

THE HOLLOWES

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## Disrespect May 14, 2009

Rennie Scoville flipped a dishtowel onto his shoulder, finished wiping down the last table at Flannagan's, the restaurant where he worked at part-time. Sweat stung his eyes. As he wiped his brow, he noticed crumbs speckling the dark brown skin of his arm. He brushed his arm against his pants leg and sighed when it came back with even more crumbs than before. He was a mess, which was usually the case by closing time. If there was a way to make it though a night of bussing tables without looking like a walking chicken-fried steak, he was a long way from finding it.

"Thanks for bringing me my tip earlier," a girl's voice said.

Rennie turned, his shoulders unconsciously tensing. Cherie MacMillan was coming from the backroom, already changed into her casual clothes, her hips swaying in a way that made him need to sit down. Her dark brown eyes perfectly matched her skin, and both were intoxicating. She was in her first year of college, same as most of the employees here. A couple of other college-aged waitresses waited for her to finish.

"Oh, you know," he said, shrugging in a way meant to look chilled out but ended up as a nervous tic. "I just saw it on the table and thought you'd want it."

She gave him a look. "Of course, I wanted it. It's *my* tip."

"Yeah, of course," he sputtered. "Totally your tip. I mean, you worked the table. It's your tip." He leaned against the wall nonchalantly, hitting one of the decorative fishing poles and knocking it off the wall. All three waitresses stopped for a moment, watching as he bent down to retrieve it. Somehow his shoe got tangled in the fishing line (and why did a decorative fishing pole even *have* fishing line, he thought furiously). As he struggled to free himself, the pole

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wobbled, banging into chairs and whipping his shins. The girls broke into simultaneous laughter, their heads tilted back, their bodies leaning against each other for support. The giggle fit continued long after Rennie had extricated himself and put the pole back on its hook. All he could do was wait for it to end.

“Whatever, Ronnie,” Cherie said, getting a hold of herself. “You have a good night.”

“It’s Rennie,” he said quietly, but the girls were already on their way out the front door. He couldn’t move after they left. Shock rooted him to the spot where he listened to another eruption of giggling from the parking lot—aftershocks of the initial quake.

*Come on, Rennie, he told himself. Shake it off. Did you really think it would end any other way? You can only get so far before the Rougarou snaps you back.*

The last sentence was in Aunt LeJeune’s voice. She had died years ago, but he never forgot how much she liked to talk about the *Rougarou*. She had never described exactly what it looked like, but she spoke of a mythical creature that prowled around at night looking for little boys who were too big for their britches. Aunt LeJeune mainly used it on Rennie’s older brother Dontae whenever his ego needed deflating, which was often. “Boy,” she’d say in that thick Southern accent, making it sound like *boah*. “You keep attin’ de fool and dat Rougarou goan et ya right up. His teeth ah sharp an’ his eyes be as red as ya blood.”

Dontae never listened to a word of it. But Rennie had. His four-year-old imagination had vividly constructed the beast down to the smallest detail. It had tree-bark gray skin and its talons were yellow like old paper. And if it hadn’t been for his oldest brother Shane buying him a night light, Rennie would’ve gone to bed every night sitting up, his spine ramrod straight, his gaze fixed on the shadows in the window.

He didn’t stare at shadows anymore. At seventeen, Rennie knew tall tales were concocted to keep children in line. But the *Rougarou* had stayed with him, maybe because it sounded so much like “rug.” That was what got pulled out from under you the moment you got too comfortable, and to him, the *Rougarou* was the creature that did all the pulling. Throughout childhood, the *Rougarou* had been the unseen force behind every boo-boo, poor grade, or back alley fight (even if those fights had always been started by Dontae). It was the trickster that laid traps in his path and kept him from having anything good in his life. It was Murphy’s Law in the form of a wild-eyed demon. And these days, it was the only thing he truly believed in.

The front door dinged as Cherie hustled back inside. He still hadn’t

moved from his spot and saw no reason to now. If the Rougarou was watching, this was precisely the moment it would trip him up again. Cherie barely glanced at him anyway. She hurried to the backroom, mumbling to herself as she went.

“Girl, can’t believe you left your wallet in the locker...”

He listened to her rumble through the backroom, hollering a couple quick words to the assistant manager as a locker door opened and shut. Soon, she was on her way back, and Rennie put his head down, furiously scrubbed the table closest to him although they were all spotless. The worst thing he could do was ogle her like a poor little black boy staring at the ice cream truck driving by. He would face the other way until she made it out the front door. Only then would he go back and clock out.

High heels clicked past the bar and abruptly stopped close to where he stood. He refused to look up again, knowing if he did he would see the one thing that would send his soul into a tailspin. She’d be waiting for him to look up just so she could tilt her head back and have another throaty laugh at his expense. Ha! See the pathetic seventeen-year-old bus boy hoping to make an impression. Come back when you’re old enough to serve alcohol.

A minute went by, and Rennie realized someone was behind him. He stopped and turned, bracing himself, and sure enough there was Cherie. She wasn’t staring at him in amusement, but she was staring. His first impulse was to spin back around and keep scrubbing. He held himself in check and forced himself to meet her gaze. His mind scrambled to find something—anything—to say. Mercifully, she broke the silence first.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he parroted, wondering if he should add something to it. He couldn’t think of a thing.

“You’re not Ronnie, are you?”

“No.” He pointed at his nametag timidly.

“Rennie,” she read aloud. “Where do you get a name like Rennie?”

“From my grandfather.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “It was, um, his name.”

“I’m guessing he ain’t from Fort Worth.”

“Not quite.”

“You ain’t either. I can tell by your accent.”

“No, ma’am,” he said without adding anything else.

“How long have you lived here?”

“A few years.”

She squinted suspiciously, probably still trying to place his accent. “Did your moving truck take longer than a day to get here?”

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He smiled. “We didn’t use a moving truck. We used a bus.”

“A bus?” she spat back at him. “Who the hell takes a bus anymore?”

*I take it every time Ma has to use the car*, he almost said but decided to go with a simple shrug instead.

“You’ve worked here, what? Like, three months now?”

“Five,” he said.

She smiled. “And you ain’t come out with us once in all that time?”

His shoulders relaxed a little. “No one’s ever invited me.”

She put her hands on her immaculate hips. “Well, I’m inviting you. Party at my place—1215 Frost Avenue. Tonight. You better get your butt moving.”

Rennie got his butt moving. He zoomed through the closing checklist, his mind in overdrive. He was outside in five minutes flat, walking next to Cherie, happily noticing the parking lot empty except for them. The other giggling waitresses had already left, probably to go home and change before heading to the party. Or maybe there wasn’t a party. That could’ve been something Cherie made up on the fly, something to get him to go along.

*Yeh, right*, came Aunt LeJeune’s voice. *Sounds like summin’s expectin too much on a fers date. Ya know what happens when boys get too beeg for their britches.*

Yeah, he knew. But he couldn’t help but feel a pleasant stirring in his stomach. No one at home needed him for anything tonight, and it was one of the few evenings that he actually had the car. Things could still go wrong, but at the moment he didn’t see how.

Cherie looked at him, grinned as if reading his mind, and said softly, “I’ve got a car if you want to leave yours here. I can drive you back after the party...or in the morning... whatever.”

The “whatever” sent the young black man’s heartbeat into an elderly man’s arrhythmia. He almost tripped over himself, but managed to stammer out, “That sounds good. Thanks.”

His cell rang in his pocket. Rennie was glad. It had to be Ma checking on him. He could tell her he was staying out with friends tonight so she wouldn’t worry. He let it ring for an extended moment, savoring the sultry look Cherie was sending his way. “Excuse me for a sec,” he said and brought the phone to his ear. “Hey, Ma.”

But it wasn’t Ma. It was Dontae, using his one phone call.

“I need bail,” he said bluntly.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Rennie whispered into the phone, all too aware of the delicious brown eyes watching him.

“No, man,” Dontae answered in a dull mumble. “I need bail. I’m downtown. Come get me.”

“I’m a little busy here.”

“Oh, well excuse the hell out of me,” Dontae said, the mumble becoming a low roar. “I’ll rot in jail until you can get your skinny ass up here.”

Rennie closed his eyes. “All right, all right. I’m coming.”

“You’re damn right you’re coming! I—”

Rennie switched off the phone and opened his eyes. Cherie watched him, but the look had changed. There was a challenge in her eyes now, and the challenge was clear: choose your next words carefully.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve got to help my brother.”

Her hands were on her hips again, but this time it didn’t look as sexy. “With what? Homework?”

“No, he’s in...” Rennie faltered. “He’s in trouble, and I have to go. Can I hit your next party?”

She started toward her car. “Boy, if you leave now you won’t be hitting anything of mine—ever.”

She only looked back once to see if he had come to his senses. He could only gaze after her helplessly. She grunted in disgust, and then it was over. Her tires squealed as she sped away from the restaurant. He stood in the middle of the parking lot, unable to move, unable to believe any of what had happened, the good or the bad. A few minutes later, his heart restarted, and he shuffled slowly to his Ford Escape.

He sighed as he turned the ignition. “Good game, Rougarou,” he mumbled to nobody. “You win again.”

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1215 Frost Avenue. The address ran through Rennie’s head endlessly. 1215 Frost—that’s where the party is. But was he at 1215 Frost? Was he curled up in Cherie McMillan’s sheets enjoying the fruits of his one true destiny? Of course not. He was waiting in the same place he had waited the past three hours; outside 350 West Belknap...the Fort Worth city jail...in the middle of the night...waiting for his brother.

He watched two homeless people stumble in front of the car, leaning against each other as they staggered onto Throckmorton. He could only shake his head. Even they were getting more action than he was. The passenger door handle clicked. Rennie turned to see Dontae yanking on it.

“Come on, man. Unlock it now.”

Rennie hit the button and Dontae threw open the door. He plopped into the seat, smelling of sweat and cigarette smoke. He wore the same Dallas Cowboys sweats he had on yesterday. “Drive,” he ordered.

They rode in silence for a while. Dontae would have turned on the

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radio if it worked. It hadn't since Dontae disconnected it, hoping to make some quick cash by pawning it. He only put it back because Ma commanded him to, and even then he couldn't figure out how to do it right. Now its view screen only lit dimly and the clock never kept the right time. It always ran slow.

"What do they think you took this time?" Rennie asked quietly. He knew better than to ask the real question: what did *you* steal, Dontae?

"Some lottery tickets," he said, sounding insulted. "I grabbed a pen to write a check. I can't help it if the dumbass keeps the pen all the way behind the counter."

"When are you going to pay me back?"

"What?" Dontae asked, as if he hadn't heard.

"That was my whole paycheck," Rennie said. "You're gonna have to pay me back this time."

Dontae stared ahead, his eyes unfocused. They were on the highway before he said anything. "Shit," he grumbled. "They're always disrespecting me."

"Who?" Rennie asked.

"You name it. The pigs, the store managers, that welfare office bitch—they all disrespect me. It's a conspiracy. They're all trying to entrap me. They wanna silence me, but I won't be silenced. I won't. They can't make me go away."

"Yeah, I know." Rennie rolled his eyes. He'd heard this rant before, too many times.

"No, you don't know," Dontae said, cocking his head. "I am the man of our house. I have responsibilities. And they are constantly putting walls between me and my goals."

"Okay. First off, you're not man of any house, because we live in an apartment. Secondly, you're not the man of anything. You're a twenty-year-old punk living with his mama."

A hand grabbed his right ear and a burst of pain followed as Dontae yanked on it.

"Are you disrespecting me too? Is that what I'm hearing? My little bro thinks he's man enough to hang with me? Is that what you're saying?"

Dontae kept pulling, dragging Rennie's head down. "Shit, man!" Rennie cried out. "Stop! I'm driving here!"

The pain only intensified. "Are you disrespecting me?"

Rennie couldn't see the road anymore. His ear was on fire. "You're going to get us killed!"

"Answer the question!"

"No!" Rennie hollered. "I'm not disrespecting you, all right? I was kidding!"

There was one last brutal tug on his ear and Dontae released. Rennie popped up, realized he was driving on the shoulder, and quickly corrected. He rubbed at his ear savagely. His whole head was ringing.

“Man, you are one crazy—”

“What?” Dontae goaded. “I’m a crazy what?”

“Nothing,” Rennie mumbled.

“That’s what I thought.” Dontae crossed his arms and looked out the passenger window. “I ain’t taking disrespect from nobody.”

“I thought you’d want to get home in one piece.”

“I knew what I was doing,” Dontae said, sounding calmer now. “Besides, you should be use to killing older brothers by now.”

Rennie almost stopped the car right then. To hell with Dontae and the ear he nearly tore off. He wanted to rip Dontae to pieces. The steering wheel squeaked from the pressure of his hands wrapped around it in a vise-like grip.

Even Dontae knew he’d gone too far. The next time he spoke, his voice was softer. “Don’t worry, man. I’ll pay you back next week—two at the latest.”

“Sure,” Rennie whispered. He didn’t trust himself to say more.

Dontae nodded. “Let’s get back. Ma’s liable to get the police after us again just so she knows where we are.”

Rennie didn’t answer, and Dontae didn’t say anything else. They rode in silence, heading north to The Hollows, their consolation prize of a home, traveling in a Ford Escape with a clock radio that was constantly getting stuck in the past.

*ELISE'S JOURNAL: APRIL 5, 1994*

What a weekend we had. David finally had a whole one off and he surprised me. Five a.m. he woke me up and told me to jump in the car. He already had a bag packed and Mel loaded in the car seat. I asked him what we were doing and he grinned. We're beating the summer rush, he said as we pulled away from the house.

Turns out he meant Galveston. It was a long drive, but Melanie slept through most of it. By the time we were pulling up to the beach the sun was brilliant and the water looked like a field of shimmering stars. Melanie squealed in delight when she saw it. I might have done a little squealing along with her. David thrust his fists upward and yelled OCEAN ACHIEVED!

I laughed. He hadn't used "achieved" in forever. That was one of his favorite words in high school. Whenever something good happened he would say "\_\_\_\_\_ achieved!" As in "homework achieved" or "touchdown achieved." It was cute if a bit dorky. He even used it the first time he asked me out.

The first time he asked me out. Wow. Haven't thought about that morning in a while, although I used to recall it regularly. It's one of my most vivid memories, as I guess all huge turning points in life are. We were walking in from the school parking lot like we'd been doing for three or four months. It had started as a whole group of friends. We'd all show up about ten minutes before the first bell rang and goof around. As weeks passed the rest of the group slowly dwindled away, either from the urge to sleep in or because they found other, hipper meeting places. Somehow David and I stuck to our little routine, because we both knew deep inside this was coming. There was a peacefulness to our times together that went beyond morning sleepiness. We liked being close to each other, whether we had anything to talk about or not. Why a naturally charismatic track star was drawn to a school-newspaper-editor geek like me was impossible to say, but I

couldn't help but be grateful every time I got to sit next to him on the hood of his Chevelle and watch the pink sky turn orange.

Anyway, on that particular morning we hadn't sat on his hood for long. From the moment we said hi to each other I could feel the change in the air. He wasn't quiet so much as disquieted, if that makes any sense. We were already walking toward the school before he worked up the nerve to say what was on his mind. The conversation went something like this:

HIM: Say, I'm going to this great restaurant this weekend. It's got dark booths and one of those cool old jukeboxes.

ME: Oh, yeah?

HIM: Yeah. (He was silent a while, as if my response had thrown him.) Yeah, um, it's one of those places that don't look like much on the outside. But once you get inside you can feel the atmosphere. It's, um, very...atmospheric.

ME: Sounds like fun.

HIM: Yeah, totally. It will be...But it'd be a lot more fun if you came along.

ME: Wait. (I think I actually grabbed his arm. He probably thought it was to stop him, but I recall feeling a little light-headed. I needed to hold on to something to steady myself. I think I stared at him a good half-minute before I eked out a reply.) Hop, are you asking me out?

HIM: I'm sorry. Did that come off as charming or cheesy? I was going for charming.

ME: I'm not sure. Are those my only choices?

HIM: What's the word you're thinking of?

ME: Shocking.

(He gasped. He looked light-headed too.)

HIM: Oh, crap. Shocking? That's not good.

ME: That's not how I meant it. It was the first word that popped in my head.

HIM: Look, here's the truth. The few minutes we're together in the morning are easily the best part of my day. And if you won't go out with me this weekend I'm totally going to curl up in the fetal position and die.

(He took my hand. I never told him, but that was the moment that got me. Thinking about it now makes my left hand tingle.)

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ME: (pretending to deliberate over it) I really don't want to see you in the fetal position...so I guess I better go with you to this cool restaurant.

HIM: You will? Seriously?

ME: (shrugging) Well, it does have a jukebox.

(His smile made the whole morning glow brighter. He was way too adorable. I couldn't help it. I had to lean in and kiss him. Some moments you can't NOT kiss. That was one of them. I didn't pull away until the first bell rang. And I remember the way his eyes met mine and the idea first struck me that he and I could read each other's thoughts. I've had this idea hundreds of times since.)

HIM: You can say it. I charmed your socks off.

ME: Look at Mr. Cocky. I'm sure both socks are still on.

HIM: Whatever. Admit it. Charm achieved.

ME: I admit nothing.

He was right. I was charmed and then some. The rest of that day I saw visions of our future together, and it was a long one. By the last period I imagined us in rocking chairs watching the great grandchildren climb on our feet. Which brings me back to the weekend we had in Galveston. I can easily pick out my favorite moment: sitting on the beach and cheering as David taught Melanie to take her first steps.

I wish we could've rented a video camera. At first David held her up by her arms, dipping her toes in as the tide broke against the shoreline. Melanie giggled like crazy every time the foamy current grabbed her feet. She struggled against David's grip, getting closer to the water. Finally he sat her down at the water's edge. Melanie didn't waste a second. She climbed to her feet like she had done it for years and waddled after the retreating waters. Her hands were outstretched and grasping, trying to catch the tide. I yelled LOOK LOOK LOOK LOOK LOOK, as if David wasn't doing exactly that. He beamed, letting her go until that last moment when the tide shifted and charged the shore again. He dipped down and hooked her by the armpits, hauling her deftly upward in the nick of time. The water rushed past Melanie's feet and she giggled and hiccupped and cooed in awe. David swung her onto his shoulder as Mel clapped her daddy's cheeks and ears with those little hands. From where I sat the sun glowed between them. Even now I can see their faces touching in

silhouette, like paper cut-outs. I know there will be other times in my life when I'll experience that kind of pure happiness, but right now I can't imagine how it will be possible. That second, watching the two most important people in my life, was bathed in perfection.

"Beauty achieved," I whispered, but my voice was lost amid the waves rolling across the sand.