

She always knew she was different.

There were three very extraordinary things that happened to Rose Collings in her life, things that had no reasonable explanation. And each time she tried to tell her parents, they would dismiss her before the words even came out. Like what she had to say couldn't possibly be more important than the evening news or the laundry or whatever else her parents chose to preoccupy themselves with instead of listening to her. Rose came to the very reasonable conclusion that she would tell no one.

Extraordinary things rarely occurred in the small town of West Nyack, population 3,439. Entrenched in a past soaked in the blood of the Civil War and Salem Witch Trials, West Nyack felt more like a museum to its dark history than the city that lay just on the outskirts of the big apple. It was the kind of town where you grew up, found a job, raised your family, and retired. West Nyack was in fact a very ordinary town.

Summer came and went in the sort of quickness that was all too unfair and all too familiar to the students at Clarkstown South High School. One hour in detention felt like an eternity in purgatory, but two months of summer felt like an after-thought. The first day of school arrived with a whimper as hundreds of tired, worn out students dragged themselves to first period class. Rose was two inches away from the front door of what would be her English class for the next nine months when someone from behind slapped their hands over her eyes. Rose stopped. "I know who it is."

"How do you always know it's me?" Gina Torres pulled her hands away from Rose's eyes.

Rose turned around to face her best friend. "Because you're the only one I know who still does that." Rose grabbed Gina, and the two hugged.

"Why didn't I get to see you all summer?" Gina asked before pulling away.

"Because you decided to go away for the whole summer."

"I'll never do that again." Gina looked as serious as a heart attack.

"You better not. I had to fend for myself."

Rose and Gina walked into the classroom and chose two seats next to each other. Students began to file in, filling up the seats around them. For Rose, this would more than likely be the only class she could look forward to. The same, however, couldn't be said for the rest of her classmates who looked like they'd rather be in detention than first period English.

"Did you hear about the new guy?" Gina asked as she took her notebook out of her backpack.

"What new guy?"

"Chase Anderson."

"He's not exactly new, Gina. He was in our freshman class, remember?"

"Well, did you hear about how he got kicked out of whatever fancy prep school he was going to?" Gina was the kind of person who thrived on gossip. If there wasn't such juicy news in school throughout the year, Gina would probably be homeschooled.

"No, I didn't. Why did he get kicked out?" Rose couldn't be any less interested in why or how Chase Anderson came back to Clarkstown, but she also didn't want to break her best friend's heart.

“Nobody knows for sure cause the Andersons made sure to keep it hush hush. But I heard that whatever it was, it was really bad.”

As if on cue, Chase walked into the classroom, and everyone went silent. Dressed like a modern-day version of the 1950’s greaser who hated authority almost more than he hated school, Chase walked slowly to the back of the room. He took his seat, oblivious to the gazes that were locked onto his every single move. Rose caught herself staring and snapped out of it. She faced the front of the classroom, but could still feel his energy as if he were sitting right next to her.

Gina leaned towards Rose. “He’s got that whole brooding, mysterious thing going on.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Rose turned around when she heard someone clear their throat behind her. While everyone was staring at Chase, Chase was staring at her. Rose turned her head around, visibly shaken.

“What happened?” Gina asked.

“Nothing...I just...”

Before Rose could finish her thought, Mr. Wimmer, 11th grade English teacher, walked in and placed his briefcase on his desk.

“Welcome, everyone. You all look as excited to be here as I am.” A low rumble of laughter could be heard from the class. “I don’t think it’s necessary for me to write my name on the chalkboard. I’m sure you guys are more than capable of remembering my name. Richard Wimmer. You can call me Mr. Wimmer, or you can call me Richard. Anyone who calls me Dick gets detention.”

Richard took off his blazer and placed it on his chair. He walked around to the front of his desk and stood before a classroom filled with unenthused juniors. “I apologize ahead of time for the pathetic syllabus the district is forcing on you guys this year. We’re reading Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’ to start the year off. If it were up to me, you’d be reading Poe or King. But I promise to make the tale of two horny, star crossed lovers as entertaining as possible.”

Rose looked around as the classroom erupted into laughter. The only one not laughing was Chase who coincidentally had never stopped staring at Rose.

Gina elbowed Rose and whispered, “I like him.”

“Chase?”

“No, stupid! Richard.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “You only like him because he said horny.”

“I think that’s a good enough reason.”

Halfway through fourth period chemistry, Rose was already counting down to summer vacation. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy getting a high school education. With a 4.0 GPA, she had the whole higher learning thing down. She didn’t even have to try that hard; it all came easy to her. There were no challenges, no surprises, no lows to make the highs that much better. High School was just this mundane thing she had to get through so she could carry on with the rest of her life. A few minutes before class ended, Rose excused herself to go to the bathroom. Her chemistry teacher was too busy drooling over the girls who managed to grow a whole bra size over the summer to notice.

Deep in thought, she didn’t hear the footsteps behind her.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?” It was the deep, familiar voice of someone she’d come to despise throughout her time at Clarkstown.

Rose turned around slowly. Nick Anderson was Chase's oldest brother, a senior by technicality, but not anymore mature than a fifth grader. "Shouldn't you be in class?" Rose answered back.

Nick leaned against the lockers. "Sure, but I'd rather be here with you."

"Wish I could say the same." Rose walked past Nick, but he grabbed her arm before she had a chance to get far.

"Something tells me you really don't like me, Rose Collings."

"That's the first thing you've said that makes sense. Now let go of my arm, Nick." They stood frozen in time until the lunch bell rang and swarms of students crowded the halls. Nick let go, and Rose wasted no time getting as far away from him as she could. She hurried to the cafeteria, nearly colliding into Gina on the way.

"What got into you?"

"Nothing. I just hate Nick Anderson, that's all," Rose answered as they made their way to an empty table.

Gina followed and sat down across from Rose. "Did you just run into him?"

"You could say that. That guy gives me the creeps."

"I mean, he's pretty hot, but he's definitely creepy," Gina responded before she took a bite of her sandwich. "And he's totally in love with you. He has been since like forever."

"I wouldn't call that love, Gina. Not even close."

"What are you guys talking about?" Anthony Monroe was the male equivalent of Gina and just as nosy.

"Rose ran into Nick Anderson in the hallway."

Anthony sat down next to Rose. "He's so hot."

Rose looked at Anthony in complete awe. "Wow, you're just as delusional as Gina."

Anthony shrugged. "Whatever, I'd get with that in a heartbeat."

"Trust me, you don't want anything to do with that." Rose trailed off as she saw Chase walk out of the cafeteria.

Anthony caught a glimpse of Chase just as he was leaving. "Did you guys hear why he got kicked out of school?"

Gina leaned in. "I heard he did something really bad."

Anthony was the one with the gossip this time, and he relished every moment. "I heard he killed someone."

Rose stared at Anthony. "That's literally impossible."

"Are you sure though? Look at his brother. He's a hot psychopath too."

"Please tell me you're smarter than this, Anthony. He wouldn't be able to go to school if he killed someone."

"Yeah, but he comes from a wealthy family. Wealthy families pay to have stuff like that covered up all the time."

"I'm leaving." Rose got up from the table and gathered her things before walking away.

"Rose! I'm kidding! Kind of."

Gina and Anthony remained at the table. Gina watched as her best friend left the cafeteria. "Do you think he really killed someone?"

"Anything's possible. What I know for sure is I'm staying away from Chase Anderson. I am not trying to end up on the 5 o'clock news."

The final bell couldn't come soon enough. Rose hurried to her locker, grabbed her textbooks, and started her walk home. She always preferred walking home. Those were the moments she loved, that small lapse of time in between being at school and being at home, when she could be alone with her thoughts. Sometimes it felt like it was the only time she had to herself. She took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of summer that managed to linger and slip into the few days before fall. The crunch of the leaves under her feet made her feel nostalgic, and she lost all sense of time. And place. With her head in the clouds, Rose was oblivious to the gaping hole left by an uprooted tree. When she fell, she was more surprised than hurt. Before she had a chance to pick herself up, she heard someone running from behind her. Her head snapped around, and Chase was suddenly standing next to her, his hand held out.

"I don't bite," he said looking down at her.

Rose hesitated then reached for his hands. He helped her up with ease and picked up her books that had fallen on the ground.

"Thank you," Rose said as she took the rest of her books from him. She turned around to walk away.

"I didn't kill anyone."

Rose stopped short. She turned around slowly. "What?"

"I heard you and your friends talking in the cafeteria. I didn't kill anyone."

"I never thought you did. It was..."

"Your friends. I know." Chase looked down and absentmindedly kicked a stone to the side.

"So what did happen then?" Rose took a few steps closer to Chase but still kept her distance.

Chase hesitated. He wanted to tell her. "It doesn't matter."

Before Rose had the chance to say anything else, Chase walked away. She stared at him as he slowly disappeared into the distance. There was something he said that bothered her, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Then a thought occurred to her. Chase had already left the cafeteria when Anthony started talking about him.

That night the nightmares came back. Rose was five years old the first time she dreamt about the woman burning at the stake. She couldn't see her face, but her screams were forever seared into her subconscious. She woke up screaming in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat and terrified. Her parents ran to her room and stayed with her until she fell back to sleep. When she asked questions the following morning, her parents told her that's what you get for having sweets before bedtime. Then in 9th grade she had the nightmares again. The screams were louder and she could smell the scent of burning flesh. She woke up screaming and again her parents ran to her. And when she asked questions the next morning, they told her to stop reading stories about the old, haunted house down the street.

But the night after Chase helped her up, the night after Rose wondered how it was possible he could hear her conversation through a sea of other conversations, Rose had the worst nightmare of all. A woman was still burning at the stake, but this time Rose was so close she could feel the hot flames flicker against her face. She held her hands to her nose to block out the putrid scent of burning flesh as she walked around to finally catch a glimpse of the woman's face. Frozen in a permanent state of fear, Rose stood in horror as she realized that the face she was looking at was exactly like her own. And as Rose opened her mouth to scream, the terrified face in front of her let out an angry, low bellow.

Rose woke up suddenly, breathless and shaken. She was still screaming.

“Rose!?” Edris ran into her daughter’s room, her husband Joel a breath behind. “What’s wrong?”

Rose stopped screaming and began to take deep breaths to calm herself down. But she still couldn’t speak.

“You had the nightmare again, didn’t you?” Joel answered for her. Rose nodded her head slowly, still trying to catch her breath. Joel and Edris exchanged a concerned look then returned their gaze to Rose. It was fleeting, but Rose saw something in their eyes, something that looked a lot like fear.

“You gotta stop watching horror movies before bed, sweetie,” Edris said as she gently moved a hair from Rose’s face.

Rose pulled away. “I didn’t watch any horror movies, Mom. It wasn’t a horror movie just like it wasn’t the candy just like it wasn’t reading ghost stories.”

“Honey…” Joel began, but Rose didn’t let him finish.

“No! I want to know the truth! There’s a reason I’m having these nightmares. I can tell when you two look at each other. There’s something you won’t tell me!”

Joel and Edris were silent. Edris sat down slowly on Rose’s bed and grabbed her daughter’s hands. “I promise you, there’s nothing that we know that we aren’t telling you. And what if there was something? What could it possibly be? What could we possibly be hiding from you, Rose?”

Rose was silent. She didn’t know the answer to that.

“Rose, honey, just try to relax and go back to sleep. You have to be up early for school in the morning. Ok?” Edris brushed a light kiss on Rose’s forehead and followed Joel out of Rose’s bedroom. Rose slid onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She could still hear the screams, smell the burning flesh, feel her skin on fire. And then she saw the face, the face that looked like hers. She loved her parents but didn’t believe one word they said. Not when it came to this.

The following morning, Rose woke up tired and drained from a night spent tossing and turning but managed to drag herself out of bed and get to school. Gina accosted Rose the second she got to her locker.

“Why didn’t you tell me you talked to Chase Anderson?” Gina planted herself against the lockers and glared at Rose.

“You can stop looking at me like that. I didn’t really talk to Chase, Gina. And how did you even find out?” Rose grabbed the books she needed for the first few classes and dumped them in her backpack.

“I have my ways.”

Rose slammed her locker shut. “Whatever.” She walked past Gina towards her English class.

Gina caught up to her. “What has you all moody this morning?”

Rose took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“You had the nightmare again?”

“Yeah. And it was somehow even worse this time.” Images from the nightmare still lingered. Rose doubted they would ever leave her subconscious.

“You gotta stop eating candy and reading horror stories before bed.” Gina often turned to humor to lighten up a dark situation.

Rose smirked. "Yeah, and stop watching horror movies too." The two walked into class and took their seats. Rose saw Chase sitting in the back and silently shamed herself for secretly looking for him.

Gina looked behind them then tilted her head towards Rose and whispered, "You never told me what you two actually talked about."

"It was really nothing. He just told me he didn't...kill anyone, and I obviously believe him." Rose glanced quickly behind her and saw Chase looking at her. He smiled briefly then looked away.

"That's random," Gina muttered under her breath.

"What's random?"

"That he said that, but whatever. He's weird." Gina opened her notebook just as Richard walked into the classroom.

"Star crossed lovers," Richard said without preamble. "What does it mean?"

Rose raised her hand, and Richard smiled at her. "Not you, Ms. Collings. I already know you know the answer." Rose put her hand down as Richard looked around the classroom. "Chase Anderson, welcome back. Can you tell the class what that phrase means?"

Chase snapped his head up and looked around at his classmates. He didn't even want to be here let alone speak to the class.

"We're waiting, Mr. Anderson." Richard continued. A few smirks could be heard from a couple of jocks in the front row.

Chase hated being called Mr. Anderson. He cleared his throat and slowly sat up in his seat. He didn't even realize he had been slouching. "Star crossed lovers was a term coined by Shakespeare to describe two lovers who loved each other deeply but were cursed by the stars."

The class fell silent. Gina's jaw dropped as she silently mouthed, "What?" to Rose. But Rose was too busy looking at Chase in utter disbelief.

Richard nodded his head at Chase. "You are absolutely right. Beyond just being about two teenagers who were hot and heavy for each other, which I'm sure you all could relate to, 'Romeo and Juliet' was about destiny, fate, rivalry. And even though it was written over three centuries ago, those are some of the things that still rule this world to this day. They didn't call it a tragedy for nothing."

Richard's lecture was cut short by the fire alarm that suddenly pierced the silence in the classroom.

Rose looked around as students began to gather their things. "Is this a drill, Mr. Wimmer?"

Richard began collecting his things. "This is absolutely not a drill, and I suggest you all exit the building in a quiet and orderly fashion." And of course, everyone did the exact opposite as they clamored out of the classroom into the hallway, more excited than scared.

Fire drills at Clarkstown South were always a social occasion, but the real deal was an all-out party. Huddled groups of students used the unexpected free time to play music from their phones and smoke cigarettes in the parking lot. While Gina and Anthony mingled with other students and shared conspiracy theories about why the fire alarms went off, Rose found a quiet area on a withered patch of grass and sat down by herself. She took out a notebook and began writing. It was the only thing that kept her sane sometimes.

"Can I sit next to you?"

Startled out of her train of thought, Rose looked up and saw Chase standing a few feet away from her. She hesitated, more confused than anything. “Sure.” She moved over to make room. Chase sat down next to her, bringing his knees up to rest his forearms on.

“The school might be on fire, and they couldn’t look happier,” he said.

Rose chuckled. “I mean, can you blame them?”

Chase turned his head to look at Rose. “I guess not.”

Rose nervously looked back down at her notebook. “Are you glad you came back?”

Chase was silent for a moment. “I’m not glad to be back here, but I’m glad I left.”

“Are you ever gonna tell me why you left? Or where you even were?”

Chase looked at her, and Rose couldn’t help but notice the way his brown eyes perfectly captured the warmth of the sun. Chase smiled. “Maybe.” He looked down at her notebook. “You write poetry?”

Rose stopped gazing into Chase’s eyes long enough to quickly close her notebook. “No. I mean, yeah.”

Chase looked back up at Rose. “Will you read it to me sometime?”

Rose could swear she felt something fluttering around in her stomach. “Maybe.”

Chase looked away just in time to see Nick walking towards them. One glance at Nick and Rose groaned as she gathered her things and got up. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hate your brother.”

Chase stood up next to her. “Me too.”

“Where you going, shit head?” Nick said as he walked up to Chase and Rose.

“None of your business.” Chase’s jaw tightened as he clenched his fists at his side.

“You’re with my girlfriend, so it is my business.” Nick focused his gaze on Rose, making her skin crawl.

“I’m not your girlfriend, Nick,” Rose spat out in disgust.

“That’s gonna change this year.”

“Why don’t you just go away?” Chase took a step closer to Nick.

“Why don’t you just go back to your stupid little school? Oh, that’s right, you got kicked out.” Nick took a menacing step closer Chase.

Rose was never one to stay quiet, a fact that occasionally had gotten her into more sticky situations than she could count. “At least he didn’t get held back twice.”

Nick looked at Rose. “He can fight his own battles. Isn’t that right, Chase?” A bell sounded, signaling the students to return to school, but Nick and Chase remained still, head to head, toe to toe. Time seemed to freeze as the two brothers looked positioned to rip each other apart. Then very uncharacteristically, Nick took a step back and smiled. “Saved by the bell.” He looked at Rose one more time before he turned around and walked away. Chase stood in the same spot, his eyes focused on Nick until his brother disappeared among the swarm of students walking back to their classrooms.

“Why’s your brother such a jerk?”

“Because he always wanted to be better than me, but he never was. And never will be.” Chase turned to his side to face Rose who remained standing next to him.

“Better at what?”

Chase hesitated. “It’s nothing. We should probably head back to class. Thanks for letting me sit next to you, and sorry about my brother.”

Rose watched in curiosity as Chase began to walk away. Just when she thought he would let her in and share his secrets, he shut her right back out. She was startled when he stopped and

turned back around. "I really would like to hear some of your poetry one day," Chase said. Then he turned around again to walk away.

And I would really like to know why you keep running away instead of talking about your past, Rose thought. And more than likely, she would never know. Rose sighed as she gathered her books and made her way back to school.

Getting kicked out of school quickly turned Chase into the pariah of the family, and after being the golden child for so long, it wasn't something he was used to. Nick was always the screw up, the black sheep, the outcast who didn't give a damn about anyone else but himself. But the look in his Chase's father's eyes the day Chase returned home just a few days shy of the end of the semester was one he'll never forget. It felt like ice in his veins, and in that second he knew things would be different. Two months later and Chase's parents, Blaire and Roland Anderson, were still just as angry, just as disappointed, and just as cold.

Chase walked in through his front door just as the sun began to set, signaling the end to another day that felt just as pointless as the day before. His mother was already sedating herself in the living room with vodka and muscle relaxers; his dad and Nick were silently eating dinner in the kitchen. No one acknowledged his presence, nor did they wonder why it took him so long to get home from school. Chase went upstairs to his room and shut the door behind him. His room was the only place he felt welcome. Posters from his favorite bands blanketed the walls and books were scattered everywhere. He kept his record player and vinyl collection in the corner of his room closest to his bed. Chase had just placed his backpack by his desk before someone knocked on the door. He waited, hoping whoever it was would just give up and go away. But the knocking continued, and Chase sighed as he walked towards the door, unlocked and opened it.

"You're a pathetic little weasel," Nick was practically frothing at the mouth as he hovered in the doorway.

Chase rolled his eyes. "Go away, Nick." Chase tried closing the door but Nick slammed his palm on the door to keep it open.

"Stay away from Rose."

Chase smirked. "And why would I do that? She's about the only person in that school halfway decent."

"Because she's mine."

"Last time I checked, she's not an object but a person, and I'm pretty sure she hates your guts."

Without any warning, Nick shoved Chase hard in the chest. Completely caught off guard, Chase staggered back, catching himself before nearly crashing on the floor. "Nick, what the..."

Nick remained in the doorway, heaving and on the brink of ripping Chase apart. "Just stay away from her."

Chase and Nick stood only a few feet apart with nothing but tension and pent up rage between them. They stared each other down like two sworn enemies, moments before an all-out brawl. Chase slowly closed his eyes and when he opened them, Nick's body was flung like a ragdoll into the hallway. Moments later, the door slammed shut behind him. Chase walked over to the door and locked it once again. He took a step back and waited. Seconds later he could hear Nick on the other side, banging on the door in a fit of rage. "You'll pay for that! You don't scare me!"

Chase walked away from the door and sat on his bed. He put his headphones on, pressed play on a song on his phone, and suddenly Nick, his feverish obsession with Rose, and all the hatred in his house ceased to exist.