

A  
Touch of  
Ruckus

ASH VAN OTTERLOO



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## CHAPTER 1

**Every time Tennessee Lancaster** visited the Hollow, it got harder to tell where she stopped and where the forest began. Mist swirled across the back roads, dancing wild outside her half-lowered van window. Tennie's stomach did odd little cartwheels, as if the rippling fog squirmed inside her, too.

She jutted her chin closer to the opening. Damp air rushed over her freckled skin until her nose went numb. Autumn—Halloween especially—was her favorite time of year. She was determined to enjoy it properly, even if her family was moving. But as the trees whizzed by in an orange-and-ruby fury, Tennie's nerves couldn't settle.

Her family's new apartment—the one they'd just left all their moving boxes in—was a two-bedroom rental too small for all six of them. So they were making a pit stop at her grandmother's town an hour away. Her older brother, Birch, would stay with Mimsy for a month, while the rest of them crammed in like sardines.

“When we get there, I'll do the talking,” Mama barked from the front seat, as “Monster Mash” blared on the radio. Her hyper fingers strummed the steering wheel. “Mimsy don't need to know about the housing mix-up.”

Tennie didn't point out they'd all already been over this a dozen times. “Yes, ma'am.”

“So here's the plan. Last week, she asked me to come help clean out Poppy's old things, which I'm not going to do. That woman can't ever stop complaining about my daddy, even now that he's passed. But Birch can go instead, as a favor to her. Problem solved.”

Sadness at the thought of Poppy's things getting thrown out gripped Tennie, followed by a pang of jealousy. She'd have loved to be the one staying over at Mimsy's.

“Not as a favor to *us*?” Dad joked in a road-ragged voice from the passenger's seat. “If she says no, we're up a creek without a paddle here.”

“Absolutely *NOT*. I won’t have my mother fixin’ my life like one of her dusty antiques,” Mama muttered. “I’d never hear the end of it.”

Tennie’s legs clenched. She hated this ongoing pride war between Mama and Mimsy. “You know Mimsy loves us, Mama! And she always brags on what a good paramedic you are.”

“That won’t stop her from being proud as peas if she thinks she’s saving Birch from sleeping on a couch. So stick to the story, got it? *Birch, d’you hear me?*”

*THWUNK*. Tennie’s eyes narrowed when Birch’s unnaturally long, cave-cricket legs knocked the back of her seat for the hundredth time as he shifted in his sleep. He wasn’t even *listening*.

“We hear you, Mama—” Tennie said, covering for her brother. Her mom’s shoulders loosened, and Tennie congratulated herself. She was the family’s parent-whisperer. Once Birch was dropped off, and Mimsy was good and hoodwinked into thinking the Lancaster finances were fine, everyone’s feathers would unruffle. Then, Tennie could relax, too, and enjoy her spooky fall season properly, with *Corpse Bride* marathons and candy corn.

But as Tennie imagined Birch lounging around Mimsy’s

picture-perfect front porch, the restlessness in her gut grew wilder. Why did Captain Earbuds get rewarded for being a lazy pain, while Tennie worked hard to help everyone get along?

*So, ask Mama and Dad if you can go instead,* a rebellious flicker suggested for the hundredth time. *That way, you get a whole room to yourself. Finally.*

Tennie's fingers tensed in her rainbow-striped gloves, curling up like threatened spiders. The thought of opening her mouth to ask Mama to change her plans was unthinkable. Especially while Mama was this keyed up. "I can't be selfish," she whispered, fogging the glass by her nose.

Five-year-old Shiloh, the drooling mirror image of her sleeping twin, Harper, snuggled her head into Tennie's side, hugging her clown-faced Raggedy Andy doll—an antique Mimsy had gifted her, and who precocious Shi had renamed "Mr. Fancy Pants." Tennie sagged and smooched the top of her sister's sweaty auburn head. Both twins' French braids fuzzed out like halos, making them look more angelic than they were. *If I go to Mimsy's, these little monsters'll wear Mama slap out. Birch won't help, and she'll start getting blue again,* Tennie worried.

But the fire in her stomach wouldn't quiet. *Think of Mimsy's fireplace! A soft, giant bed, all to yourself! Hot breakfast every*

*day!* The flames crackled. Tennie pressed her lips. Time to give it an ice-cold drenching. She peeled her left glove from her hand, slipping her bare fingers into her hoodie pocket. She grazed them across a shard of plastic she kept there.

Tennie inhaled sharply. Her own magic always unsettled her.

The van around her dissolved into smeary smoke, and a blurred memory from five years ago replaced it.

*Her old living room fluttered with orange streamers and homemade ISN'T IT GREAT? TENNESSEE'S EIGHT! banners. Memory-Tennie twirled and walked tiptoe in a ruffled pumpkin-print dress. She pestered Mama, who balanced a cake on one arm and crying baby Shiloh in the other.*

*"Stop grabbing, Tennie!" Mama snapped. The scent of apple shampoo from her still-dripping shower hair tickled Tennie's nose. "Guests will be here any minute, and the kitchen still isn't clean! And you know how sanctimonious Mimsy gets about that!"*

*Birch trotted into the room holding a jar of spiders, then wrinkled his nose. "Ugh, what smells like toilets?"*

*Tennie gasped. She pointed at baby Harper in her playpen, who had just strewn the contents of her diaper in unthinkable places. "Ewwwww!"*

*"Gross!" Birch hollered, dropping his spider jar and*

*yarfing onto the floor. Tiny spiders fanned out from the broken glass in a skittering shadow, sending chills up Tennie's neck. She shrieked. Dad rushed in with paper towels as Mama tried to stamp the spiderlings with squeaking sneakers.*

*The doorbell rang. Mimsy let herself in and started fussing hard over the mess. Mama yelled that she didn't need Mimsy's help. A sour feeling filled Tennie's mouth at the sound of their arguing.*

*Everything was wrong. Fury rose in Tennie. Her family had ruined her birthday party before it began! Tennie hollered then, too. She yelled ugly, hateful words at her whole awful family. She snatched the party tiara from her head and snapped it into bits. Mama's face crumpled. She cried in the bedroom for hours, and Tennie cried in hers. Dad turned guests away, making up a story about a stomach bug. Mimsy cleaned the living room, then left, never bringing it up again.*

Tennie yanked her trembling fingers from the shattered plastic. Her vision spun like a ceiling fan until the van grew solid around her. She pulled deep breaths through her nostrils and fixed a chill expression on her face, just in case her parents glanced in the rearview. The memory slowly fell asleep again, but the guilty feeling stayed in Tennie's gut, like the sore spot you got on your arm after a booster shot.



It worked like a charm. Tennie's anger fizzled. But that was no surprise. She'd smothered it this way a hundred times, and she had to admit, she felt a little smug over how good she'd gotten at it.

The first time she'd discovered her ability, it had been by accident. She'd clutched her shattered birthday tiara and forced herself to picture Mama's tears as her guilt coiled around her like a hungry snake. The memory had grown more and more real, until suddenly Tennie wasn't just *remembering* her crappy party—she was *at* her crappy party. Presently, Tennie's heart rate slowed. *Eighty beats per minute*. By now, she'd probably relived this particular scene hundreds of times, and she recovered from it faster than when she woke a brand-new memory.

Reliving the party was her anchor when her feelings got out of control—helping her keep her promise to herself to never add fuel to her family's problems again. Over time she'd discovered her ability was good for digging through other folks' memories, too. When they really cared about something, their recollections would get nice and stuck in an object, and Tennie was free to take it all in. Sometimes she just caught a feeling, and other times she practically time-traveled into the past.

But stealing memories could be upsetting. Sometimes, she hated what she found. Hidden sadness, secret worry, and real

pain were more common than folks let on, making her superpower feel more like a superburden. But that's what the gloves were for. They kept the memories out.

*Everybody's hiding something*, Tennie thought, eyeballing the back of her parents' heads as the van hit a bump. She hadn't snooped through their stuff with her gloves off in a while. What sort of things were they not telling? Tennie pursed her lips and pushed the thought away.

She rolled her window all the way down to enjoy the view.

Wind whipped her fine brown bob. She daydreamed that the playful fog ran its fingers through her hair until her entire body turned into white wisps, and she could float around like an echo through the patchwork mountains. Far away from peanut-butter-smelling vans and cramped apartments and her wonderful, terrible family . . .

"Shoes on, everybody; we're meeting Mimsy for pizza in fifteen!" Dad barked.

Tennie didn't mind not being the one to stay at Mimsy's. She was fine.

Outside her window, the glorious woods began to thin. Down the long slope on the other side of a gully beside the road, the woods turned strange and twisted. Trees grew slanted, or even sideways before bending up again, like broken necks.