea of killing them, even though it was the monsters themselves who said it was okay, that it’s like killing rats or deer. It almost never happens, and she’s never had to, but still.

They drive on. The edges of Indianola disappear into the fields of pale grass, already turning yellow in the summer heat. The radio station crackles and then disappears, the way it always does—once you

pass the power plant it'll kick up again, as strong as ever. Julie switches it off, though, because she knows from experience that sometimes you hear voices in the static.

The power plant materializes on the horizon.

Julie has seen it dozens of times, but it's always a surprise, and it always leaves her with an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. It looks like a painting on the poster for a science fiction movie, a convoluted tangle of gray pipes, twisting and winding on top of one another. At night the pipes twinkle with amber lights. Julie's only seen that once. She knows you don't come out here at night.

There's smoke today, a thin trickle of it seeping out of the plant and flattening against the pale sky.

"So what do y'all got cooking in there?" Julie asks, trying to deflect her nervousness.

"Girl."

Julie shivers, her chest tightening. "Jesus, I hope not." She pulls up to the entrance gate. The *KEEP OUT* sign's still there, dotted with rust. It's not the sign that keeps people away. Not even dumbass football players try breaking in here. Everyone in town knows it's bad news.

And yet her father won't give her a job at the video store like she keeps asking, and so here she is, punching in the access code.

The gate screeches open. Julie eases in. The monster shuffles in its cage, trying to sit up.

"Almost got you home," she says, cruising down the narrow main road. The power plant rises up on both sides, hemming her in. Julie clenches the steering wheel tighter. The van and the smoke are the only things moving in the entire plant.

Finally, she makes it to the main building, where Aldraa spends his

days. She parks in the usual spot, climbs out, heaves the monster's cage out with a grunt. It's hotter here than in town, the sun reflecting off all these acres of asphalt. When it catches the metal in the pipes, it throws off broken shards of white light.

Julie takes a deep breath, puts in her earplugs, tells herself nothing's going to happen, and then goes inside.

Being inside is even worse than being outside. The monsters have the buildings fixed up the way they like, warm and humid and crawling with strange dark green plants that look sort of like moss. Julie does her best not to look at those plants, because when you do, you see that they twitch and pulse like they're breathing.

"Julie Alvarez." Aldraa's voice booms through the room, rattling like thunder, reverberating across her eardrums. It hurts even with the earplugs. "You are here."

He always knows who it is. "Yes, I'm here." Julie sets the cage on a clear patch of floor, where she can see the speckled tile from when this used to be a place for humans, and peers into the thick, dingy dark. "One of your boys got out."

A pause. Julie's heart thuds. She wants to drop off the monster and leave, the way she's supposed to. Except today she's got some questions for Aldraa.

"I'd like to speak to you." Her blood rushes in her ears. "I need to ask you something."

Another pause. Aldraa's breathing somewhere in the recesses of the lobby. The monster rattles against its cage, and Julie kneels down and opens the latch. The monster shoots out, scurrying into a tangle of plants.

The floor shakes. Once, twice. Footsteps.

Julie straightens up. She braces herself.

Aldraa appears.

He's enormous, almost as tall as the high lobby roof, and shaped like a person but not quite. His proportions are off, his arms and torso too long and twisting, his head too small. Julie tries not to look straight at him, but still she feels the beginning throb of a migraine in her right temple.

"What do you want?" he says.

"You're in violation of the agreement," Julie says, keeping her eyes on a spot just above his left shoulder. There's something about him that makes her dizzy, like he's much more solid, much more *there*, than the things around him. And that includes her.

"I haven't left the power plant in forty-nine years."

The headache surges in time with the beat of his voice.

"I realize that. But the monster I just brought in was at an Indianapolis citizen's house. *In town.*" She points off at the undulating vines, her hand shaking. "The only thing he could say was 'girl,' so he could have been exterminated."

"But you didn't exterminate him." Aldraa kneels down, the floor shuddering beneath him. He opens his mouth and reveals the rows of sharp gleaming teeth through which he makes a rattling noise that bores deep into Julie's brain. She cries out, digs the palm of her hand into her temple.

The monster from Mrs. Sudek's house slinks out of the plants and scurries up Aldraa's arm.

"Why did he say 'girl'?" Julie asks, drawing herself up, trying to eke out her bravery. She tells herself that she's protected, that no harm can come to her.

“Why do you assume there’s a reason?” Aldraa does something with his mouth that’s meant to be a smile; it’s something he learned from humans but doesn’t work with the muscles of his face. Seeing it sends a wave of nausea rushing through Julie’s stomach and she has to take a deep breath to stop from throwing up.

“Because,” Julie starts. The nausea worsens; her thoughts are becoming gummy and loose like melting candy, turning to slime in the room’s humidity. He’s doing this to her. Aldraa. “Because there’s a girl there, a new girl—you aren’t going to hurt her, are you?” She can’t remember much about the new girl. Only a flash of green eyes, a gleam of pale skin. The phone call—Brittany saying *Got a monster down at Mrs. Sudek’s*.

“Stop,” she says. “Please, whatever you’re doing with my head, just stop screwing around with me.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes you do.” Julie takes a deep breath and concentrates.

“Are you certain Lezir was in the town?” Aldraa strokes the monster’s back with his long vine-like fingers. Gray fur ripples through them.

“Yes. Dammit, Aldraa, stop. Answer my question.” Her voice sounds far away and muted. “You know you have to. It’s part of the treaty, if I think something’s wrong, or that someone’s going to be hurt—”

“We are going to hurt no one!”

His voice lashes out like a thunderstorm, and Julie stumbles backward, clamping her hands over her ears. The monster from Mrs. Sudek’s house dives off Aldraa’s arm and disappears into the green darkness, and the plants rustle and sway around her, despite the absolute stillness of the air.