

THE HOLLOWES

By Ben Larken



Published by  Publications

il-publications.com/thehollows.html

Released Nov 20th 2009

~~~~~

# 6

## Flowerbeds & Nests

June 1, 2009

Rennie Scoville placed gloved hands around the base of the hydrangea plant and pressed down firmly, making sure the soil and compost were packed hard enough to keep the plant from tilting. The blue mopheads tickled his chin as he lifted his face enough to glance at Charlie Rickett. The apartment manager appeared to be doing basically the same thing at the other end of the front office. Rennie never felt too sure of himself when it came to flowers. Of all the tasks Charlie had Rennie help him with, gardening was his least favorite. Sweeping the walkways or raking leaves left him sore at the end of the day, but they were easy, mindless chores. Flowers, on the other hand, were fickle little bastards. You had to use the right soil and fertilizer and water them just enough but not too much. It was a wonder he didn't kill every last one of them.

But Rennie didn't complain. If this was what it took to keep their rent at half price, he could spend an afternoon hunched over a sea of turquoise flower petals. There were worse ways to spend time.

"How's it coming over there?" Charlie asked, as if reading his mind. The apartment manager stood up on squatty legs. The knees of the jumpsuit he constantly wore were brown circles.

"Oh, you know," Rennie said, half-shrugging. "I didn't mess them up too badly... I don't think."

Charlie took a couple steps his direction, examining his work. "Looks fine to me. You got the petal ends on top, which I always prefer. You ready for my special lemon-and-lime-and-whatever-other-fruits-I-got-in-the-fridge iced tea?"

Rennie smiled. "Sure, Mr. Rickett."

Charlie gave him a sour glance and clicked his tongue. "One of these days I'm gonna make you stop calling me Mr. Rickett. I've done told you the name's Charlie."

"Yes, you have. You've told me several times, Mr. Rickett."

Charlie shook his head in exasperation and headed into the front office. Rennie stood and wiped his forehead with his arm and some of the sweat found its way to his eyes. He blinked away the sting, focusing on the wrought iron fence that ran the perimeter of the complex. He saw the street beyond it, but only as a glimpse through the leafy branches. He saw the bus stop bench as well, something he often found himself staring at. It happened so unconsciously he hadn't realized he was doing it until recently. It was the first thing he had seen when he stepped off the bus four years ago. It was the first glimpse of what would become a new life for the Scovilles. If you could call it that.

Sometimes Rennie wondered, and that could be why he stared at the bench. Perhaps his subconscious was looking back in time to see if it could spot the old life. The *better* life. Either that or he was waiting for the rest of his family to get here so they really could be a family again. Rennie turned away from the bench. He didn't feel like following that train of thought. On cue, Charlie stepped outside holding two brimming glasses of honey-colored tea.

"Think this'll quench your thirst?"

"And then some," Rennie said and reached for a glass. But Charlie held it back.

"What do you say?" Charlie tested.

"Thank you?" Rennie tried, but Charlie huffed, sounding more exasperated than ever.

"Boy, I don't care if you say 'thank you' or 'screw you,' but you're gonna put a 'Charlie' on the end of it. I wanna hear you say it."

"Sorry, Mr. Rickett. Afraid I can't do that."

Charlie rolled his eyes, and lowered his tone so no one walking by could hear, not like anyone was walking by. "I'm sure you ain't noticed, but you and your brother are the only two Afro-um, Afree...Africanese males in this here complex."

"Really?" Rennie said, smiling. He liked making Charlie squirm.

Charlie arched his brow. "Fine, be a smartass. You know what I'm saying. How do you think it looks when the only one around here calling me Mr. Rickett is the brown kid I've got helping me with chores?"

Rennie tried to keep a straight face. "Would it help if I called you Master Rickett?"

*THE HOLLOWES – BOOK I: THE TICKING*

Charlie nearly dropped the tea. “You do that, and I will kick your ass all the way to Dallas and back again.”

Rennie couldn’t hold it in any longer. He let out a laugh, clapping Charlie on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Mr. Rickett. Really. I call you that because I want to.”

“But why?” Charlie asked. “It’s not like anyone else your age has any respect for their elders. Most kids your age call me ‘dog’ or ‘bitch’ or my personal favorite—‘Old Spice.’ No one, black or white, does the mister and misses thing anymore.”

A trickle of sweat slid down the back of Rennie’s neck. He wiped at it absently as he said, “My brother always did.”

“What?” Charlie said, disbelieving. “I have known Dontae for a few years now, and I have never heard that boy give anyone so much as the time of day, much less—” He caught himself, and their eyes met. The silence hung between them until Charlie said. “You’re not talking about Dontae, are ya?”

“No,” Rennie said quietly.

Charlie smiled and nodded. He handed over the perspiring glass of tea. Rennie took it with a little grin. “Thanks, Mr. Rickett.”

“No problem, son,” Charlie said back, smiling himself now. “No problem at all.”

They sipped on their glasses, taking in the sounds of birds twittering back and forth in the trees. In the distance they heard a metallic echo as someone stomped up the metal ramp of a moving truck. Charlie ribbed him gently.

“Did you see our newbies when they pulled it?”

“I saw the truck come through the gate,” Rennie replied. “Didn’t get a look at the driver.”

“His name’s David,” Charlie informed him. “He’s a cop and a good fella. You should meet him. Even better, you should meet his daughter. She’s about your age, I reckon, or a little younger. Awfully pretty young thing.”

Rennie turned back inside to take the empty glass to the sink. He had downed the tea in seconds. “That’s okay. The last thing I need is an overprotective cop-father breathing down my neck. The Rougarou would love that.”

“The Roug-a-what?”

“Nothing,” Rennie said quickly.

Charlie chuckled and called after him. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re much too sensible for a kid your age? Most teens I know are sowing their wild oats, if that’s what you call them.”

“Oh, yeah,” he called back from the little kitchen next to Charlie’s cramped office. “That’s what all the kids call them. I can’t tell you how many girls ask me about my oats.”

Charlie grumbled something that started with, “Such a smartass.” Rennie smiled as he placed the glass in the sink. He glanced around the kitchen, which was really a washroom. He wondered where Charlie Rickett lived. The apartment manager could always be seen inside The Hollows working on anything that needed tending to. The light blue van he owned never left the space behind the office, even in the middle of the night. But the office wasn’t big enough to live in, and in the four years Rennie had lived here, he had never seen the old man going into any of the apartments unless he carried a toolbox. The one time Rennie asked him which apartment was his, Charlie grinned and said, “Now why would I take one of these apartments when I could be charging someone else to live there?” He never answered the question, which was just like Charlie.

A voice echoed through the front door of the office, and this time it wasn’t the apartment manager’s. This one sounded angry. After a moment he recognized it as Mr. Becker’s, or “Mr. Sun Tan,” as Dontae liked to say. Rennie glanced around the kitchen doorway and spotted him outside next to Charlie, his voice low but heated.

“Our new guests have only been here a couple minutes and Dontae’s trying to rob them,” he said. “It took every bit of finesse I had to keep a fight from breaking out. We are going to have to do something about that young man.”

“Now technically a robbery involves a weapon,” Charlie said, scratching his bearded chin. “What you’re talking about sounds more like a burglary.”

“I don’t care what you call it,” Braun shot back. “He’s a menace. And I’m sure you’ll recall that I told you this would happen. The moment they stepped off that bus I knew they were going to be trouble. You were inviting a certain element into our home. And now Dontae’s going to scare the Alders away.”

Rennie came out of the front office, hands in his pockets. Braun Becker stiffened, looking momentarily terrified. But that well-practiced grin reappeared. Rennie could see Mr. Sun Tan telling himself that the boy hadn’t heard a thing. Braun held out a hand.

“Well, Rennie,” he said congenially. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

Rennie slid a hand from a pocket and shook Braun’s. “Hi, Mr. Becker.”

“Nice day to be out and about, isn’t it?”

*THE HOLLOWES – BOOK I: THE TICKING*

“I don’t know,” Rennie replied, shrugging. “I keep hearing about certain elements in the complex. I’m hoping I don’t run into any of them.”

The manufactured grin dropped from Braun’s face at once. He looked from Rennie to Charlie, although Charlie appeared to be holding back a smile. Braun turned his attention back to Rennie. “I don’t mean any disrespect,” he explained in a careful tone. “But your brother is at best a nuisance and at worst a criminal. He’s wrong for The Hollows. Always has been. You’d be doing everyone a huge service if you convinced him to build his nest elsewhere.”

Stepping past him, Rennie headed into the hydrangeas. He squatted and began digging a spot in the flowerbed for the next one. “I know what you mean, Mr. Becker. I’ve told him before that we’re too crowded in our apartment. He’d be happier if he found a roommate and got a place of his own.”

Braun was visibly relieved. “Thank you, Rennie. That was exactly what I meant.”

Rennie nodded and put a finger to his lip. “Say, don’t you have an extra bedroom in 312? He could ‘nest’ with you.”

Charlie snorted before he could stop himself. Rennie focused on the flowers, sensing the bronzed man’s glare. After a moment Braun turned away. “Well,” he said with a huff. “I see no one’s going to heed my warnings today. I guess something bad will have to transpire before you see that I’m right.” He stopped and pointed at Charlie. “When it does, don’t come crying to me.” Braun stalked off quickly.

“Wasn’t planning to,” Charlie muttered under his breath, watching the other man retreat.

“Is he right?” Rennie asked quietly.

“What’s that?” Charlie said. He watched Braun as he disappeared around Building Three.

“Is he right? Is Dontae bad for The Hollows?”

The gray-haired man turned his way, considering Rennie’s question. “There’s nothing about Dontae that’s easy,” he admitted. “But in my opinion, everyone’s got a purpose in life. I figure Dontae will find his soon enough.”

“Do you think he’ll scare away the newcomers?”

Charlie laughed at that. “David Alders?” He chuckled again and went back to his end of the flowerbed. “Not a chance. David Alders is here for a long time to come. I’m sure of it.”

Rennie looked up from the hydrangeas, wondering how Charlie could be so certain. He was about to ask when his gaze swept across the bus stop bench. A man sat on it. Rennie had no idea who it was from this distance, but he wore something incredibly reflective. The

man's whole body shimmered in the sun like a silvery eel. The man suddenly realized he was being watched. He turned quickly and looked into The Hollows. Rennie caught a beam of reflected sunlight coming off the man's face and quickly looked down at the turquoise petals. Sunspots swam in his vision. What in the hell could the man be wearing to turn him into a human disco ball? Rennie peered up again, determined to find out.

But the man was gone. The bench was empty. Rennie stared at it, waiting for him to come back. The apartment manager coughed.

"That hydrangea ain't gonna replant itself," he prodded.

Rennie looked to Charlie and then back at his work. "Sorry, Mr. Rickett."

**LOOK OUT FOR CHAPTER 7 ON 13<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER!**

**THE FIRST TEN CHAPTERS OF THE HOLLOWES ARE**  
**BEING SERIALISED ONLINE FOR FREE!**