



THE ISLAND

Book 1 of The Cliffside Chronicles

by

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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 5 ROSE ROBBINS

Part 1: September 1965

*But you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
How you don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction*

- Old pop song

“Dadhee, you need to sheck for monshTERS before you leave.”

Fred Robbins paused in the doorway of his daughter’s bedroom, startled in that particular way parents are when their child says something totally unexpected. Like Art Linkletter had been telling America for years, “kids say the darndest things.” But Rose was an exception. Many times, what came out of her mouth was beyond the darndest. But this was a first. In retrospect, it would turn out to be a prediction.

“I do?”

“Yesh,” Rose said firmly. “I don’t want them in my room.”

Until that moment, Fred had no idea his daughter even knew what a monster was, let alone was afraid one was in her bedroom. Or more than one, apparently.

She’d said “*them*.”

If Rose had been a “normal” child - and he despised that word - he would’ve blamed it on the new house. Well, it was actually a new “old” house, built on a rocky promontory above the Hudson River in the early 1900s. It was just new to Marie, him, and Rose. They’d closed on the place just three months before, and were finally feeling at home in it and in Cliffside Park, a small neighborhood at the south end of Cornwall Landing.

Three months had been ample time to have registered the house’s numerous eccentricities, but not long enough to have gotten completely used to them. There was the strident clank of the boiler in the cellar that always seemed to interrupt the more frequent heated discussions between him and Marie. As if to tell them “STOP!” by sending its sharp metallic disapproval echoing through the ancient tin ductwork. And the Forties-vintage ceiling fan in the dining room that sounded at times like the chattering of very small teeth, or, at times, sniggering laughter. Of what? Fred mused. A mischievous gremlin? That’s what came to mind when he heard it the sixth or seventh time. And, of course, the slow hiss of the second-floor hallway radiator, seemingly only when a stranger, usually a repairman or handyman, walked past it. As if it disapproved of the presence of an interloper come to fix, in its mind, what wasn’t broke. But he’d dismissed it all. He didn’t believe in haunted houses or Hill Houses or Hell Houses or whatever those fictional houses were called. He could never remember what the house in the book was called and what the one in the movie was called, and made a mental note to straighten that out.

It, he'd said. *As if IT disapproved*. Now he was sounding like his daughter. Monsters were always *Its* before they revealed their specific monstrousness.

But, of course, it couldn't be a monster. Rose, now 15 going on 16, perhaps more sensitive than most children while naive in so many other ways, was still having trouble adjusting to the place. And Rose Robbins was no stranger to adjusting.

She'd been born three months pre-mature in 1950, weighing barely two pounds. She spent her first nine months in a neonatal intensive care unit in a Westchester hospital. When they finally brought her home, Fred and Marie noticed her limbs were rigid, she never rolled over, and didn't reach for toys that were dangled in front of her. She seemed to stare past them, at the ceiling.

Babies born so early rarely survived in those days, the doctors had said, and those that did initially spent their lives in an incubator until the more significant dangers passed, and then were relegated to something between a cage and a crib once they were able to breathe on their own, take food orally, maintain their body temperature independently, and begin developing in earnest. The doctors eventually determined aside from those challenges that she had suffered some degree of brain damage. One Ivy League-educated asshole, the first but not the last, advised the Robbins to institutionalize her and "get on with their lives." That was the 1950s for you.

Anyone who knew the Robbins knew that putting her in a home was the last thing that they would do. They looked for specialists who could help, even taking Rose to Canada to see one. They brought her to more than two dozen, all of whom said that Rose's case was hopeless. One told them that a child born with Rose's condition in some cultures, even these days, would be left outside to die. Fred had to summon every bit of patience to stop from slugging the guy.

They ultimately found a doctor who in Philadelphia who determined that she had cerebral palsy. Not an extreme case, but bad enough.

Every day for the next year, Fred and Marie spent at least two hours every day exercising Rose's limbs. She eventually learned to first sit up in a wheelchair, then stand and then walk. Each triumph came with considerable difficulty. In time, she was able to move on her own. Luckily, her case wasn't as physically debilitating as it might've been. Her balance wasn't the best and would never be, making it difficult for Fred and Maria to hear that she wanted to be a ballerina when she grew up. At a local fair in Orangeburg two summers ago, she had asked the caricaturist to draw her as one. The drawing - typical of so many, with a giant head vaguely resembling her atop a tiny ballerina body doing a pirouette - was the first thing she wanted hung on the wall above her bed.

Rose could run, but so clumsily that she fell, it seemed, twice for every 20 feet of ground she covered. But bruised shins and scraped knees didn't deter her. She tried roller-skating, but just couldn't do it. It was the saddest thing in the world to watch her trying until she just gave up at the bottom of the driveway. Marie cried as Rose stood there, legs spread wider and wider apart despite her efforts to stay upright as she slowly sank to the ground on her skates. Fred waited a little while before going out and picking her up since she was both unwilling

and unable to get up herself. She might've sat there in that position for hours, asking God the usual question. Why? Why me? Marie told Rose she'd complied with Rose's tearful demand that she throw the skates away, but she'd kept them. Marie told Fred she was holding out hope that Rose would someday try again.

Mentally, Rose had some difficulties speaking, was emotionally immature, and her intellectual development had to date been painfully slow, consigning her to a "special school." A few months shy of 16, she had reached, the experts said, the cognitive level of a 9-year-old. It was highly probable she would never see the inside of Landing High, where Marie had just started teaching 10th Grade English. The Landing's schools had no special ed departments, so Rose had to attend classes for developmentally disabled children at a school in nearby Beacon. Until Marie worked up the gumption to convince the administration to create a special ed department in each district school. Once she settled into her job, that's precisely what she intended to do.

Rose, unsurprisingly, had put up with a lot of crap from other kids in her old neighborhood, before Fred had moved the family from Piermont north to Cornwall Landing to take a job as a history professor at nearby West Point. They called her "Rose the Retard" and "Retard Rose" and referred to the small, yellow International Harvester Travelalls she rode to school in as "Tard Karts." Her "bus" picked her up in front of the house, but, unfortunately, the regular school bus stop was across the street, so for too many mornings she had to endure veritable choruses of both nicknames led by a few kids that somehow got most of the rest to follow suit. Fred confronted the group more than once, but multiple shamings only silenced them for the moment. The next day, they were right back at it. At one point, they turned their attention to a new kid, a shy Italian boy with what they had decided was a "funny name." Fred still remembered it. Angelo Laggatutte. Fred had to stop them from belittling Angelo too, which took the form of loud chants of "Lakka-tudda" repeated over and over again as he stood waiting a few feet from the crowd, head down, looking at his worn-out hand-me-down shoes. One of the kids even stood behind Angelo and repeated "Lakka-tudda" directly into his ear, ratcheting up the volume as he repeated it faster and faster. His cohorts pantomimed firing a machine gun as they joined in.

Fred had no delusions that Rose would be able to avoid some of the same treatment here. Even though Cliffside Park was a small, insulated enclave within the Landing "proper," they were aware of at least one little shit that got his jollies from tormenting Rose. His name was Jack Killian, Jr., and no matter how many times Fred had confronted the turd's father, nothing changed. Fred figured that suggested a case of "like father, like son," and that Jack, Sr. had been a bully too. He doubted the man had ever told his son to stop. All of it left Fred wondering if Rose was right in some way she didn't intend or couldn't yet fathom, that monsters were indeed real.

After everything Rose had overcome, Fred thought, now there were actual monsters to contend with. Even if they were only in her head.

"I suppose it can't hurt," Fred said, humoring her. "Where should I look first?"

“Under the bed.” He gave her a thumb’s up as he watched his daughter’s knuckles whiten as she tightened her grip on the top of her favorite blanket. If he wasn’t here, she’d doubtless be under it.

No surprise there. Fred had had the same fear when he was Rose’s age. *Well*, he silently corrected himself with more than a twinge of chagrin, *when I was her “mental age,” that is.*

Beginning with Kindergarten, Fred too had been certain something terrifying was hiding in the darkness scant inches under his bed. He pictured it hanging upside down under there, clinging to the iron frame’s steel springs with razor-sharp claws. He called it the Boogeyman. Everyone he knew did, which only later, upon thinking about it, did he wonder how the Boogeyman get around to every house, inside every child’s bedroom, and under every child’s bed?

There was no point in asking really. The answer was simple. Because it was the Boogeyman.

Truth be told, he wasn’t even sure that he could fully picture it now, as then, since all he’d retained was an image of disembodied yellow eyes peering out of the darkness. In his case, however, he had been imaginative – or, he supposed, silly - enough to summon an ally to help protect him from whatever it was. That protector came in the form of a magical white mouse he’d decide quite randomly to name Oliver. Whenever he called, Oliver would come running into the room through a mouse-sized tunnel that emerged from under a loose floorboard in his bedroom closet. All he had to do, in his hour of need, was “call” Oliver in his head, not out loud, and he would come. And his mere presence would be enough to keep the monster at bay. Fred just had to remember to keep his closet door open so Oliver could get into the room. It was kid logic at its most fantastic and absurd. He had no idea how Oliver stopped the monster. And didn’t know why Oliver couldn’t open the closet door himself considering he possessed such awesome monster-stopping ability. It would be revisionist history to suggest that Oliver had sent the monster back to wherever it came from permanently, since it came back time and time again. Fred’s thinking at the time didn’t extend to explaining the exact nature of Oliver’s power. He took it, he guessed looking back, as an article of faith. Or perhaps Oliver’s power was derived from the simple fact that a white mouse represented good and a monster lurking in the darkness represented evil. And kid law decreed that good always triumphed over evil, even if it was embodied by a tiny mouse battling a much bigger monster. The David-versus-Goliath factor mattered in child lore too. And kid belief could be mighty potent in such matters.

When Fred turned 7, the Boogeyman and Oliver joined Santa and the Easter Bunny on the slagheap of things he no longer believed in. He smiled at the small memory of once leaving a piece of cheese for Oliver under that floorboard. Being a little squirt, he soon forgot about it, and when it began stinking to high heaven, his mother found it, and had his dad glue the board down, closing off the tunnel. He imagined the look on his face now listening to Rose was probably the same one on his parents’ faces back then, as he explained why he left the cheese there in the first place.

Taking out his keychain and switching on the small penlight attached to it, Fred dropped to his hands and knees, raised the ruffled bedskirt, and glanced under the bed. All he could see

was a thin patina of dust on the polished oak parquet, a single pink sock, a penny, a stray Pez candy, and one of Skipper's doll shoes.

"All clear," Fred announced as he stood up and looked down at his daughter. "Except for this," he said, holding up the sock between his thumb and forefinger.

"Phew," he said, holding the sock away from his face.

Rose had pulled the covers up over her head, and was slowly lowering them, exposing her still furrowed brow and her beautiful green eyes. He couldn't tell if she was smiling, so he decided not to make a joke about "The Sockmonster."

"Where should I check next?" Fred asked.

"The clawshet," Rose said, turning her head in its direction.

Fred knew the drill and had assumed as much. He was already halfway to the closet door before Rose answered.

They'd christened this part of the house "Roseland" because it contained both her bedroom and an adjoining room where her toys and games, including a large dollhouse, were kept. She had enough toys for five kids, but as an only child, and a disabled one at that, they'd spoiled her extravagantly. Many of her games required a minimum of two players, but Rose often assumed the role of the other players, sometimes as many as five others. Fred, amazed at - what to call it: an adaptation? - often wondered to himself, *who does she want to win? Which Rose?*

Since her bedroom was located on one end of the second floor, under the eaves of the steeply sloped roof, the ceiling was slanted, as was the top half of the closet's door. Did that make it a rhombus standing on end? he wondered. Who knew? What the heck was a rhombus anyway? Fred was a historian, not a mathematician.

Marie, seeing the room for the first time, said it looked like a room in a fairytale cottage, a gingerbread place with nooks and crannies and understairs spaces, which was one of the reasons Marie insisted the oddly shaped room should be Rose's. Someday, Fred thought, he'd put a skylight in that slanted ceiling so Rose could see the stars.

That was someday. Tonight, there was a monster to deal with.

Fred sharply yanked the chain dangling from the old porcelain fixture inside the closet, and weak yellow light from the single naked bulb spilled into the room. He then made a show of poking between the tightly packed clothes with one end of an empty hanger. He pushed Rose's shoes around the closet floor with his foot. As he did, he flashed on the loose floorboard in his own childhood closet 30 years before, and as a minute or two passed he realized he was absently recalling how he used to summon Oliver to come to his aid. As he heard his child voice in his head, he remembered only now that he called him "Ollie."

Ollie, please come.

Please come now.

It's back.

Where are you, Ollie?

Catching himself before continuing as if he were five again, he interrupted the bittersweet reverie and returned to the present.

“No monsters in here,” Fred said, his back to Rose.

No little white mouse either.

If he'd looked at his daughter at that moment, he would've caught her silently mouthing “Owl-eee” twice. As if she'd heard him talking to himself. And, unbeknownst to him, she had.

“I declare this closet a monster-free zone!” he said, before making a sign of the cross as he closed the door.

Turning to her, he asked, “Anywhere else you think it might be hiding?”

“Them,” she corrected him. “Where they are hiding.”

Rose pointed at the hulking, reddish-brown armoire. Rose called it her “armor.” And it could actually be her armor since she could easily fit inside. Standing up. It was an odd piece, surely an antique, sold to the Robbins by the previous owner for what surely was a pittance to avoid having it removed. It was over eight feet tall, leaving little clearance between it and the ceiling, and just shy of five feet wide and about three deep. Fred wondered how they even got into the room in the first place, and jokingly said that the house must have been built around it. He was even at a loss regarding what kind of wood had been used. It looked like something exotic, from the rain forests or jungle. Or maybe Japan. It wasn't varnished, but its surface was shiny, as if it had been. It was, even more amazingly, seemingly not constructed of pieces that had been put together, except for the doors and drawers. Several of Rose's dresses hung in an open space on one side. Three pairs of patent leather shoes with silver buckles were below the dresses, one white, one black, and one red.

Fred could see no nails or screws when he first examined the armoire. The entire exterior had no visible joints that he could see. Various birds, including a large owl in the center, had been carved into a crosspiece at the top that, in turn, was carved to resemble a branch. Exquisitely carved vines climbed up each side, from the heavy feet that resembled those of an even larger bird to the branch on which the ornately rendered birds were perched. Large panels inset in the doors featured richly detailed forest scenes painted in oils. Marie thought it gave Rose's room a storybook feel, evoking the magical wardrobe in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” the second of C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories. Fred, on the other hand, thought it was creepy as hell. That owl's eyes, he swore, followed him around the room.

Fred opened the armoire's hefty double doors a crack and waited. He could hear Rose inhaling deeply, as if she was girding herself for the moment that what she feared was inside would be revealed.

“Are you sure you want me to open it?” he asked without looking back at her.

“N-n-no.” Rose stuttered, but then changed her mind.

“Y-y-yesh.”

Fred pulled the armoire doors open, first the left, then the right.

“It’s empty,” he said. “See?”

Rose sighed with relief at the sight of her dresses hanging there, floating like ghosts above her pristine “chuch shoes.”

It was time to nip this in the bud.

“You know there’s no such thing as monsters, right?” he said, switching from his cajoling tone to his best parental voice, not overly concerned that he sounded somewhat dismissive.

“Right, Rose?”

Rose didn’t respond.

“Right?”

“You’re wrong!” she blurted out loudly, before sliding back under the covers so only her eyes were visible.

“I’ve seen them,” she insisted, her voice muffled slightly by the blanket covering her mouth. They jush aren’t here right now. Eshpeshally the tall one.”

“Where, Rose? Where have you seen them?”

“Right there,” she answered, pointing to the foot of her bed.

Fred closed the armoire, and walked over and sat on the bed. He looked at Rose, trying not to appear worried, even though he was. Despite the professional opinions regarding her mental capabilities, he knew she had an imagination that belied the most negative aspects of her condition. But this was the first time she seemed convinced she saw something that wasn’t there, and believed it to be real. Something that frightened her.

Fred knew one thing: While the monster might be imaginary, her fear was real. Was she having a nervous or other kind of breakdown?

Fred could tell from the plaintive look in her eyes that she desperately wanted him to believe her. He could almost hear her say it inside his head.

“Please believe me, Please.”

Tears welled in the corner of her eyes. She believed there were monsters in her room, and it terrified her. And that terrified him because he suddenly feared she was losing her grip on reality. Imaginary friends were one thing, but something imagined that was malevolent was an entire matter. That could damage her psyche.

“Monsters aren’t real, Rose,” he said. “If you don’t believe me, ask your mother. She’ll tell you the same thing.”

“But they are, Dadhee,” she insisted. “I shee them all the time. And so does Challie. One of them talks to Challie and me. The one who calls himshelf Mishter Kadeeter.

A shiver went up his spine. The name seemed made up but utterly bizarre at the same time. He teetered on the edge of being scared by the name for a reason he couldn't quite identify, and being scared of what might be happening to his little girl.

"Mister Kadeeter?"

Rose nodded several times, and pulled the covers down below her chin.

"Yule shee," she whispered.

"And Challie is Charlie Deal, the little boy up the street?"

"Yesh," she answered.

Charlie was Jim and Shelley Deal's son. Although Fred wasn't sure exactly how old Charlie was, he couldn't be much older than four.

"What does Mister Kadeeter tell you and Charlie?"

"He tellsh us ..."

Rose stopped and swallowed hard, before continuing.

"He tellsh us we're going to die."

"Who's going to die, Rose?"

"Evellyone."

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER