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“Human Error” short story, Lupi #15

# *Chapter 1*

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

There were worse ways to spend the holidays. Even leaving out nuclear winter, Benedict could think of several. Like in a hospital. On a battlefield. At a Humans First rally—no, that was basically the same as a battlefield. At least it had been in October, when he'd lost six men . . .

“Good grief. Don't look so grim.”

“I'm not grim,” he said automatically. He had the sense to shut his mouth without explaining that he'd been cheering himself up by comparing visiting Arjenie's family to spending time with tubes in his veins and other places. Never mind that the visit came out ahead. It wouldn't sound right.

She didn't say a word. This was unusual enough to get his attention. He stole a glance away from the unfamiliar road.

The woman in the passenger seat was slightly above average height, definitely below average weight, with black-framed glasses, a narrow face, and long red hair so extravagantly curly it seemed to have a life of its own. And his. She was his, and beautiful beyond words, and he'd cross the country on foot if that's what it took to give her such joy.

Everything in him softened. He reached for her hand. “Grim, huh?” It was foolish to drive one-handed, even for someone with his reflexes, when he didn't have to. But missing a chance to touch her was surely a greater folly.

“Not so much now.” She squeezed his hand. “They aren't going to eat you, you know. They're good people.”

He smiled because he knew that was true, and it made him happy that she had good people standing behind her. People who'd stepped in, opening their home and their arms to her when her mother was killed. But good people wouldn't be happy about her relationship with him.

Perhaps, as she claimed, they wouldn't have a problem with him being lupus. Most human families would, but Arjenie was sure her people weren't like that.

Maybe not. And maybe they wouldn't be upset that he and Arjenie had no plans to marry, either, even though she couldn't explain why that legal binding was unimportant compared to what truly held them together.

Humans weren't told about the mate bond. Ever.

But because of that bond, Arjenie had to live far from her family now. Because of Benedict, she'd been exposed to danger, violence, and death. And probably would be again.

How could they accept that? Why should they?

Benedict thought, however, that they'd be courteous. People who raised someone as generous and open-hearted as Arjenie would be courteous to him for her sake and their own. Clearly he had nothing to worry about. "I may be a little nervous."

Her bright grin flashed across her face. "You think? Oh, look—that's the oak! Turn there—just beyond that magnificent oak--the gravel road, do you see it?"

Obediently he slowed. She was vibrating with excitement. It had been nearly four months since she'd see her aunt and uncle and cousins. Other aunts and uncles and cousins would be there, too. The gravel road he turned onto would take them to an old farmhouse that had been the home and heart of the Delacroix family for nearly two hundred years. It was like a small clanhome. Everyone who could, came there for Christmas.

Not Christmas, he corrected himself. Yule. They were Wiccan. The center of their celebration was the Solstice, which they called Yule, though they exchanged presents on the morning of December twenty-fifth in what Arjenie called a grand explosion of culturally sanctioned greed.

They turned onto a tree-crowded lane. Branches arched overhead—bare now, but it must be pretty in summer. Moonsong hummed in his veins rather the way the car's engine sounded to his ears, an ever-present song this close to full moon. He checked the rearview mirror.

The car behind them was identical to the one he drove. Both rented, of course. He hadn't actually been called on to cross the country on foot. They'd flown to D.C., stopping there for a couple days to pack up Arjenie's apartment.

She'd cried. When they boxed up the last of the things in her bedroom, she'd cried, and he almost did, too, looking at her wet eyes. She called it "getting all teary, which is not the same thing," but tears were tears. He'd told her she didn't have to let her apartment go. She could keep it as long as she wanted—for the rest of her life, if she wished. They'd come to D.C. as often as

possible . . . which probably wouldn't be all that often. Not when they were at war.

Maybe the present he would give her on Christmas morning would help a little. He hoped so.

Arjenie's phone pinged with her text alert. She checked it and exclaimed, "Oh, Uncle Nate and Aunt Sheila got in last night with their crew! That's Jacob, Noah, And Emily. Emily's the one I used to baby-sit."

"You thought they were spending the holiday with Sheila's family this year."

"Yes, it's her turn. They alternate between his family and hers, you know, but . . ." She scanned her phone. "Oh, my. There was an argument. Aunt Robin doesn't give any details, but I'll bet Sheila's mother got in one of her huffs. She does that. Anyway, the woman decided all of a sudden to go on a cruise. Can you imagine?" She shook her head. "A cruise instead of family at Yule."

Benedict checked his memory, trying to place people he'd never met. "Nate is the physician. Family practice. He and your Uncle Ambrose are twins. His wife Sheila is . . ." He frowned. He'd studied the family pictures Arjenie had on her phone, and he remembered a smiling woman with honey-blond hair. But he was drawing a blank on the details. "A landscape architect?"

"No, that's Gary, Uncle Hershey's partner. Sheila's a stay-at-home mom, though she's been talking about dusting off her Lit degree now that two out of three of the kids are in high school." Arjenie's thumbs flew over the screen as she replied to her aunt. She had no problem carrying on multiple conversations. "And Uncle Ambrose and Aunt Carmen are here already with their brood. Oh, and she brought her brother. Good."

"Her brother."

"Uh-huh. Ben Avelar. He's divorced and has joint custody, but his ex has the kids for the holiday and his family's in Portugal, so Aunt Robin must've told Carmen to bring him along."

Benedict stopped trying to add up all the people he was about to meet. "The twins are already there, too."

"Oh, yes. Both their colleges let out a week ago. I just wish Tony could have made it. You'd like him, and he'd be glad of someone to talk to who gets him."

Tony was the oldest of Clay and Robin Delacroix's three children, and like the twins was more of a sibling than a cousin to Arjenie. A younger sibling. Tony had been born the same year Arjenie's mother died and she went to live with her aunt and uncle. "He couldn't get leave."

"The Air Force does not seem to understand how important it is for him to be home for the

holidays.” She shook her head. “Poor Tony. It’s not like Wicca is inherently anti-war, but my family does seem to breed more pacifists than warriors. He’s sort of the odd man out sometimes.”

Benedict wished Tony could have made it, too. As it was, he’d be very much the odd man out. He was nothing but a warrior.

Fortunately, there was a lull in the war at the moment. In October the enemy had launched simultaneous battles at four Humans First rallies, the opening salvo in an intricate yet elegant strategy for destroying the lupi and toppling the U.S. government. It had nearly worked. If Lily hadn’t figure out what was going on . . .

But she had, and even the Great Enemy would need a little time to regroup after such a defeat. She had to work through human agents, after all, who required mundane resources—money, followers, fake IDs, weapons . . . and an ignorant and frightened public she and her people could deceive.

After October, the enemy was ahead on the fear front, but the public was slightly less ignorant. Benedict had no idea how that would play out, but figuring it out wasn’t his job. He was in charge of security at Nokolai Clanhome, not PR and politics. Guessing which way humans would jump—and trying to manipulate that direction—was Rule’s job, not his.

Thank God for his brother. Who was helpful in other ways, too. Benedict had gone to Rule for advice about what clothes to pack. At first Rule had suggested he ask Arjenie, but Benedict had explained that he didn’t need to know what was appropriate. He needed to know what cultural messages his clothes were sending. Rule understood things like that.

It seemed strange that he ended up wearing pretty much what he would have on any other day, except for the jacket. Somehow adding a leather sports jacket changed the message of his jeans and dark blue t-shirt from “I didn’t bother to dress up” to “I’m a casual person, but wanted to honor our meeting.”

“ . . . not that you’ve heard a word I said. Which is okay, because I’m babbling to an insane degree, but you’re supposed to nod or say ‘uh-huh’ now and then anyway.”

Promptly Benedict nodded. “Uh-huh.”

She laughed.

“You wish your Nana and Papa could be here,” he added. “It seems strange for them to be gone at Yule, but they’re having such a good time backpacking in Europe and it seems to be helping them heal after Samuel’s death.”

“Oh.” She squeezed his hand. “Oh, I do love you. A lot.”

He glanced at her, pleased but baffled. He hadn’t done anything special.

Just then the road finished curling around a low hill and the tree tunnel vanished. Ahead the Delacroix home place snuggled into a sunny meadow backed by woods. The house was tall and white and sturdy and wore its black roof like a British gentleman’s bowler. A veranda ran the length of the front. There were two outbuildings visible from the road, both set well away from the house. The barn was relatively new construction and currently housed four horses. The Delacroix family had long been horse lovers; Robin Delacroix was a large animal vet who’d met her husband when she came to treat one of his family’s horses. The other building was local stone, at least as old as the house, and held Clay Delacroix’s forge and workshop. On the far side of the barn, five vehicles were parked in a recently-mown field.

There was a detached garage, too, though Benedict couldn’t see it from this angle. That’s where his guards should have been bunking. He’d been overruled on that, however. Robin Delacroix did not want guests sleeping in an unheated garage.

They were his guards, not her guests, and would be exterior guards at that. Having them bunk in the garage offered an extra layer of security. Even a sleeping lupus was hard to sneak up on. But Arjenie said that her aunt would not budge about this, so Benedict had been forced to agree to her terms.

The gravel road split well back from the house, with one track veering for the field while the other looped in front of the house. Benedict put down his window and signaled Josh, who would park and wait until Benedict summoned him and Adam. It was not exactly normal to bring bodyguards along on a holiday visit; Benedict wanted to keep their presence as inconspicuous as possible. He kept going. Arjenie had said he was supposed to pull up in front of the porch and unload their bags before moving the car out of the way.

“Oh, look—there’s Uncle Hershey coming around the side of the house!” She waved, then twisted around to grab the green wool coat he hadn’t seen until she dug it out of her closet at her old apartment.

The man she was waving to waved back and broke into a jog. He was under fifty and powerfully built, with a silver streak in his dark hair and a big grin. “They’re here!” he hollered, presumably to those in the house.

Before Benedict got the car stopped, people boiled out the front door—three kids, two dogs, two men, and one woman. Everyone but the dogs wore jackets. The woman was nearly a foot shorter than Arjenie, a couple decades older, and had Arjenie’s hair. She’d knotted it on top of her head at some point that day, but like her niece’s hair, it sneered at attempts at restraint. Escaped strands frothed and fluttered as she skipped down the veranda steps as lightly as a girl.

One of the men was well over six feet and lean, with wavy brown hair and glasses. The other was shorter, broad and strong, with a close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard. That would be Clay Delacroix, blacksmith and sculptor and everything Arjenie knew about fathers.

The dogs barked excitedly. The smallest child—three or four with freckles and a missing front tooth, too young to be the Emily Arjenie once tended--tripped and fell. The brown-haired man scooped her up and parked her on one hip while the other two youngsters slammed into the passenger side of the car like guided missiles. The taller boy—he looked Pakistani or Indian--yanked it open. “Arjenie! Arjenie! Is it true your new guy turns into a wolf at the full moon? It’s full moon tomorrow! Can we watch?”

“Malik!” Robin said, rebuke in her voice, adding quickly, “Danny, grab Havoc.”

The shorter boy with chipmunk cheeks snatched up the terrier before it could duck under the car.

And Benedict breathed a sigh of relief. All of the Delacroix, even Aunt Robin, were wearing jeans. Just like him. So far, so good.

Arjenie explained that Benedict only Changed when he chose to, but full moon was a time when he really wanted to Change, and no, they couldn’t watch, and if they didn’t move so she could get out of the car, their Aunt Robin was going to turn them into hoppy toads.

That made them laugh—but they backed up, too. Arjenie bounced out and grabbed her aunt in a hug. Benedict got out on his side. The moment his feet were on the ground, earth tried to surge up through him to join with the moonsong. The closer the full moon, the more the Change beckoned. Automatically he repressed it and reached back inside for the new leather jacket. He didn’t need it, not with the temperature at least ten degrees above freezing, but he was supposed to wear it.

Questions were spilling from Arjenie as she was scooped into hugs—where’s Uncle Nate and Aunt Sheila and Uncle Stephen and Uncle Ambrose and Aunt Carmen and the twins and the rest of the kids? Everyone answered at once. Benedict picked up something about holly and horses as he slipped on the jacket and eyed the dogs.

He wasn’t worried about the Lab mix, but the other one was a recent adoption, Arjenie had said, a scruffy little Jack Russell Terrier. Most dogs either ran or submitted quickly when they met him, but a few just had to challenge. Especially terriers. Terriers were genetically convinced of the dictum that size doesn’t matter—it’s what you do with what you’ve got.

Robin Delacroix told the boys that they had apparently forgotten everything they’d ever learned about manners, and did they want a refresher course from her, or from their fathers? The Lab

mix rounded the hood of the car and stopped dead, staring at Benedict in utter astonishment.

He chuckled. “You don’t know what the hell you’re smelling, do you?” He snapped his fingers. “Here, boy.”

The dog flattened his ears, lowered his tail and wagged it once, uncertain. Benedict averted his gaze slightly—I’m not challenging, either—and snapped his fingers again. The dog trotted up to him. Benedict rubbed his ears. “Good boy.”

“Did you see that?” a young voice piped up. “Did you see? He told Harley to come, and he did! Just like that!”

“Hold onto Havoc,” Clay Delacroix reminded the boy in a voice deep enough to rival that of Benedict’s father. He nodded at Benedict in a friendly way. “Harley there is an expert at selective deafness. He knows all the usual commands. He only hears them when food is involved.”

Arjenie turned in the circle of her uncle’s arm to beam at Benedict. “Benedict, this is Clay Delacroix, and my aunt, Robin Delacroix, and the man holding little Amy is Uncle Gary--Gary Brown--and this is Uncle Hershey,” she said as the man they’d first spotted reached them, “and the two hellions with all the nosy questions are—”

“Oh, no!” cried the boy who’d been holding the terrier—past tense, since the dog had squirmed free. “Havoc! Come here, Havoc!”

The dog ignored such poor advice to race around the car, barking madly. Both boys raced after her. Which, of course, just increased her excitement. Being chased was almost as much fun as chasing, and maybe the boys would help her get rid of this weird-smelling intruder.

You never know what will work with a terrier, and Jack Russells could be fearless bordering on suicidal. But they were smart and curious, so sometimes . . . Benedict dropped down on his heels and stared at the little dog charging him.

Havoc skidded to a stop, startled into silence--then darted to the right, trying to flank him. Even a Jack Russell hesitates to charge straight at a predator twenty times her size, but she knew she was fast, and for all that he smelled like the scariest canid she’d ever run across, he was shaped like a big, slow human. She figured she could outmaneuver him.

She was wrong. Crouching on his heels was more awkward than some positions, but Benedict taught a version of the troika or Cossack dance as part of his training program. He kept up with Havoc’s movements easily as she circled him, looking for an opening that didn’t appear, and he kept his gaze pinned to her. I see you, little warrior. I respect you, but I can take you. You know this. Will you make me prove it?

“What’s he doing?” one of the boys asked. “He’s not afraid of Havoc, is he? Mr. Benedict, why are you—”

“Shh.” That was Arjenie. She’d come around to his side of the car—as had the others. “He’s talking to Havoc.”

“He’s not talking,” the boy objected.

Robin Delacroix answered. “Yes, he is. It’s a language we don’t speak.”

It occurred to Benedict that this was not the way to blend in with humans.

Havoc stopped. Cocked her head. Gave a single wag of her tail.

Benedict smiled. He held out one hand down low—come greet me, see, I understand how to do this—

And a wall of power slammed into him like a mountain’s belch or the laughter of gods.

Benedict had no chance to fight. His control was superb, but control governed only whether or not he entered the Change. All the will in the world couldn’t stop the Change once it began—and that giant hand had swatted him into it as easily as a child’s foot can send a beetle tumbling. He could only submit and speed it along.

Between one breath and the next, the man was gone, his clothing fallen to the ground in the instant of transformation, when he was neither truly here nor not-here. An enormous black wolf stood in the Delacroix front yard, snarling with rage at what had been done to him.



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