

Forget
this ever
Happened

CASSANDRA ROSE CLARKE

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

HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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.”