

ROSE COFFIN

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CHAPTER 1 A GIRL NAMED ROSE

She always knew that one day she would have to conquer the woods or succumb to them. For the first twelve years of her life, Rose Coffin had delayed this moment as best she could. As far back as she remembered, her head had been filled with stories about the strange goings-on in the woods just down the street from her little pink house, across from where she stood every morning waiting for her bus, the bone-chilling noises drifting out like a phantom limb and ensnaring her. The woods were lush and dark and deep, and every inch was covered with dread thick as sap. She had heard tales of human sacrifices taking place within, satanic rituals, murders, disappearances. Late at night there were

said to be flashing lights and unusual sounds, exotic smells. Some people were said to lose their minds in there. Some people were said to emerge altered in some way. And some people were said to never have emerged at all.

And now here Rose was, on the precipice of these very woods, about to set foot within. But why?

Because SallyAnn and her friends asked her to. That was why.

SallyAnn had found Rose hidden away in a bathroom stall, quietly singing to herself. She had an oral presentation coming up, and there was nothing Rose dreaded more. She'd rather have her face ripped off by rabid squirrels than speak in front of the class, and the only way to calm herself down was to sing. It was a coping mechanism she had learned when she was little. Her twin brother, Hyacinth, had taught it to her, and for a while, it really worked. But ever since the accident, he wasn't there anymore. And over time, Rose grew quieter and quieter.

"What was going on in there, Rosie?" SallyAnn began. She was taller than all the other girls, her eyes cast down at Rose. "That couldn't have been you singing. I mean, it wasn't half-bad. I'm actually impressed."

Her friends echoed her faint praise.

"So, are you a singer or something?"

Rose's head raised. She was searching SallyAnn's eyes for a motive. A part of her—a very big part—prayed this might be the start of something special. She knew it was dangerous to think like this, but her heart and hopes were pulling the strings now. The words squeezed out of her mouth as if through a pinhole, awkward as ever and directed toward the floor. “Well . . . I . . . Yeah . . . Kind of . . .”

“You know we have a band, right? We're looking for a singer. Care to try out?”

For a year now, Rose had seen flyers for SallyAnn's band all around the school; she had heard the sounds from down the street. It was a beautiful noise. As the question hung in the air, Rose felt faint. If not for the wall, she might have fallen straight back. “M-me?” She knew her face was bright red, and she kept trying to nonchalantly exhale as a way to cool it down.

Rose hated being stared at. Whenever she was stared at, whenever she was embarrassed—which was often and at the slightest bit of attention—her face burned red. It was why she never brought attention to herself, never spoke up for herself, never raised her hand in class—because she would always end up looking like a jar of tomato sauce and someone could always be counted on to point it out, which would make Rose flush even more. She could remember

the time way back in third grade when SallyAnn gave her the nickname Rosie because of her fickle pigmentation. It felt like a curse that would never lift. The moment *still* stung, but she always thought that if they ever became friends, the name could be turned around into something endearing.

SallyAnn nodded. “Look, I’m not saying we’re going to be besties or anything, but if you can sing the hell out of some songs, you can maybe join our band. It’ll be so real.” She looked her up and down, her face crumpled as if repulsed. “But if that happens, we’ll have to work on your clothes a bit. And that hair. At least run a comb through it.”

Rose pulled her unruly hair out of her face. She placed one of her imitation sneakers over the other, as if to hide them, and adjusted her shirt, which was a size too small. These things had caused her tremendous amounts of taunts and ridicule throughout her life—it was as certain as the sun’s rise, but with none of the light. But maybe no longer.

“Well?”

“Um, yeah . . . so . . . uh, what kind of music do you play?” she asked, her thoughts running at a wicked pace.

SallyAnn belched laughter. “What, you mean, like, reggae? Jazz? Don’t ruin it already, Rosie. Just meet us in the woods after school, okay?”

Hearing this, Rose’s stomach flipped. “The woods?”

“Yeah, you know, back where those older boys hang out on their dirt bikes? There. Nobody can know about this, Rosie. You know how jealous some of these girls get. The whole school would be knocking on my door asking for a chance to audition.”

But the woods? Rose thought again. Does it have to be the woods? Does she have any idea what she’s saying? Has she ever been in there herself? Has everyone lost their minds? “Can I . . . I mean . . . Is there anywhere else we can meet?”

“Well, we can all squeeze into that little pink house of yours. Have a look around, see what’s in the fridge. How about that?”

She said this with a knowing grin, and Rose went ice-cold. The last thing she wanted was someone like SallyAnn in her house. It would ruin whatever chance they had at being friends. No one ever entered her house, and something told her SallyAnn knew that.

She squeezed the books tight to her chest. “Somewhere else . . . maybe?”

“Be in the woods at four o’clock. Don’t make us come knocking.” Then, as she and her friends walked out of the bathroom, she said, “And, Rosie, don’t be scared. People only die in there at night.”

Now, staring into the woods, the previous conversation etched deep into her bones, she understood that her destiny

was in her own hands. It was something she could actually control. All she had to do was enter.

Three feet in and she immediately felt cold. It was a warm day in late May, but she swore she could see her breath. Her chest tightened, and her breathing became more and more strained, as if her lungs were encased in ice, as if everything was. Her eyes roamed warily through the woods. All was still and silent. Still and silent and dead.

Don't let the place get inside your head, she told herself. Just find SallyAnn and everything will be better. For once in your life just have some guts. Conversation within her head was never a problem. After her brother's accident, the only person she felt comfortable talking with was herself, and she did it often.

Glancing back, she couldn't even see the road anymore. It was like it had been swallowed up. For a moment, it was as if the entire school and all her problems at home were suddenly gone. The woods took her away from it all, and there was a kind of peace in that.

She walked tentatively, her arms wrapped around her gangly body. She had no idea where to go. There were trails, but they veered off in multiple directions. Beneath her chest, her heart was galloping.

Calm down, she told herself. Calm down or you're going to end up in a ball on the ground. People die like this, Rose.

People get lost and starve, they fall in a ditch, get eaten by some animal—

“Stop!” she called out. Warily, she glanced around to see if anyone had heard. Then, under her breath, she continued. “Stop it. You’re doing the right thing.”

After walking awhile down the middle path, she heard a noise, a slow kind of shuffle. “Wh-who’s there?” she cried, her voice cracking in a thousand places. Frantically, her eyes tried to locate the source. *SallyAnn? The older kids? That didn’t sound like any dirt bike you’ve ever heard, Rose. Is someone there? Is something following you, Rose? Waiting? Watching? Ready to pounce? You’re too young to die!*

If her senses hadn’t been numbed with panic, she would have noticed she was whimpering. Her arms were tucked tight against her chest, her hands meeting below her chin, fingers writhing. The sound repeated, and gazing deeper into the woods, she spotted movement. “What is that?” Her head spun at the strange sight, her blood going cold. “S-SallyAnn?” All around her, the trees were moving. Not like if there was a wind—which there wasn’t. The branches weren’t swaying, the leaves weren’t rustling. It was like the trunks had lifted out of the ground and were crawling on their roots toward her, the woods come alive.

It’s a mistake, she thought. An illusion. This is what you always do. Now, stop it. You’re not seeing that. You’re not!

Quickly, she hurried down the path, away from the noises and whatever was lurking there.

Eventually, in a small clearing up ahead, she saw splashes of color mixed in with all the green. It was SallyAnn and her friends. They were sitting on fallen trees, laughing and playing around on their phones.

One of the girls spotted her standing there watching them, and nudged SallyAnn.

“Right on time,” SallyAnn said, standing up.

Rose was confused. She had been wandering these woods for at least ten minutes. Maybe even fifteen.

“Well, Rosie, don’t waste our time. Are you going to sing or not?”

In all the excitement and possibilities of this new life, she had completely forgotten that she had to actually perform. She hadn’t sung for anybody in three years. What if her brother had been lying about how good her voice was? What if he had been only looking out for her like he always promised to do? Suddenly, these realizations hit her with the force of a speeding train. “Right. Yeah. Of course.” She felt herself wither with insecurity, her voice nothing but weak pops of air.

“Well, let’s get on with it.”

SallyAnn and the others backed away and Rose shuffled her feet where she stood. Her entire body went numb and her

breaths became uncomfortably intense. The heat in her face increased by the millisecond, and her heart provided her with a rapid beat.

She sputtered the first thing that came to her. “‘Winter,’ by Tori Amos.”

SallyAnn and the others looked at one another blankly and shrugged their shoulders, smirking. It was Rose’s father’s favorite song. She remembered how he used to talk about it, how attentive he was to her, a life long gone now—she sometimes went days without seeing him. Back then, he had Hyacinth learn it on the piano, and when they were alone, Hyacinth taught Rose the vocals. He would play along on the piano, nodding her on with every note—he never smiled so much as when Rose sang. Secretly, in those moments, she always imagined herself as Tori.

Shaking the nerves from her hands, Rose took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She told herself not to open them again until the song was over. *Sing as if Hyacinth’s with you. Sing as if he can hear.* For Rose, the song had always been about him anyway.

All at once, her voice broke open, shards of a song cutting a path to the ears around her. *“Snow can wait, I forgot my mittens.”*

She heard snickering and her eyes flashed open for a

second. She saw them staring at her, smiles on their faces, their phones out recording everything. With intense fear, she slammed them closed again and continued, her voice still cracking as if it had been encased all this time, but gaining strength with every note, a beautiful ache.

A minute in and the laughter was even louder now. Rose's voice shrank away. She doubted if she'd ever find it again. She opened her eyes to the brutal truth and watched as SallyAnn wiped away tears of laughter, her body hunched over in extreme delight. She pointed at Rose, saying over and over again what a loser she was.

Rose flinched with insult, and her eyes filled with tears and the pain of her life came speeding back. *How could you be so stupid?* she thought. She felt so heavy all of a sudden, lead bones and veins of heavy metals.

"You . . . you never meant it," she said in a slow trickle of a voice. "Not a thing . . ."

SallyAnn straightened up, wiped away one last tear, and stomped her way closer, twisting her left foot into the ground as if putting out a cigarette. "I'm the singer in this band, Rosie. You think we'd ever let you in? We wouldn't even let you carry our guitars. But when we heard you in the bathroom today—oh, man!—had to get that on camera."

Rose was as stiff as the trees around her. SallyAnn circled her like a lumberjack looking for the sweet spot that would

bring her down. And what could she do about it? SallyAnn was bigger, tougher, and she had a whole group of friends behind her. Rose had nothing.

The girls kept circling her, zooming in on their phones, cackling and calling her names. For once, Rose was glad her parents couldn't afford to fix her computer or buy her a phone; at least she wouldn't have to read all the comments this time.

SallyAnn folded her arms and cocked her head. "You know why your brother's never gonna wake up, Rosie? The real reason he's in a coma? It's because he doesn't want to see what a loser you are."

Rose felt the tear run down her cheek as if in slow motion and hated with every fiber of her being that SallyAnn saw it.

"Zoom in close!" SallyAnn shouted. "Get those tears in her eyes! Get how red her face is! We're going to plaster this everywhere! What a loser!"

Hollowed, Rose dropped to the ground and curled into a ball as all the girls gathered around. She knew not to get up. She just buried her face and let the tears flow. She felt them kicking dirt on her, putting leaves and debris in her hair. She felt them smearing mud on her jeans as if she had an accident. The jokes and laughter piled up so high she felt crushed.

When they were long gone, fearing the ridicule that would

be awaiting her come the following morning, Rose, crumpled and dirty, turned over to her side and gazed into the woods. As if whispering directly in her ear, the trees emitted a long and strange noise. Whether it was a threat or a lullaby, she didn't know.