

Glass Houses

CHAPTER ONE

On the day Claire became a member of the Glass House, somebody stole her laundry.

When she reached into the crappy, beat-up washing machine, she found nothing but the wet slick sides of the drum, and – like a bad joke – the worst pair of underwear she owned, plus one sock. She was in a hurry, of course – there were only a couple of machines on this top floor of Howard Hall, the least valued and most run-down rooms in the least valued, most run-down dorm. Two washing machines, two dryers, and you were lucky if one of them was working on any given day and didn't eat your quarters. Forget about the dollar-bill slot. She'd never seen it work, not in the last six weeks since she'd arrived at school.

'No,' she said out loud, and balanced herself on the edge of the washer to look down into the dark, partly rusted interior. It smelt like mould and cheap

6 Rachel Enjine

detergent. Getting a closer look didn't help.

One crappy pair of underwear, fraying at the seams. One sock.

She was missing every piece of clothing that she'd worn in the last two weeks. Every piece that she actually *wanted* to wear.

'No!' She yelled it into the washer, where it echoed back at her, and slumped back down, then kicked the washer violently in the dent made by all the other disappointed students before her. She couldn't breathe. She had some other clothes – a few – but they were *last-choice* clothes, oh-my-God-wouldn't-be-caught-dead clothes. Pants that were too short and made her look like a hick, shirts that were too big and too stupid, and made her look like her mom had picked them out. And she had.

Claire had about three hundred dollars left to last her for, well, months, after the latest round of calling out for pizza and buying yet *another* book for Professor Clueless Euliss, who didn't seem to have figured out yet what subject he was teaching.

She supposed she could find some clothes, if she looked around, that wouldn't totally blow her entire budget. After all, downtown Morganville, Texas, was the thrift shop capital of the world. Assuming she could find *anything* she could stand to wear.

Mom said this would happen, she thought. *I just have to think. Keep my cool.*

Claire threw herself into an orange plastic chair, dumped her backpack on the scratched linoleum, and

put her head in her hands. Her face felt hot, and she was shaking, and she knew, just *knew*, that she was going to cry. Cry like the baby they all said she was, too young to be here, too young to be away from Mommy.

It sucked to be smart, because this was where it got you.

She gulped deep, damp breaths and sat back, willing herself not to bawl (because they'd hear), and wondered if she could call Mom and Dad for an extension on her allowance, or use the credit card that was 'just for emergencies'.

Then she saw the note. Not so much 'note' as graffiti, but it was addressed to her, on the painted cinderblock wall above the machines.

Dear Dork, it read, We found trash in the machines and threw it down the chute. If you want it, dive for it.

'Shit,' she breathed, and had to blink back tears again, for an entirely different reason. Blind, stupid rage. *Monica*. Well, *Monica* and the *Monickettes*, anyway. Why was it the hot mean girls always ran in packs, like hyenas? And why, with all the shimmery hair and long tanned legs and more of Daddy's money than Daddy's accountants, did they have to focus on *her*?

No, she knew the answer to that.

She'd made *Monica* look stupid in front of her friends, and some hot upperclassmen. Not that it had been all that hard; she'd just been walking by, heard *Monica* saying that World War II had been 'that dumbass Chinese war thing'.

And by simple reflex, she'd said, 'It wasn't.' The whole lot of them, slouched all over the couches in the dorm lobby, looked at her with as much blank surprise as if the Coke machine had just spoken up. Monica, her friends, three of the cool older frat boys.

'World War II,' Claire had plunged on, panicked and not quite sure how to get out of what she'd got herself into. 'I just meant – well, it wasn't the Korean War. That was later. World War II was with the Germans and the Japanese. You know, Pearl Harbor?'

And the guys had looked at Monica and laughed, and Monica had flushed – not much, but enough to ruin the cool perfection of her make-up. 'Remind me not to buy any history papers off of you,' the cutest of the guys had said. 'What kind of dumbass doesn't know that?' Though Claire had been sure none of them had, really. 'Chinese. Riiiiight.'

Claire had seen the fury in Monica's eyes, quickly covered over with smiles and laughter and flirting. Claire had ceased to exist again, for the guys.

For the girls, she was brand-new, and unwelcome as hell. She'd been dealing with it all her life. Smart and small and average-looking wasn't exactly winning the life lottery; you had to fight for it, whatever *it* was. Somebody was always laughing at, or hitting, or ignoring you, or a combination of the first two. She'd thought when she was a kid that getting laughed at was the worst thing, and then – after the first couple of school-yard showdowns – getting hit jumped up to number one. But for most of her

(brief, two-year) high school experience, being ignored was worse by far. She'd got there a year earlier than everybody else, and left a year ahead of them. Nobody liked that.

Nobody but teachers, anyway.

The problem was that Claire really *loved* school. Loved books, and reading, and learning things – OK, not calculus, but pretty much everything else. Physics.

What normal girl loved *physics*? Abnormal ones. Ones who were not ever going to be hot.

And face it, being hot? That was what life was all about. As Monica had proved, when the world had wobbled off its axis for a few seconds to notice Claire, and then wobbled right back to revolve around the pretty ones.

It wasn't fair. She'd dived in and worked her ass off through high school. Graduated with a perfect 4.0, scored high enough on the tests to qualify for admission to the great schools, the legendary schools, the ones where being a brainiac mutant girl-freak wasn't necessarily a downside. (Except that, of course, at those schools, there were probably *hot tall leggy* brainiac mutant girl-freaks.)

Didn't matter. Mom and Dad had taken one look at the stack of enthusiastic thumbs-up replies from universities like MIT and Caltech and Yale, and clamped down hard. No way was their sixteen-year-old daughter (nearly seventeen, she kept insisting, although it wasn't really true) going to run off three thousand miles to go to school.

At least not at first. (Claire had tried, unsuccessfully, to get across the concept that if anything would kill her budding academic career worse than being a transfer student at one of those places, it was being a transfer student from *Texas Prairie University*. Otherwise known as TPEwwwwwww.)

So here she was, stuck on the crappy top floor of a crappy dorm in a crappy school where eighty per cent of the students transferred after the first two years – or dropped out – and the Monickettes were stealing her wet laundry and dumping it down the trash chute, all because Monica couldn't be bothered to know anything about one of the world wars big enough to rate a Roman numeral.

But it isn't fair! something in her howled. *I had a plan! An actual plan!* Monica slept late, and Claire had got up early just to do laundry while all the party crowd was comatose and the studious crowd was off to classes. She'd thought she could leave it for a couple of minutes to grab her shower – another scary experience – and she'd never even thought about anybody doing something so incredibly *low*.

As she bit back her sobs, she noticed – again – how quiet it was up here. Creepy and deserted, with half the girls deep asleep and the other half gone. Even when it was crowded and buzzing, the dorm was creepy, though. Old, decrepit, full of shadows and corners and places mean girls could lurk. In fact, that summed up the whole town. Morganville was small and old and dusty, full of

creepy little oddities. Like the fact that the streetlights worked only half the time, and they were too far apart when they did. Like the way the people in the local campus stores seemed *too* happy. Desperately happy. Like the fact that the whole town, despite the dust, was *clean* – no trash, no graffiti; nobody begging for spare change in alleyways.

Weird.

She could almost hear her mother saying, *Honey, it's just that you're in a strange place. It'll get better. You'll just have to try harder.*

Mom always said things like that, and Claire had always done her best to hide how hard it was to follow that advice.

Well. Nothing to do but try to get her stuff back.

Claire gulped a couple more times, wiped her eyes, and hauled the arm-twisting weight of her backpack up and over her shoulder. She stared for a few seconds at the wet pair of panties and one sock clutched in her right hand, then hastily unzipped the front pocket of the backpack and stuffed them in. Man, that would kill whatever cool she had left, if she walked around carrying those.

'Well,' said a low, satisfied voice from the open door opposite the stairs, 'look who it is. The dumpster diver.'

Claire stopped, one hand on the rusted iron railing. Something was telling her to run, but something always told her that: fight-or-flight – she'd read the textbooks. And she was tired of fighting. She turned around slowly,

as Monica Morrell stepped out of the dorm room – not hers, so she’d busted Erica’s lock again. Monica’s running buddies Jennifer and Gina filed out and took up flanking positions. Soldiers in flip-flops and low-rise jeans and French manicures.

Monica struck a pose. It was something she was good at, Claire had to admit. Nearly six feet tall, Monica had flowing, shiny black hair, and big blue eyes accented with just the right amount of liner and mascara. Perfect skin. One of those model-shaped faces, all cheekbones and pouty lips. And if she had a model’s body, it was a Victoria’s Secret model, all curves, not angles.

She was rich, she was pretty, and as far as Claire could tell, it didn’t make her a bit happy. What did, though – what made those big blue eyes glow right now – was the idea of tormenting Claire just a little more.

‘Shouldn’t you be in first period at the junior high by now?’ Monica asked. ‘Or at least *getting* your first period?’

‘Maybe she’s looking for the clothes she left lying around,’ Gina piled on, and laughed. Jennifer laughed with her. Claire swore their eyes, their pretty jewel-coloured eyes, just glowed with the joy of making her feel like shit. ‘Litterbug!’

‘Clothes?’ Monica folded her arms and pretended to think. ‘You mean, like those rags we threw away? The ones she left cluttering up the washer?’

‘Yeah, those.’

‘I wouldn’t wear those to sweat in.’

‘I wouldn’t wear them to scrub out the boys’ toilet,’ Jennifer blurted.

Monica, annoyed, turned and shoved her. ‘Yeah, you know all about the boys’ toilet, don’t you? Didn’t you do Steve Gillespie in ninth grade in there?’ She made sucking sounds, and they all laughed again, though Jennifer looked uncomfortable. Claire felt her cheeks flare red, even though it wasn’t – for a change – a dis against her. ‘Jeez, Jen, Steve Gillespie? Keep your mouth shut if you can’t think of something that won’t embarrass yourself.’

Jennifer – of course – turned her anger on a safer target. Claire. She lunged forward and shoved Claire back a step, towards the stairs. ‘Go get your stupid clothes already! I’m sick of looking at you, with your pasty skin—’

‘Yeah, Junior High, ever heard of sunshine?’ Gina rolled her eyes.

‘Watch it,’ Monica snapped, which was odd, because all three of them had the best tans money could buy.

Claire scrambled to steady herself. The heavy backpack pulled her off-balance, and she grabbed on to the banister. Jen lunged at her again and slammed the heel of her hand painfully hard into Claire’s collar-bone. ‘Don’t!’ Claire yelped, and batted Jen’s hand away. Hard.

There was a second of breathless silence, and then Monica said, very quietly, ‘Did you just hit my friend, you stupid little bitch? Where do you think you get off, doing things like that around here?’

And she stepped forward and slapped Claire across the face, hard enough to draw blood, hard enough to make flares and comets streak across Claire's vision, hard enough to make everything turn red and boiling hot.

Claire let go of the banister and slapped Monica right back, full across her pouty mouth, and for just a tight, white-hot second she actually felt *good* about it, but then Monica hissed like a scorched cat, and Claire had time to think, *Oh crap, I really shouldn't have done that.*

She never saw the punch coming. Didn't even really feel the impact, except as a blank sensation and confusion, but then the weight of her backpack on her shoulder was pulling her to one side and she staggered.

She almost caught herself, and then Gina, grinning spitefully, reached over and shoved her backward, down the stairs, and there was nothing but air behind her.

She hit the edge of every stair, all the way to the bottom. Her backpack broke open and spilt books as she tumbled, and at the top of the stairs Monica and the Monickettes laughed and hooted and high-fived, but she saw it only in disconnected little jerks of motion, freeze-frames.

It seemed to take forever before she skidded to a stop at the bottom, and then her head hit the wall with a nasty, meaty sound, and everything went black.

She later remembered only one more thing, in the darkness: Monica's voice, a low and vicious whisper. 'Tonight. You'll get what's coming to you, you freak. I'm going to make sure.'

It seemed like seconds, but when she woke up again there was somebody kneeling next to her, and it wasn't Monica or her nail-polish mafia; it was Erica, who had the room at the top of the stairs, four doors down from Claire's. Erica looked pale and strained and scared, and Claire tried to smile, because that was what you did when somebody was scared. She didn't hurt until she moved, and then her head started to throb. There was a red-hot ache near the top, and when she reached up to touch it she felt a hard raised knot. No blood, though. It hurt worse when she probed the spot, but not in an oh-my-God-skull-fracture kind of way, or at least that was what she hoped.

'Are you OK?' Erica asked, waving her hands kind of helplessly in mid-air as Claire wiggled her way up to a sitting position against the wall. Claire risked a quick look past her up the stairs, then down. The coast looked Monica-clear. Nobody else had come out to see what was up, either – most of them were afraid of getting in trouble, and the rest just flat didn't care.

'Yeah,' she said, and managed a shaky laugh. 'Guess I tripped.'

'You need to go to the quack shack?' Which was college code for the university clinic. 'Or, God, an ambulance or whatever?'

'No. No, I'm OK.' Wishful thinking, but although basically everything in her body hurt like hell, nothing felt like it had broken into pieces. Claire got to her feet, winced at a sore ankle, and picked up her backpack.

Notebooks tumbled out. Erica grabbed a couple and jammed them back in, then ran lightly up a few steps to gather the scattered textbooks. ‘Damn, Claire, do you really need all this crap? How many classes do you have in a day?’

‘Six.’

‘You’re nuts.’ Erica, good deed done, reverted to the neutrality that all the non-cool girls in the dorm had shown her so far. ‘Better get to the quack shack, seriously. You look like crap.’

Claire pasted on a smile and kept it there until Erica got to the top of the stairs and started complaining about the broken lock on her dorm room.

Tonight, Monica had leant over and whispered. *You’ll get what’s coming to you, you freak*. She hadn’t called anybody, or tried to find out if Claire had a broken neck. She didn’t care if Claire died.

No, that was wrong. The problem was, she *did* care.

Claire tasted blood. Her lip was split, and it was bleeding. She wiped at the mess with the back of her hand, then the hem of her T-shirt before realising that it was literally the only thing she had to wear. *I need to go down to the basement and get my clothes out of the trash*. The idea of going down there – going anywhere alone in this dorm – suddenly terrified her. Monica was waiting. And the other girls wouldn’t do anything. Even Erica, who was probably the nicest one in the whole place, was scared to come right out on her side. Hell, Erica got hassled, too, but she was probably just as glad

that Claire was there to get the worst of it. This wasn't just as bad as high school, where she'd been treated with contempt and casual cruelty – this was worse, a lot worse. And she didn't even have any friends here. Erica was about the best she'd been able to come up with, and Erica was more concerned about her broken door than Claire's broken head.

She was alone. And if she hadn't been before, she was scared now. Really, really scared. What she'd seen in the Monica Mafia's eyes today wasn't just the usual lazy menace of cool girls versus the geeks; this was worse. She'd got casual shoves or pinches before, trips, mean laughter, but this was more like lions coming in for the kill.

They're going to kill me.

She started shakily down the flights of stairs, every step a wincing pain through her body, and remembered that she'd slapped Monica hard enough to leave a mark.

Yeah. They're going to kill me.

If Monica ended up with a bruise on that perfect face, there wasn't any question about it.